

Booklet #25: The Northern Virginia Alliance of Camera Clubs

## PHOTOGRAPHY AS ART

by

Joseph Miller



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## PREFACE

The Northern Virginia Alliance of Camera Clubs (NVACC) is an informal organization started in 1997 by Joseph Miller with the assistance of Dave Carter and Ed Funk. Our purpose is to promote communication and cooperation among camera clubs. We accomplish this by (a) publishing a monthly calendar of the member clubs' activities; (b) conducting training seminars for photographic judges; (c) maintaining a registry of trained judges who serve the clubs' monthly competitions and critiques; and (d) maintaining a directory of speakers who have been recommended by the various clubs. You can learn more about NVACC by going to our web site at [www.NVACC.org](http://www.NVACC.org).

This booklet is one of a series that was developed by NVACC during the period 1998-2008 to capture the considerable expertise of the many accomplished photographers in Northern Virginia and share it with others. Over recent years, we have seen significant change in the photographic art form and very rapid technical advance in both the media of photography (film and digital) and the tools (cameras, lenses, computers, and software). For that reason, the detail of some of these booklets may seem "dated", although the ideas and techniques presented transcend "progress" and the digital-film divide. Watch the NVACC web for new booklets as well as revisions that incorporate new technology and ideas into the existing ones.

Originally, our booklets were made available through member clubs for a small fee that covered the cost of reproduction. Now, however, the booklets are available on [www.NVACC.com](http://www.NVACC.com) where individuals may download one machine-readable copy and one print copy per page for personal, noncommercial use only. Written permission from NVACC is required for any other use.

If you would like to know more about NVACC or have questions or suggestions concerning our booklets or services, please feel free to contact us at [JoeMiller@NVACC.org](mailto:JoeMiller@NVACC.org).



# Photography as Art

## Introduction.

To have our photography thought of as art is indeed a high honor. That said, images which we consider to be art may not fare well in camera club competitions where judges must make quick decisions based primarily on immediate impact and, of course, the usual technical and composition considerations. It is a rare judge indeed that ever considers whether a photograph is art when he or she judges at a camera club competition.

Some photography is considered art and most major museums have an area, albeit usually very small, where photographs are exhibited. Recently I gave a talk to a photographic society in Hartford, Connecticut, and afterwards spent a few days gallery and museum hopping in New York City looking at photographs that are considered art. One art gallery had an exhibit of Robert Mapplethorpe and Helmut Newton photographs – the least expensive was \$25,000.

What is the definition of photography? A few years ago that was a much easier question to answer. Now, with the advent of the digital explosion, the web, clip art, scanners, electronic software programs and pixels to the right of us and pixels to the left of us, what is photography today? Where does photography end and imaging begin?

If we were asked what is art, most of us would prefer to reach for the dictionary for a definition of art. No doubt prehistoric cave men debated that very same question regarding drawings on the walls of their caves. I am sure the only consistent answer was then – and still is – “I don't know what art is, but I know it when I see it.” So much for a definition of art.

This booklet on photography as art had as its genesis several different experiences:

- I have attended many camera club competitions where ribbons were given to photographs while more artistic images (in my view) were thrown out. I sometimes feel that judges at camera club competitions are bound and determined to give a ribbon to the technically perfect landscape or wildlife photograph of the evening.

- I have judged at a number of art exhibitions where photography was included. The venues insisted on the best of the best. Some members of camera clubs could not understand why images that had won ribbons in competitions were not juried into the exhibition.

As a result of these experiences, I felt there was a need for a booklet on the subject of photography as art. I began by asking questions. Is photography art? Are there criteria for judging photographs as art? What are the criteria and who is to say?

For centuries the French have had an expression describing that "certain something" about a work of art that makes it unique and sets it apart from everything else in that genre. The French say it has a "je ne sais quoi" quality, i.e., trying to express the inexpressible when the work has a spark and appeal that defies a simple explanation, and even may be undefinable. Such is the nature of art.

While photography is a member of the visual arts family, all photography is not art. What makes a particular photograph a work of art? There is no simple answer. In my view far too much attention is devoted to the technical side of photography and not enough to its emotional aspects. Perhaps that is because technical features can be tested and measured whereas the emotional/feeling side of photography is subjective and not conducive to easy analysis and interpretation.

The whole idea of this booklet is to cause us to think about photography as art. One must develop a certain mindset to make a photograph to be considered art – a mindset much different from making an ordinary photograph – and that mindset begins before the image is taken. You first have to see and feel art before you can photograph it. Technical craftsmanship is not enough. To be considered art, a photograph must be felt as well as seen.

Photography as art involves not only the photographer but also the viewer. Ultimately, the photographer relies upon the ability of the viewer to see and feel photography as art. Some viewers can and some cannot. Knowledgeable and sensitive viewers are essential to an appreciation of photography as art.

## **Some Dictionary Definitions.**

### Art

- The conscious production or arrangement of sounds, colors, forms, movements, or other elements in a manner that affects the sense of beauty, specifically the production of the beautiful in a graphic or plastic medium.

### Artist

- One, such as a painter, sculptor, or writer, who is able by virtue of imagination and talent or skill to
- create works of aesthetic value, especially in the fine arts.

### Fine Art

- Art produced or intended primarily for beauty rather than utility.

### Photograph

- An image, especially a positive print recorded by a camera and reproduced on a photo sensitive surface.

### Photography

- The process of producing images of objects on sensitized surfaces by the chemical action of light or other forms of radiant energy.

## **Some characteristics to help us judge if a photograph is art.**

- Inspires and/or causes a reaction from the viewer.
- Is unique and individualistic. Says something about the photographer.
- Has multiple meanings and suggests various interpretations.
- Evokes feeling and emotion by appealing to the senses as well as the eye.
- Is more than a pretty picture post card.
- Has depth, intrigue, and mystery, creating wonder.
- Defies quick analysis and interpretation.

- Has subtleties and intangibles.
- Is more than just technically excellent.
- Needs to be viewed at length and with care.
- Has lasting appeal. Can be looked at again and again with no loss of appreciation.
- Makes the ordinary extraordinary.

**Some questions to ask ourselves before we take the picture.**

- What is my reason for making this image? Is it to be a record shot or do I want it to be provocative and thought provoking?
- Am I making this image for myself or for others?
- Have I carefully utilized the picture space?
- Have I considered the visual power of corners and edges?
- Have I considered the effect of lines, shapes, color, tone, rhythm, harmony, placement, balance/ imbalance, proportion/dominance, negative space, eye movement, etc? Am I leading the viewer's eye where I want it to go?
- What are the psychological influences of the composition?
- Am I interpreting the scene or am I merely recording the scene?
- Is the image ordinary or extraordinary? Why? Why not?
- Is the image artistically pleasing and technically excellent? Both? Neither?
- Have I said too much, too little, or just enough?
- Will the image whet the viewer's imagination? Will the image entice the viewer to enter it?
- Is the exposure right for the mood/feeling/emotion I want to convey?
- Am I presenting my image in a different or unique way?
- Am I putting my "mark," my personality, my point of view into the image?
- Does the image represent my interpretation of what I am seeing?
- How do I feel about the image? What do I want the viewer to feel?
- Is the image the best I can do? Would I want to see it again and again?

### **Some Relevant Quotes.**

"A photograph is usually looked at - seldom looked into." - Ansel Adams.

"...it takes a lot of looking before you learn to see the extraordinary." - David Bailey.

"I am not interested in shooting new things - I am interested to see things new." - Ernst Haas.

"Of course, there will always be those who look only at technique, who ask 'how', while others of a more curious nature will ask 'why'. Personally, I have always preferred inspiration to information." - Man Ray.

"Once you really commence to see things, then you really commence to feel things." - Edward Steichen.

"The artist's world is limitless. It can be found anywhere, far from where he lives or a few feet away. It is always on his doorstep." - Paul Strand.

"... not searching for unusual subject matter, but making the commonplace unusual." - Edward Weston.

"Craft always precedes art – in every pursuit." - Freeman Patterson.

## Freeman Patterson's Art Statement

Every artist is, first of all, a craftsperson thoroughly knowledgeable about the materials, tools, and techniques of his or her particular medium and skilled in using many of them.

However, in my view, no amount of technical knowledge and competence is, of itself, sufficient to make a craftsperson into an artist. That requires caring – passionate caring about ultimate things. For me there is a close connection between art and religion in the sense that both are concerned about questions of meaning – if not about the meaning of existence generally, then certainly about the meaning of one's individual life and how a person relates to his or her total community/environment. This is not to say that every work of art is or should be a heavily profound statement, indeed many may be very light-hearted, but rather that consciously and unconsciously an artist engaged in serious work is always raising or dealing with the question: "What really matters?"

For me, answering that question means recognizing the factors that produced and shaped me. I cannot escape dealing with these things if I am to live creatively as a human being or, to put it another way, if I am to take control of and maintain the integrity of my own life. Photography (and, more generally, visual design) has been my enabling medium.

In the broadest sense I photograph nature, which includes human beings. Growing up in a rural community, I was surrounded by natural things. Unlike a child in a totally urban environment, my friends and peer group were not only other children, but also wild and domesticated animals, plants of every sort, brooks and waterfalls, rocks and sand. In winter I listened to the wind-chiming of ice-covered branches, wandered through spring's greening fields, splashed about for minnows in the river, and gathered bouquets of autumn leaves.

However, the obviously beautiful in my environment was balanced by other realities. I saw the food chain operating, experienced the effects of droughts and floods, and daily observed the process of aging. When my little sister died, the loss I felt was assuaged by my having learned early that this happens to everyone and everything.

I believe that the ability of human beings to be creative depends fundamentally on the health and well-being of our biosphere, the few kilometres of air, water,



and soil that surround our planet like the skin of an apple. Quite simply, they are the physical and spiritual bases of our lives, and the only source of materials and tools that enable us to express our responses to questions and feelings about ultimate things. Creation and creativity are inextricably linked.

This awareness now forms the central core of my work. The abstracting of visual elements in order to recognize their particularity has become automatic, but seeing, combining, and creating them as integrated "wholes" will remain a life-long challenge.

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## **The Why of Making Pictures**

by Freeman Patterson

Whenever I'm scanning magazine racks for photographic publications, I always notice the abundance of other craft magazines. Among those on display are quilting, woodworking, motor mechanics and fitness, of course, the latter being a pursuit with which I've become familiar lately, after a couple of satisfying winters working out at the local gym. And these pursuits are just the tip of the iceberg!

What most of these magazines have in common, including those on photography, is their emphasis on "how to". They are mostly about the tools and techniques of a particular craft. If you want to quilt, here's how. If you want to take photographs, here's how. With the possible exception of fitness, there is rarely any consideration of "why" do it.

A good friend of mine, a painter (who is married to a sculptor, both of whom have devoted their lives to art), remarked to me recently that she is glad to have been a painter for so long. "I've been able to paint out all my pain," she said, and I reflected that her comment showed a profound understanding – based on experience – of the most important "why" of pursuing a craft. And, ultimately, of the value of art. Craft always precedes art – in every pursuit. Even the most accomplished artists are forever refining and improving their craft; and they never cease being craft people. How to do something well is always important. But, there's a lot more to it than tools and techniques, and that's what I miss in magazines. I miss the discussion of "why."

I miss the open and honest search for meaning, the admission of weakness, the acknowledgment of pain, and the wholeness of genuine celebration. I miss the tears and I miss the 'dancing'. Yet, I have experienced all of these things – deeply and repeatedly – in our workshops, when amateurs and pros of every sort begin to feel that their efforts in the craft of photography transcend the craft, that photography becomes a passport to the country of their soul: a fresh trip into Life.

A magazine can never be a substitute for a good workshop experience. Such experiences are simply too diverse. But, working with pictures and words, both can achieve balance – a creative mix of the "how to" with the "reason why," because its "the reason why" that gives the "how to" its purpose.

To be more precise, what I'm alluding to are spiritual concerns – not religion, not

psychology, not philosophy, although any of these may be involved. I want to be personal, to speak about how each of us is a unique individual, somebody like nobody else who has ever gone before nor will ever come again. I want to suggest that the process of understanding and feeling who we are and can become is a lifelong challenge that photography, as a medium of expression, enables us to engage with meaning and purpose. I also want to suggest, strongly, that it's okay to talk about these things far more openly than we do most of the time.

LET ME USE A COUPLE OF EXAMPLES.

1. A gallery owner recently commented on a photographers work: "It's like sitting down to a simple, sumptuous meal. But maybe I've become accustomed to edgier things over the years, and like them darker and a little more broody." After reading this I was tempted to rephrase the remark as "It's a simple, sumptuous meal, but I'll like it better when it goes rancid.

I don't want to imply that everything dark and broody is negative or bad. But, I have long noted that many highly urbanized curators and critics prefer, indeed often seem intellectually and emotionally committed to darkness over light, suffering over healing. Clearly many have trouble appreciating beautiful photographs, and can be quite derogatory about them. This attitude needs to be explored. To me, such critics are admitting (unconsciously, in most instances) that our species is frustrated. Our rapid technological development (providing both good things and bad), our exploding population, our rampant destruction of natural habitats all impinge daily on our lives, and are in deep conflict with the biological and psychological patterns (archetypes) that we evolved over untold thousands of years in order to survive and grow. Sensing that is fine.

However, at the same time, this attitude shows a preoccupation with the shadow side of life – with damage rather than with possible solutions. That's not so fine. Light has always been and remains the antidote for darkness. Beauty is the necessary balance for ugliness. It's all right to desire them, and it's okay to photograph them too.

2. A curator of a major Canadian gallery of contemporary photography once

remarked that a certain photographer's images were "just so many pretty pictures of pretty flowers." The works in question were reminiscent of some of Eliot Porter's nature studies. One was a scattering of dwarf wild iris among a random pattern of fallen dead twigs and branches, another was of a tiny ox-eye daisy virtually overwhelmed by a rampant thicket of lush green grasses. In every image the overriding visual impression was of how the habitat or environment influenced the particular flower(s).

In my view, most sensitive viewers would quickly recognize the symbols as standing for the photographer and his personal habitat – regardless of whether the symbols were consciously chosen or not. They were his way of examining and commenting on important life relationships. Don't we all do that? Don't we all need to do it? Fortunate is the person who knows how to use a camera well enough to explore such issues and questions — consciously or unconsciously. Perhaps more fortunate still is the photographer who meets somebody who recognized the emotional content of the images and is unafraid to discuss them.

Another photographer may choose completely different subject matter (that is, use different symbols) to confront the same basic questions.

Sometimes we dream the same dreams; sometimes we don't. But, we all dream and we all imagine – all the time. That is how our unconscious self (the biggest part of us, like the submerged portion of an iceberg) communicates with our conscious self, our ego.

Nothing is ever "only a dream" or "only her imagination." The fact that imagination and dreams don't come from the conscious ego doesn't make them less real, but it does make them very important especially to artists. Artists of every sort, including photographers are constantly working with their dreams and other symbols.

I'm not suggesting, of course, that all photographs are symbolic, particularly those in which the maker has consciously sought to document physical reality – the details of a war scene, the geological pattern of a rocky cirque, or a sparrow feeding its young. Yet, even here, our choices of subject matter and our style or approaches over many years provide a great deal of information about us, to ourselves primarily and in turn to others – if we care to consider it. In the process of photographing other things, we are always

and forever photographing ourselves, "making a record of our living," to quote photographer Paul Strand.

And that, perhaps without realizing it, is one of the main reasons why we take pictures. If so, it's a very good reason for making them.

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