

RANDOM THOUGHTS
ON PHOTOGRAPHY #1

BY
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Porch, Guess House
from A Walk Down Academy Street

Random Thoughts are just that; various ideas on the topic of photography and creativity that seem to randomly pop into my head. I ponder on them and then record them a folder. When inspiration strikes I formalize them and when enough are compiled, I decide to add them to my web site. The web page has become a bit unruly with all the scrolling required, so they need to be given a new home in this document.

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Joe Lipka
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Museums and Me

The thought has occurred to me that photographs purchased by museums have no relationship with photographs that I might purchase. The three things where there is a marked difference between the institutional purchaser and yours truly are price, size and content. I noted this a year or so ago when a local museum exhibited photographs which they could purchase for the collection. The tax paying public was allowed to go to the show and record their comments on the various photographs.

Most of these photographs were large, and boring. There was one huge image of a granite quarry in snow. To me, the image was not particularly outstanding. But, it was about 8 x 10 feet. Super for a big old museum wall. Sure wouldn't fit above the fireplace, or in the dining room.

Make that large, boring and expensive. The least expensive photograph was \$3,000 if I remember correctly. There were multiple images priced at \$40,000 each.

I did have my revenge, though. Tucked away in a corner were some beautiful Margaret Bourke White photographs. I voted for the purchase of all the MBW photographs. In my comments on the proposed acquisitions, I noted that the purchase of these photographs would be considerably over the proposed budget. They could make the money work out just fine if they sold a Nan Goldin photograph in the adjoining gallery. They would have enough money to purchase all the MBW photographs, have some cash left over and improve the museum's collection of photographs.

Stuff You Can't Sell

So much of photography is not about photography. If one wants to make a living at photography as an art form, one does not sell

photographs. One must convince various governmental or non governmental organizations that your art is worthy of their support. Why should an organization part with its' hard earned money to fund art no one wants to purchase?

You Can Call Me...

Photographer? Artist? Pixelographer? I just want to be remembered as a creative person. I don't want to be relegated to a single dimensional person (heck, my photos are two dimensional.) Being a creative person is a lot more encompassing. I can be creative in many areas. Why just photography? I can write, I can be creative at work, at home, as well as behind a camera, sitting at a computer or writing this between bites of a ham sandwich (on rye, pepper jack cheese, Dijon mustard and lettuce). We should not try to limit our creativity to a single facet of our life. Creativity should be unfettered. Lily Tomlin observed we spend a lot of effort to control quality. How much better would it be if we didn't try to control quality, but just let it run rampant through our lives? Wouldn't that be better? Shouldn't we treat our life the same way? Let creativity run wild in our entire lives. Maybe some of that creativity from the woodworking shop or the kitchen could creep into other facets of our lives and make it better. To me that means avoiding the single label of large format alternative process photographer. I would rather be a creative person.

Artist's Statement

I had to prepare one of those "artist's statements" that one sometimes has to prepare for a juried competition. The photograph in question was a small scale landscape of stone fences and shrubbery. When I was making the photograph I wondered about my role in the creation of a work of art. It seemed like all the "heavy lifting" (literally) had been

done before I got there. I showed up with my camera well after the fact and made a picture when the light was just right. There seemed to me to a spectrum of creativity where I was coming on at the tail end. Here's what I had to say:

“Many people contribute to the creation of the Subject. Working together, they bring an artistic vision to life. The contributors may not be artists, but their skill in working stone and earth demonstrates their artistry. Even after completion, the Subject continues to be a work in progress, affected by nature, time and other artists. Sculpture develops a patina; rain and wind smooth sharp edges. Trees and shrubs are pruned to exacting shapes. The photographer, using light, film and paper is the latest in a succession of artists interpret the subject.”

Wow. I just thought about that. A critique of my own artist's statement. Gee, I hope I liked it. Here is the photo. It's part of the Fifty Portfolio and is called, “Stonework, Macgregor West October-90.



Subject Matters

Evolution of style and themes is really the search for subject matter. The selection of subject matter is an art in itself and I think, is one of the fundamental aspects of artistic success. The search for the subject must succeed internally before it can succeed externally. By this I mean that the subject must be important to you. You have to decide what is important before you can go out and really make your own photographs. The discovery of subject matter depends not only the mental, but on physical activity. By creating art we practice both our craft and vision. This leads us to the subject that matters to us. Most of us do that for a while until either we find our artistic turf, and begin to make our own art or give up entirely.

The search for subject matter is a rational progression of communication. The analogy I like to use is forming sounds, syllables, words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, stories, and novels. Visually we progress along a parallel path. I spent a long time looking for the singular image. I produced all requisite large format photographs: rocks, trees, clouds, nudes and various combinations of all those elements. Looking back on this now, the equivalent task I was working on was similar to a writer trying to really write one good word. Once I freed myself from the burden of trying to create one great photograph, photography became much easier. The single great photograph never arrives by itself. It arrives as part of a crowd. Recognizing and understanding this was pivotal to me in terms of artistic growth.

Craft as a goal

My journey to produce platinum prints was long and drawn out. The desire was always there. But it was first a technical quest, a problem of developing craft before I could reach the goal of producing artwork. Others travel the same path, the quest for making the Fine Print. To those that can produce a Fine Print, I say, “Great. Fine accomplishment.

Now what are you going to do with that craft? What is its purpose in your life? How will it help you express your thoughts photographically?” It is necessary to master craft, but one must remember that you are the Master of the craft. Some folks pursue the printing of the entire range of the negative as the holy grail of photography. If that’s all there is, just print a step wedge and marvel at all the tones you can produce. The step wedge: all the craft, none of the content. Here is the sad part. Once the craft has been mastered, many photographers stop because they see mastery of craft as the ultimate goal, not as a tool to express visual thoughts.

Three Essentials of Field Photography

I want three things when I go out into the field and photograph. I want lots of time. I want lots of film. (Okay, if you have that digital camera, you want lots of batteries.) The third thing I want is access. I think that the access is the probably the most important if you want to make great photographs. Access is the ability to get where others cannot get. It gets you beyond the “velvet rope”, through the “authorized personnel only” door, unlocks the “not open to the public” gate. It can also get you close to a person with enough time to make a portrait that can be more than just a picture. There is an important preliminary to getting Access. That is to know enough about what you are photographing to know that you need Access.



Silk Robe, Heceta Head,
from the Fifty Project

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