

Push a Button – Make a Picture / Why Post-Processing?

For the sake of discussion let's make a distinction between photography and art. The world of photography is a wide ranging affair. There are many kinds of photography; documentary, news, fashion, product, family snapshots and so on. Then there is art-photography.

One approach that is applied often in Art School is to walk around, find cool looking things, take a picture, print that out, and share it with people. The keywords in this phrase are 'find' and 'share'. If you are finding things and presenting them more or less as they appear in real life then you are not really making anything. You are capturing things. People in the other Areas of this Art School make fun of the photographers saying that "Photographers just push a button to take a picture. They don't actually make anything."

[Yes, Marcel Duchamp did the whole thing about found objects as sculpture, and that is a conceptual statement about the nature of creation. This example indicates that this conversation is far from exact because the whole world of making art is all shades of gray with no black or white. There are no absolutes. But we do have to invent terms so we can discuss things. But I digress...]

To make really compelling photographs you have to take them and push them beyond their original real-life appearance. *"You have no responsibility to present the world as it really appeared in real life."* No one is going to compare the photograph you print to the original subject anyway. In fact, if your photograph does look like the subject as it appeared in real life you're not doing a very good job of framing and composition. [The viewpoint of the photographer must alter the subject in a way that makes the sense of vision of the photographer the subject of this photograph rather than just the appearance of the subject. This is the difference between passive vs. active photography.] [ref: Mirrors and Windows, John Szarkowski.]

The really good photographs are not those that look cool. Just looking at cool stuff is not the point. Figuring out why the photographer took the photograph in the first place is what is intriguing. The great photographs take you inside the mind of the photographer. It is all about motivation, not appearance. It is more a conceptual thing than a visual thing.

The first step is to over articulate the subject of the photo. A good analogy is when you hear somebody talking in a normal speaking voice on the television. They sound really boring and flat. If you ever hear a real announcer speak in person, they over articulate everything! This is necessary for a subject to survive the compression of time, space, 3 dimensionality, and even color that happens inside of a camera (or a microphone through a broadcasting booth).

This over articulation can be done in a subtle manner or can be taken to extremes. Some people consider this kind of alteration to be editing a photograph, that is a kind of correction. What is being suggested here is to take the alteration beyond that point of correction and make it an act of creation. See the world as raw material from which you can make an amazing image that extends beyond normalcy.

This brings us to the world of post-processing. Even in analog days, all photographs were post-processed. Variable contrast filters, split-filter printing, and creative chemical toning were all tools that were used by photo-artists to make dynamic prints. [Read about what Ansel Adams went through to make a print and how he invented 'pre-visualization' and 'the Zone System'.] Now in the digital world we have many tools available to give us a great amount of control over the modification of the tonality, luminance and chrominance of the final print. [Then there is the whole world of presentation beyond that!]

The key point now is to figure out why you would want to post-process a print. What direction do you want to take it? This is the essence of the phrase "form supports content". You must first decide what you want to say and then find the right vocabulary to make that statement clearly. If you are not clear what the photograph is about your audience will never get it, and there is no communication. *"If there is no communication, there is no art."* If you just use post-processing as an effect with no particular reason behind it, all you get is fake looking photographs.

The next conversation deals with some possible motivations for post-processing photographs:

Maybe the question is: How can you alter the emotional quotient of the photographic environment using post-processing?