Editors and photographers often take the meaning of color in communication for granted. That can be a mistake, because color not only attracts the eye and stimulates our senses, but also can represent or symbolize ideas we wish to convey. To use color effectively, we must think of color for what it might say about the subject. We also must be aware of how colors can either complement each other or clash. By using color just because it is there, we run the risk of making chaotic snapshots filled with distractions that dilute, rather than reinforce, meaning. Here are three photographs I’ve taken that demonstrate how color can work as communication.

Only seconds before I made my first example (below right), this woman was carving slabs of bloody meat in a market at Luang Prabang, Laos. The key to this image is the striking similarity in color between her fingernail polish and the raw meat: Both are purple. Meanwhile, her pale skin contrasts with the vivid color of the meat she sells. I deliberately cropped most of the woman out of my frame, focusing the viewer’s attention on these color contrasts and similarities.

In my second example (above right), colorful floral offerings seem to overwhelm the women who sell them to worshippers at the Schwedagon Pagoda in Yangon, Myanmar, one of the largest complexes of Buddhist temples in the world. The key to this image is the striking similarity in color between her fingernail polish and the raw meat: Both are purple. Meanwhile, her pale skin contrasts with the vivid color of the meat she sells. I deliberately cropped most of the woman out of my frame, focusing the viewer’s attention on these color contrasts and similarities.

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arrangements of white flowers seem to flow out of that little bouquet and move across the top of the image. There are three splashes of yellowish orange in the image, creating a triangle linking the boss to her young assistant at the bottom. The assistant, wearing red and holding a bunch of green leaves, is warily watching me. She seems to have found a perfect niche at the bottom of the frame, beautifully complementing the red flowers elsewhere in the image.

I shot the third example (below) at dusk in Amboy, California, a tiny ghost town that once served travelers along the long-bypassed U.S. Route 66. Roy’s Motel and Café now stands empty along the highway. The white lights of a distant oncoming car punctuate the deepening colors of dusk. The road has turned dark brown, a band of deep blue lingers on the horizon, and the pinkish glow of the departed sun creates a base for a moon rising into a pale blue sky. This vintage gas stop, frozen in time, evokes both desolation and beauty simultaneously, largely due to the atmospheric color palette I’ve been able to draw on.

Vibrant flowers at a market in Myanmar fill the frame at left with color, texture and shape. Below, a more subtle color palette suggests the desolation of this ghost town in the California desert.

**take your best shot**

Send photos for possible use in this column to The Dougis Visual Workshops, 2505 E. Carol Ave., Phoenix, AZ 85028 USA.