

Basic Photography Tips 3: Thoughtful Photographs

So, here you are! You've become comfortable with your camera. You're able to make technically good photographs most of the time. You sometimes find yourself operating the camera without really even thinking about it, and you've got a collection of photographs that you're actually pretty proud of. Okay, some are flukes, but some you made on purpose!

I don't know if this is you right now, but it's all of us at some stage. Some arrive here very quickly, and some take years. It's a turning point. It's the place where you stop thinking about the camera and start thinking about the photograph. It's the place where you ask yourself a question:

Is it art?

The answer is all up to you. This is where the photographic journey starts getting constantly tougher, but also constantly more rewarding. Instead of seeing through a lens, you're just seeing, and often what you're seeing is a little bit of yourself. Your photographs might begin to change, taking on a piece of your personality. You might begin to learn more about yourself and your world. You might begin to see that photography is not really about a camera at all!

It's an exciting place to be. It can be a difficult place to be. Some will carry on, and some will stay here forever. If you do decide to pull at this thread, remember that creative progress is never easy, though it can be a lot of fun.

Oh, and, is it art? I don't know. Can it change a life, even just a little? Only you can say. It's a tough question, but do all you can to answer it honestly.

Below are some challenges you might struggle with on your journey.

Responding Emotionally to your Environment

Emotion can separate art from simple documentation, even if the documentation is done in an attractive manner. This is not to say that art does not exist in documentary styles of photography. Portraiture, journalism, sports, event, and even product photography can be made as art. If the photographer cares about the photograph and its message, and this message is communicated clearly in the photograph, the photograph can "work". If you don't care about the photograph you're making, don't expect it to change lives.

Learning to respond emotionally to your environment can be tough. We are sometimes

too absorbed in ourselves to let anything affect us. To really respond to what you see, you must be open to it. Worries, agendas, pressures, and distractions are all barriers between you and your surroundings. This is not to say that you can't be feeling something from within - some of my best photographs have been made while I was in one mood or another. Try to turn off your thoughts and let your surroundings affect you - if you notice something interesting, stop and look at it. See the shapes and colours of that tree, not just its species. How does it smell, and what does it sound like? All this can be easier said than done, especially when something's on your mind. It comes with practice - in time, you'll develop your own ways of calming yourself and devoting your mind to the here and now.

Another barrier to emotion is our tendency to apply labels. This only allows us to see grass, instead of graceful green arches, or a lake instead of a giant tinted mirror reflecting the world. Try to notice the colour and shape of something before you think about what it is. Again, this can be easier said than done! Sometimes going somewhere different can help. So can seeing things at a different time of day, or when you're feeling differently. Try looking at something for a long time. Imagine it in different light, in different situations, or as something else completely. Try thinking of things based on their features rather than their names.

When responding emotionally, don't be afraid to feel many things. Every situation might make you feel a different way! At times, you might feel differently about the same thing. Don't be afraid to feel gloomy, excited, awed, displaced, or anything else! Use these feelings towards creating a photograph. However, don't hesitate to make a photograph even if you're not sure how you feel. Most of my photographs are made just because I'm attracted to something, like a shape or a colour. The scene affects my mood, and I make a photograph accordingly. Make yourself as available as possible, trust your instincts, and don't shy away from your feelings!

Visualizing a Photograph That Illustrates your Feelings

Visualizing your feelings in photograph form is the bridge between your mood and the mood your photograph will project. This is otherwise known as "abstraction" - choosing what to include in the photograph, as well as choosing how to present it. Abstraction isn't just making things look weird. A well-abstracted photograph presents its theme and mood clearly, (the photograph may still be complex!) and lets the viewer sense the photographer's intentions.

Abstracting a strong photograph from everything around you can be a daunting task. At times, the photograph you want may present itself easily, but other times unearthing it can take a lot of work. Sometimes you might want to allude to things that a photograph cannot display - like sounds or smells. You might want to include familiar imagery, or you might want to depend entirely on shapes, tones and colours for communication. Consider whether or not your subject needs to be recognizable for the photograph to

work. Sometimes rendering a subject in a new light can be just what a photograph needs!

Sometimes a photograph's subject is not obvious. Look around, and think about what would best represent your mood in a photograph. You might have to go looking for it! Sometimes, it can take effort to find an appropriate subject in a good situation - often lighting, backgrounds and foregrounds, or accessibility can dictate the appropriate subject. Remember potential subjects for future visits, and come back better equipped or when the subject's situation has changed!

Once you've found your subject, think about how you want to present it. Look at it from all possible angles, and picture how it would best say what you want it to. The subject's colour, shape, texture, orientation and position in the frame will all make its message change. You don't have to study all the complexities of composition to know what you like! Experiment, and don't be afraid to try many compositions for a single subject. Be a student of your surroundings, and always focus on making your photographs clearly express your intentions.

Using Photographic Techniques to Enhance Your Theme

The techniques you use in photographing your subject greatly influence the photograph's theme. Your choices regarding lens, exposure, filtration, film, and focus can change your photograph's look. The photographer can control most of the aspects of a photograph - colour balance, perspective, brightness, and even the apparent shape of objects! Use these controls to your advantage, making your photograph's message ring clearly.

The lens you choose will change the perspective of your photograph. Short (wide angle) lenses produce an elongated perspective, enlarging closer objects, and shrinking far away ones. They can be useful for showing depth and space, or for photographing a large subject close up. Normal lenses produce a perspective close to that of the human eye - good for showing a very "real" viewpoint. Long (telephoto) lenses produce a compressed perspective, showing nearer and farther objects closer to the same size. Telephotos can be used to "stack" objects together, or to isolate objects with their limited depth of field. Of course, the degree to which your lens skews perspective depends on its length! Nuances can be very pleasing, but if your photograph demands a pronounced effect, don't be afraid to try a very long or very short lens. Experiment, and find out which lenses you like in certain situations.

Other elements affect your photograph too. Work with filtration, (try especially a polarizer) exposure, focus, and different films to alter the look and feel of your photographs. You'll notice an amazing difference! Even moving the camera might be appropriate at times. Experiment, but try to use techniques to better suit the theme of your photograph. Using a technique for its own sake will only draw attention to it, blurring your theme and confusing your audience. Once you've imagined how you want

the photograph to look, imagine what you can do to make it that way!

Sorting and Critiquing Your Photographs

Sorting and critiquing your photographs can be as challenging and enjoyable as actually making them. It's an important process - the selection of a photograph involves many of the same artistic processes that go into creating it. Truly, a photograph cannot be considered art until the photographer decides it worthy.

When judging photographs for your portfolio or for display, be picky. Make your first reaction count - you'll never be able to be objective after the first time you see a photograph. Judge the photograph for all its merits - composition, colour, tone, sharpness, and especially for how well it communicates its theme. If viewing transparencies, use a bright (white!) light box and a good 8-10x magnifier to check for sharpness. Try turning the photograph over to get a new perspective. See what it looks like upside down, and sideways. Do the shapes really work together? What about the colours? Which photograph of the subject works best? Why? Only choose to display photographs you're completely happy with - there's nothing more rewarding than sitting back and enjoying a selection of your own very best work!

Keep photographs that didn't work, too. (Admitting that a hard-won photograph is a flop can be tough, but it must be done.) Photographs that miss can be an inspiration to try the same idea again, or just a reminder of where you were and how much fun you were having! Go through the bad pile and examine each photograph, thinking about how each could have been made better. I learn much more from my mistakes than from my successes. Don't let them worry you - if you're not screwing up a lot of photographs, you're not learning. One great photograph is often the product of thousands of attempts.

As the great American landscape photographer Ansel Adams once said, "Three or four important photographs a year is a good crop for any photographer."

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