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I have decided to make a public confession, in spite of the risk that it may damage my reputation in photographic art circles. I’ve recently begun to create a number of personal, fine art images in Photoshop. I am using – and God help me for using the word – digital means to create artwork. Mind you, I’m not pursuing with this work a Uelsmann-esque type of recombinant imagery nor a Witkin-like fantasy construct. The work I’m creating is very realistic, that is to say, it is most definitely photography-like in its final nature. I’d like to think the f/64 crowd would approve because the aesthetic nature of my images are in concert with their vision. Sure, I’m using the digital darkroom extensively, and I’m even doing digital output. What do you suppose is the reaction I’ve received from some of the traditionalist contemporary photographers who have seen this work? You guessed it: “That’s not a real photograph!” How silly.

I’ve been studying a great deal of art history lately. I’ve become fascinated how many lessons the art world has learned with which the world of photographic art still struggles. I find there is a great deal to learn about making fine art photographs that can be learned by studying the history of painting, sculpture, and other art media. Art history has even helped my clarify my thinking about digital photography.

Let me see if I remember this right – this whole “art thing” started with a crude picture of a bison painted on the ceiling of a cave. Fast forward a few millennium. Japanese ikebana flower arranging is so ephemeral the results of the master’s work last a few days or weeks. So, on the one hand we have art that lasts tens of thousands of years, and on the other we have art that lasts a few tens of days. Art is not about longevity. OK, I’ve got that point.

Beethoven wrote symphonies that are nothing more than musical notations on paper transcribed from his furtive imagination. But the paper that contains his writing is not really what we call his artwork. His artwork is the musical notes that are played as a result of interpreting his score. So Beethoven doesn’t perform his art, but his art does perform Beethoven’s mind and make it manifest.
for those of us who listen. So the art isn’t necessarily what the artist physically creates, but instead is what others create in turn from the vision of the artist. Art is about vision. OK, I’ve got that point.

One of photography’s maxims is that the negative is the score, the print is the performance. So, what we make in the field, standing in front of a great landscape, is merely a negative that has artistic and creative potential, but our real artwork is the performance of the print that is seen by the public. So all the interim steps – the latent image, the developed negative, the test strip, the draft prints – don’t count in the final artwork. The only thing that really matters is the completed piece and whether or not it has the proper emotional impact and expresses the artist’s vision. Means are immaterial; it’s the final product that counts. OK, I’ve got that point, too.

So, the world of art has already sorted out the number of these issues for us: 1) emotional content is king, 2) the actual artwork authored by a creative mind can be a physical product of other people’s labor, 3) longevity is immaterial for artwork to be considered important, and 4) all the steps it takes to arrive at the final product are non sequitur to the final result.

So then, what is all the debate about digital photography? My observation is that this resistance by so many to the new technology is rooted deeply in the early 20th Century when photographers began debating the nature of pictorialism and the straight print. But, what is all this business about the straight print that must not be manipulated? What do they mean by the purity of the photographic vision and process? Does this movement in the history of photography really focus on processes or was it a movement about ways of seeing?

Clearly the genesis of the mystique about the “straight print” has its roots in an artistic vision, not a physical process. The physical process about making straight prints was simply the dictate of a train of thought about the crystal clarity possible with the photographic lens. It does occur to me, however, that a great deal of the confusion about digital tools in our age of photography’s evolution stem from an almost religious devotion to the straight print and the “pure” photographic process. This tends to manifest itself today in a community divided into the pro-digital and anti-digital mutually exclusive camps.

It should be clear that I’m firmly in the pro-digital camp, but for specific reasons that have to do with the use of tools, not with the creation of so-called “digital imagery.”
This brings me to the heart of my comments in this article. Both the pro-digital and the anti-digital camps need to be sure they are thinking clearly about their positions. To those of you who are resisting digital photography, I would propose that you consider whether or not you are protesting the use of a new tool, or a type of imagery. To those of you who are enthusiastically involved in digital photography, I would propose that you think carefully about whether or not you are advocating a tool when perhaps you are really advocating an aesthetic vision.

One of the most often-encountered arguments against everything digital is that it is just too mechanical. Digital images somehow lack the human touch. An “original work” assures us that the master’s spirit, presence and perhaps even a few trace molecules from his hand are indeed embedded in this print.

But this is really just a question about where one chooses to draw the line. Ansel Adams’ prints are supposedly valuable because he printed them. But what about all those prints that were made by his assistants under his guidance and direction and only accepted upon his approval? What about the spot-toning? Does the fact that Adams hired craftspeople to do the spot-toning of his prints somehow make them less his? What about the matting? What about the framing?

Or consider the other end of the productive spectrum – are they only truly Adams’ work if he grinds his own lenses, mixes the film emulation from scratch, coats his own film, manufactures his own enlarging emulsion and paper, and produces photographs as his predecessors had done in the early days of photography? If he doesn’t, does that then make him a charlatan? Or, is this only a matter of where one chooses to draw the line? Even in the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo didn’t paint all the clouds – his assistants did. Does this invalidate his authorship for the painting?

If Photoshop is the digital equivalent of the perfected negative; and if through the use of digital craft techniques an artist can express themselves with the same integrity and passion as have done the previous generations of traditional photographic craftsmen; and if (or when) the final digital output that the viewer sees is technically indistinguishable from its analog counterpart, then perhaps we are seeing the first truly revolutionary approach to the production of photographic artwork since the introduction of silver gelatin materials. Just as gelatin silver created the possibilities of technical control and subtlety that had been previously unknown, perhaps the introduction of a new tool like the computer may expand elements of craft into a new visual vocabulary. But, does this necessarily imply
bizarre construction, fantasy imagery and the ubiquitous floating rock?

I’d like to suggest an entirely new way of looking at this debate. I think it’s critically important to differentiate between digital technologies – as a means to reproduce tones – and a certain aesthetic which is often misunderstood as “digital photography,” but is actually more closely aligned with the school of art known as Surrealism. There’s no question that digital technologies bring surrealism to photography with a thunderous presence. Because tools like Photoshop allow recombinant imagery to be made so easily, it’s therefore easily abused and even misunderstood. Surrealists made an awful lot of bad artwork before the best painters figured out how to use this new vision to make artwork that was significant and lasting. Right now, I see far too many photographers experimenting with digital techniques, making the same mistakes and the same bad artwork that the Surrealists have already rejected as being trite and insignificant. To paraphrase the old wisdom: photographers who do not know their art history, I guess, are condemned to repeat it.

Speaking strictly for myself, if I see one more bilaterally symmetric photograph, one more floating rock or tree, or one more human body part growing out of an inanimate object, I think I’ll probably vomit. I confess, I’m not very interested in surrealistic painting either. That Surrealism can now be so easily produced in photographs has not increased my interest in that style of imagery. I suppose I am a bit of the stuffy traditionalist. I enjoy the photographic vision of Ansel Adams, Alfred Stieglitz, Eugene Atgét, and the like. About as far as I stray into the non-real might be Minor White’s mystical images. This says, of course, a great deal more about me and my personal tastes than it does about the wider world of photography. My point, however, is that digital tools, had they been available in their time, would no doubt have been used by Adams, Stieglitz, and Atgét. And although I believe they would have used the tools, I don’t believe these photographers would have been creating pictures of fish-headed women or mountain rivers that whirlpool down kitchen drains. There is no reason to think any of these photographers would have chosen to do surrealistic imagery. In fact, all of them had tools to create such imagery and chose not to use them. It used to be called “trick photography.” The seduction of Photoshop, which I believe is a passing fad, is this sort of surrealistic fantasy imagery. Notice I did not say “recombinant” imagery. There may be a very interesting kind of photography yet to be produced that is both realistic and
recombinant. This seems to me to be a perfectly legitimate use of the tools without succumbing to surrealistic representations.

So, it seems to me the only practical question that photographers should debate is not whether or not they should “go digital.” Whether it is the Internet, e-mail, image transfers, or publishing reproductions like posters, books, or other means, photography is now digital. That question has clearly been answered. That it is now also becoming digital in image capture (cameras) and image production (output) is undeniable. Whether or not film is obsolete is still a debate. Whether or not darkrooms are obsolete is yet to be seen. But the one fact about digital imagery that cannot be debated is that the tools are here. Creative, inventive, and judicious use of the tools is a learning curve that each one of us will need to master for ourselves. The first step to thinking about this clearly is to differentiate between the tool and the products made with it. Digital photography and Surrealism are not synonymous, but I fear it is being cast into that mold by people who need to review their art history a bit more carefully.
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BEYOND WORDS

by

Paul Crosby
PHOTOGRAPHY MUST RELEARN TO AFFIRM

by

Steven Gilbert

[Editor’s Introduction: No other Editor’s Comment in LensWork has touched a spark of controversy quite like the article Cheap Shots in LensWork #40. On reflection, perhaps this makes sense. What one points the camera toward is the single most determinant factor in what one’s photograph is. (Simple truths are often the most profound.) In this article-length response, Gilbert expands on the original ideas in our Editor’s Comments and places this long debate in the context of some history. His letter is reproduced here, verbatim, with the author’s permission.]

Dear Mr. Jensen,

Finally! With powers of observation worthy of a photographer, you’ve seen and said, as the child in Andersen’s tale did, that an “emperor” – photography now – is naked (with your editorial in issue no. 40, Cheap Shots). Since that monarch insisted his ministers and subjects (“curators” and “viewers”) join him in his delusion, his country must have been a sad mess, but maybe with words as forceful as yours...

You and I share a conception of photography as aiming to elevate its makers and viewers. Yes, making images that can re-sensitize our eyes and revive our spirits is harder than making those that
“Good photography is not about Zone Printing or any other Ansel Adams nonsense. It’s just about seeing. You either see or you don’t see. The rest is academic. Photography is simply a function of noticing things. Nothing more.”
WAR GAMES

by

Bryan Grigsby
INTERVIEW WITH GORDON OSMUNDSON

Brooks Jensen: Gordon, you are probably best known for your exquisite detail work with trains, but I know you’ve done a lot of other work, too. You make your living as a landscape architect, but your first passion definitely is photography. How did you get interested in trains to begin with?

Gordon Osmundson: I think I was born with it. My Dad says that when I was a little boy he had to read the story of *The Little Engine That Could* to me over and over again. If he tried to change any of the words, I made him go back and correct it. We took trips down to the railroad tracks and saw the trains go by and things like that. Later I got interested in model railroading when I was in the seventh grade. Once I started that, I was hooked.

BJ: So have you ever worked in the transportation business – worked on a train? Or is it just a passion from the photographic sense?
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