

PHOTO CLICHÉS

Some years ago there was a conference of the Society of Photographic Education. During that conference there was a panel of New York gallery directors, including the infamous Ivan Karp from OK Harris in Soho.

Someone posed a question, "How do you deal with looking at so many portfolios?" Karp was quick to reply.

"I have a list of photo clichés in my desk. I open each portfolio and compare the top photo with my list. If there is a match, I close the portfolio and go on to the next."

He then began to recite the photo clichés on his list.

- no pictures of the expressive hands of old people,
- no pictures of the gnarled roots of mighty trees,
- no dramatic sunsets,
- no drooling babies,
- no cute, cuddly pets,
- no self-portraits in rear-view mirrors,
- no pictures of cemeteries with or without dancing nymphets,
- no pictures of motorcycles boys with or without pierced nipples",

and he went on, to a riotous response of laughs and applause.

When I first started teaching in Bucks County I got lots of picturesque photos of barns and covered bridges, so I added the rule of

- no pictures of barns or covered bridges.

Then I came to teach at Temple University, an urban campus. The first new rules that were added were

- no pictures on TU campus, and
- no pictures that could immediately be identified as typical student photos, including snapshots of roommates and drinking buddies.
- no pictures that look like they could have been shot at the family or company barbeque [aka snapshots]

These expanded to include the urban postcard set:

- no pictures of City Hall (or any landmark building)
- no pictures of the Love Sculpture (or any sculpture)
- no pictures of City Hall through the O of the Love Sculpture
- no pictures of City Hall through the O of the Love Sculpture reflected in a puddle.

This is basically a way of saying

- no pictures that look like anything that might appear on a picture postcard.
- no pictures that look like snapshots
(these depend on personal knowledge of the people or places in the photos).

The other types of photos that seem to have been used up by the commercial world are the following:

- no pictures of musicians,
every record album shot is trying to look like art
- no pictures of dancers,
Dance Magazine is full of photos trying to look like art
- no pictures of kids on skateboards or bikes
like everything we see in bike and skateboard magazines
- no pictures of animals of any kind
they will just look like Nat Geo shots

This is basically a way of saying

- no pictures that look like anything that might appear in a documentary.
- These are photojournalism, which is neither better nor worse, just different from what we are engaged in here.

And finally

- no pictures that could be fashion ads.

The bottom line here is that the motivation for making any of these pictures is to sell something, not to make any kind of personal statement. These photos cannot be art – they are commerce. ref : Sarah Moon

MOTIVATION & INTENT

Sometimes it is not the appearance of the photograph that counts. Well, never, actually. It is the motivation of the photographer that is important. What is the photographer trying to share with you? What is the essence of the communication?

This does not have to be some profound statement. It may only be some small part of the world they are drawn to, and then wish to share with you. If you find this same content interesting, then there is some similarity between you and the photographer. This is called resonance.

For this to work the artist must first be clear about what they are trying to communicate. If they are not clear about their content, how can anyone ever understand what they are trying to say? If the motivation behind the content is indiscernible, then there is no communication. If there is no communication then there is no art.

It can be so simple sometimes, that clarity can be the content!

Other times it can be buried behind layers of personal meaning, and only the surface is clear. But still you can understand the depth of the feeling without knowing all the details. This is the emotional aspect of communication. EMOTIONAL discipline.

Other times it can be some ideas about the content. Maybe the connection in a group of photos is the place or a series of events. This is an example of the conceptual aspect of photography. CONCEPTUAL discipline.

And even other times it can be the way a photo is made that can make it compelling. It could be some technical aspect of the craftsmanship. PHYSICAL discipline.