

Photography: Moving Beyond the Basics

Most memorable photographs are an act of interpretation, not representation.

Let's start with some simple premises:

1. **The camera has limitations.** Beginners often measure the success of their photographs by how close they come to matching the real scene. One of the most important stages in the development of a photographer comes upon the realization that photos seldom match the reality of the event captured. This awareness of the limitations of the camera frees one to begin to explore how to express rather than just represent.
2. **Photography does not capture 'objective truth'.** A well-thought out image mirrors the person behind the camera as much as what was in front of the lens. *What* you choose to shoot, *how* you choose to shoot it, *when* you choose to capture it, and the manner in which you display it all determine the 'truth' of any image. A photograph is not the same as reality. In some situations, the mere presence of a camera can influence or alter the event being recorded.
3. **There's a reason you take any particular image.** When you decide to click the shutter, something has caught your eye; something that resonates with you. Sometimes what attracts you to an image is obvious; sometimes it's not. Sometimes you can put it into words; sometimes you can't.
4. **The reason you share your images with others is that you want them to see what it was that inspired you.** If you want your photos to have maximum impact, you should be aware of what it was that drew you to the scene and emphasize it. Think of the viewers of your image as participants in the photo experience. Just remember that they are not there as you take it. You have to lead them to what you are experiencing. *If you are unsure of what your intent for an image is, then your audience will be unlikely to respond to it.*
5. **The technical and aesthetic decisions you make while shooting and in post-processing lead viewers to appreciate what excited you when you shot it and result in a more powerful image.** During a shoot, the methods for enhancing your vision come the camera settings you make (technical) and the choices you make in framing and composition (aesthetic). In post-processing, many Photoshop/Lightroom classes are about 'fixing' images — conforming to some arbitrary standard of perfection. The better use for the digital darkroom is to use its tools to guide your viewer's attention to your interpretation of that image.

These premises apply to all types of photography: pictorial, landscape, nature, street photography, travel, studio work, portraiture, event photography. The difference lies only in the amount of time you have to make your creative decisions during the capture phase.

Determining Intent

Consider the difference between *subject matter* (what; the object) and *subject* (why you shot it; the story).

A word about photographic vision and intent: Don't be put-off by artsy terms like 'vision' and 'intent'. Maybe you are trying to put forth some great meaning-of-life truth, but intent can just as well be a simple personal response to a scene, person or event. It all boils down to 'What are you trying to say?'

Discovering your vision. If you find you have difficulty determining what compels you about certain visual stimuli try this exercise: Examine your existing body of work for themes. Find images or sets of images that have special meaning for you. They may not necessarily have garnered any praise or awards, or even be technically great. Which 'imperfect' images do you find yourself unable to delete from your collection? From this, you should begin to detect a trend -- your own vision for photography -- what moves you; what has meaning for you. Be aware that photographic vision is an evolving process. If you have been shooting for a long time you should detect an evolution in what themes stir up your passion.

Intent & Visualization:

Intent: Deciding what intrigues you. Before you press the shutter ask yourself, “What is it about this scene, what mood, emotion or thought, compels me to capture it?”

Visualization:

The ability to see the final photograph *in your mind before you click the shutter*.

Seeing is passive; visualization is active planning on your part. Visualization takes practice

- Consider the difference between how the camera and the human eye see things.
 - Dynamic range and sensor's limitation
 - Color perception - the brain alters color temperature
- Consider technical obstacles - speed and depth of field
- Consider your creative and compositional options

NOW you can begin to make the appropriate decisions that will express to viewers more than just ‘I was there’ — to express your intent.

Move away from duplicating shots others have taken. Don't shoot what you think others want to see. Shoot what you want others to see!

This natural tendency is only a valuable exercise for beginners learning the mechanics of photography.

“Your photography is a record of your living, for anyone who really sees. You may see and be affected by other people's ways, you may even use them to find your own, but you will have eventually to free yourself from them. That is what Nietzsche meant when he said, ‘I have just read Schopenhauer, now I have to get rid of him.’ He knew how insidious other people's ways could be, particularly those which have the forcefulness of profound experience, if you let them get between you and your own vision.” — Paul Strand

Practice and experiment: Master your camera. Shoot in manual mode until you fully understand the relationship between aperture and shutter speed. Try different lenses on the same scene. Note how they affect the composition by altering the framing and compression of the pictorial elements.

Take photos without your camera! Develop the art of seeing, not just looking. Practicing will heighten your sensitivity to the visual world. *“I'm always mentally photographing everything as practice.” — Minor White*

Articulating Intent

Aesthetic Consideration: The camera flattens the three dimensional world

Guiding the Viewer's Eye: Understanding what the eye is drawn to, we can guide our viewers to what we want them to focus their attention on.

- Large elements before small
- Light objects before dark
- Warm colors before cool
- Focused items before blurred
- Isolated elements before clutter
- High contrast items over low contrast
- Diagonal lines before straight
- Human before inanimate

“Work the Scene.” Try different angles, perspectives, camera orientations – choose the ones that enhance the story. Avoid just trying to be clever with the camera. Concentrate on what it is you are trying to say and utilize that knowledge to pick the best compositional approaches.

Be open to what's out there. Sometimes, if you're too focused on creating an image that you have in your mind, you can miss what's really important about a scene. Look around. Take lots of pictures. Get in the ‘zone’. Let one

visual thought lead to another. Ending up with many shots that were not part of your original intention can mean that you are open to inspiration. This may sound contrary to what I've been saying, but really it may just another way to discover your photographic vision.

Drawing is like studying Greek and piano: "You can't speak or play in your conscious, which is clumsy. You must get it into your subconscious, which is graceful." -- Robert Beverly Hale

Articulating Intent: Camera Tools

Technical Consideration: Which lens / focal length emphasizes your intent

- Wide angle (wider view and greater depth of field)
- Telephoto (closer viewpoint and compressed image components)
- Different focal lengths create different relationships between objects in an image

Using Depth of Field to Guide Your Viewer (Selective Focus)

What area of your image you choose to set your focus on, and how great a depth of field can significantly influence where your viewers' attention will be drawn.

Using Motion: Using a slow shutter speed can enhance the physical motion in a scene (tripod use suggested)

Technical Considerations: Exposure Compensation

Consider exposure compensation. Would under- or over- exposing enhance the mood of the image?

Articulating Intent: Composition

Framing

"Photography is a system of visual editing ... a matter of choosing among given possibilities ... the number of possibilities is not finite but infinite" — John Szarkowski

- Move or zoom in simplify; Back off to show environment
- Remember that your viewers assume all decisions on the content of a photo were made by you on purpose!
- Exclude the unnecessary; don't try to say too much. Less is more!

Cropping in Post Processing

- A Good Place to Start developing your image
- Simplify
- Choose aspect ratio

Study the language of Light. Direction of light, intensity of light and color temperature. The quality of light is determined by shadows. *"Light speaks, just like language. You can make someone look like an angel, or the devil." — Joe McNally.* Direction: front light, side light, rear (rim) light. Each type affects the mood of a scene. e.g. rear rim light is often associated with romantic mood.

Be aware of what light is available. (Bright sun, shade, overcast) **Then use it to enhance your intention.** What type of light best suits the subject? Can you change position of the camera or subject to catch better lighting? Can you modify or shape the lighting (diffusers, fill flash, gobos, etc.)?

Using Color to Enhance Your Message

- Color temperature affects mood
- Warm colors advance; cool ones recede
- Color Intensity
 - Bright colors draw the eye
 - Would the image be better without color?
 - Black & White
 - Split Toning

The myth of 'Correct Color'

Color Temperature Enhances Mood

Color Intensity

Implied Movement

Control where your viewer looks by using lines

Articulating Intent: Technical Considerations

Technical Consideration: Shoot in RAW: It's not a question of quality but one of flexibility.

The Histogram: Use it, but don't be a slave to it!

Filters & Techniques. Avoid gimmicks (filters, plug-ins, and techniques) that do not add to the intent of the image. Only use them when they add to the feel of the photo.

Final Thoughts:

On Inspiration & Creativity:

Do not sit around waiting for inspiration. Creativity comes through working at your craft.

On Growing as a Photographer:

Workshops, presentations, tutorials can all be beneficial but the real learning only comes from practice.