

## Top Ten 1: Mistakes Fine Art Photographers Make

Photographers make mistakes. They miss great photography opportunities, blunder technical details, and worse, create boring photographs that no-one wants to look at. Not to worry - making mistakes is all a part of learning. You'll know that you're growing as an artist if you look back on earlier work and say to yourself, "what was I thinking?"

This article is not meant to chastise or criticize my fellow photographers. If anything, it's a list of past blunders committed by yours truly. Keep in mind that my opinion is just that - my own - and that others may quite rightly seek another path.

Ideally, we can learn from our mistakes, and the mistakes of others. So here's a list of ten of the biggies to watch out for when you're making photographs or evaluating your art.

### 10. Always Centering the Subject

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It's human nature to want to just plop the subject of a photograph in the centre of the frame. The subject is the most obvious part of the photo, and the center is the most obvious place to put it. By putting the subject in the centre of the frame, you run less risk of accidentally cutting part of it off or having to make it too small.

However, by centering your subject, you can stagnate your photo. Especially with geometrically simple subjects, the eye finds what it's looking for right away and doesn't bother to explore the photograph any further. Any supporting or background elements are lost, and the photo can become simple and trite.

There are many ways you can place your subject in the frame. Try experimenting with all of them, (including centering) depending on your subject and other compositional elements in the photograph. You should always aim to use all the elements in your composition, including the position of your subject, to support your theme.

### 9. Taking Ordinary Pictures

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I've often wondered how many photographs of sunsets actually exist in the world. Millions, certainly - possibly billions. Are there more photos of sunsets than there are people on the planet?

I took my share of sunset photos when I first got into photography. I was thrilled that I could produce such vivid colours and dramatic light-play on film. The photographs I took of sunsets looked professional, and many of my other photos really didn't.

However, as I learned a little more and looked at a lot of photography portfolios, I stopped making sunset photos, and eventually stopped making typical "golden hours" photos altogether. I was, and still very much am, disenchanted with the idea of creating art that already exists. When I find myself about to take a picture that I know I've seen many times over in magazines, prints, stock galleries, and online stores, I put away my camera. I'd personally much rather have a collection of creative photographs that don't work than a collection of cliché photos that do.

Am I encouraging you to stop taking photos that resemble existing works? Absolutely not. Photography is about doing what's fun, and photographing what you want to. However, if you're assembling a collection of photography to impress others, think original. Don't worry if your photos don't look like other artist's work - that's the whole idea!

## **8. Auto-Exposing / Auto-Focusing**

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Today's cameras are technical geniuses, able to analyze the scene before them and instantly come up with the best exposure value for the conditions, even compensating for very tricky lighting. Auto-focus systems can focus on a moving subject in any part of the frame, and through-the-lens flash exposures result in perfect strobe pictures every time.

These are great tools available to most photographers, and photographers should certainly take advantage of them. However, setting your camera to 'auto' and firing away won't give great, creative results all the time. There are many focus points and exposure values for a given scene, and your camera will only come up with a few of them. Exposing and focusing manually is the only way to ensure that the photograph looks the way you want it to.

When you take control, you will probably come up with exposures that your camera thinks are mistakes. Ignore it - remember, your camera only really wants to focus on the active focus point and expose the scene at 18 percent grey. In situations where you really just want a normal photo, this is fine - just remember to take control and be creative if you think the photograph demands it.

## **7. Hand-Holding the Camera**

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A tripod is the single best investment most fine art photographers could make. A tripod is cheap, versatile, low-tech, and easy to use. A tripod makes photography in challenging light easy, and provides a whole repertoire of options for photographing motion. Better yet, a tripod provides precise control over the composition of a photograph, allowing the photographer to carefully inspect and correct their composition before exposing. Properly used, a tripod could improve 80% of most fine art photographers' photos.

So why do so many photographers hand-hold their cameras?

Probably because hand-holding the camera is an easier, more spontaneous way to make a photograph. Hand-holding your camera let you explore compositions without being restricted by a heavy tripod. Freely moving the camera is especially important when photographing, a dense, detailed subject, where the best composition is not obvious and must be found through the lens.

My "best of both worlds" solution is to use a tripod with a quick-release attachment on the head. This lets me roughly find a composition through the lens by hand-holding, and quickly snap my camera onto my tripod when I'm ready to make the photograph. It also helps to have a tripod with quick-release legs. A tripod that is easy to use will see more use, and your photos will improve as a result.

## **6. Trying to Make Every Photograph Beautiful**

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Beauty is a very small part of what can be communicated through photography. Calling a photograph "beautiful" is often just a way of generalizing the vast and difficult array of emotions one feels when looking at a great photograph. Fragility can be beautiful, and so too can sadness, fear, hope, nostalgia, anger, or any other emotion you can interpret from art.

However, trying to make a "beautiful" photograph every time is usually a mistake. Unmixed with thought or emotion, gratuitous beauty loses its luster. A subject with only pretty colours and attractive shapes has little to offer. Without an emotional connection to your subject, how can you create a photo that will emotionally connect with your viewer?

Think about why you want to photograph the subject that's in front of your camera. Instead of trying to simply "beautify" it, try to make your reasons for creating the art clear, using your knowledge of photographic techniques to enhance your theme. I consider a photograph to be a success when my viewers feel the same standing in front of the print as I did in front of the subject.

## **5. Using Poor Quality Film / Sensors**

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Quite simply, a poor quality film / image sensor will never produce a professional, fine art quality image, unless poor image quality is the intended effect. Poor films / sensors display poor colour, resolution, dynamic range, and noise ratio. Even well composed, well thought out photographs can look like family snapshots if the photographer uses shoddy image capture.

Balancing image quality with a tight budget can be difficult. If you're shooting film, try using good quality film only when you're creating art - shoot cheap film the rest of the time. If you're shooting digital, however, a good quality camera body can be very expensive. Remember that the quality of the image sensor is really the only important thing about the camera body - try to buy the best sensor you can reasonably afford.

#### **4. Not Abstracting**

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Abstracting your subject doesn't necessarily mean rendering it unrecognizable. To abstract an article or book is to present it in a reduced, simplified form, only discussing its most important aspects. To abstract a scene with the intention of making a photograph is to follow a similar process - weeding out redundant or unnecessary details, and only showing the viewer the most important parts of the scene. A snapshot, taken without abstracting its subject, usually fails to communicate with its viewer at all.

Abstraction can happen on many levels. In its simplest form, the photographer simply removes any superfluous objects from the scene. In more a more complex abstract photograph, the subject may be hard to recognize, rendered as a series of design elements which only hint at the general structure of the whole. I try to make my compositions just abstract enough that my viewer can appreciate the composition before applying a "label" to the subject.

Abstracting doesn't mean simply getting closer to your subject. Many abstract photographs can be complex, richly textured compositions taken from afar. To abstract your subject, first decide why you want to photograph it, and then try to use your subject's shapes, colours, and textures to communicate these reasons in a photograph.

Good photographic abstraction is simply good communication. Instead of a clumsy, confusing, or overly simplistic composition, the viewer is presented with a well formed photograph they can connect with. Though the theme of a photograph (or any art) will vary from person to person, a well abstracted photograph will dialog with its viewer, exciting their imagination and inviting them back for another look.

#### **3. Following Design Templates**

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Quite simply, following design guidelines like "the rule of thirds", "the zone system", or any other conceptual templates, will lead a photographer to create a photograph just like so many existing photographs. Photographing within some arbitrary conceptual scope only stifles creativity, placing unnecessary restrictions on an already very restrictive art form.

This is not to say that a photographer should go out of their way to avoid the rules. In truth, "thinking outside the box" is just as restrictive as thinking inside it. Forget about

the box already!

As we grow and evolve as artists, we all come to rely to some extent on certain ways of approaching familiar subjects. Over time, this approach becomes our unique take on the world around us - our own style of photography. Developing a recognizable style is a great thing for any artist, especially if that style grows and changes over time. However, we should recognize the difference between style and rote memorization of rules, and we should never let other artist's views on photography get in the way of our own creativity!

## **2. Ignoring the Frame**

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The photographic frame is the only compositional element that will appear in every photograph you will make. How you arrange further compositional elements within the frame can completely change the look and feel of your photograph. Ignoring the frame as a compositional element altogether will usually result in a clumsy, awkward composition that looks forced and random.

Instead of blending seamlessly into the photograph, an unplanned frame tends to call attention to itself, which subsequently calls attention to the photographer. This results in a self-conscious artwork, where the viewer tends to think more about the photographer than the photograph. The photos themselves take on a "snapshot" quality.

With experience, most photographers begin to consider the frame, even unconsciously, when composing a photograph. However, being fully aware of the design potential of your photographic "container" is one of the biggest favours you can do your art. Ironically, by recognizing the limits of your photograph, you will journey your viewer beyond them, and the finite art will blossom into the infinite imagination.

## **1. Confusing Technically Good Photographs with Art**

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Far too often, photographers evaluate their work using phrases like "great depth of field", "saturated colours", "hair-splitting detail", or other photography jargon describing the technical merits of a photograph. Photography websites and magazines are overflowing with terms like these, seamlessly blended into ads for the latest image-capture technology.

However, pursuing photography with this (admittedly enthusiastic) attitude will almost always lead a photographer to create a portfolio of perfect, yet completely uninteresting photographs. The photos will indeed "pop off the page", but the viewer's attention will quickly wander.

This is because a technically good photograph is not necessarily art. In fact, it is not necessarily even one step closer to being art. Though they are often found together,

technical merit and artistic merit are two very different qualities of a photograph. A photograph can be seen as technically good, artistic, or both at the same time. Technique should be used to enhance your theme, but it should never, ever become your theme.

Evaluating photographs artistically is a complex, confusing process, and it's quite normal to want to fall back on more concrete criteria to make the decision easier. Resist the temptation. By struggling to discover which photographs you really like, you will be assured of collecting a portfolio that speaks with your unique voice - one that will interest other people as well.

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