



“Photography is an Artform, it's my Artform”

When delivering one of my series of **from the ordinary to the extraordinary** talks – [details here](#) - to camera clubs and groups of photographers I often find myself being asked to comment on what makes a great or even, if we dare use the word, perfect photograph. I usually remark that modern technology in our cameras and indeed phones can



produce pretty acceptable images. However, if we want to – in the title of my series of talks – **Move from the Ordinary to the Extraordinary** - then we need to take control. I use a version of the war time poster, “your country needs you”, to say “your camera needs you”. I stress it's your art and your creativity and you have a right to express yourself in the way you wish and to create a piece of art that does just that.

I strongly believe that photography is a creative art and what you produce is what you want to say to express yourself or even to challenge the viewer. Artists have done it in other media for years and many are heralded for it. There is the risk however that what you produce fails in all these respects but surely that's all part of the learning curve and the journey we travel as a photographer.

I also strongly believe that whilst this journey and the learning is very important but that we must never use it as an excuse for submitting poor work. We must never respond when the judge doesn't value your work as you do that; “he or she is a poor judge because they gave my photo a low mark”. There is no excuse for blaming a judge for a low mark, if it deserves it. Hopefully, he or she will provide a fair comment on the quality and execution of your work and it's that that helps you learn. Equally we should never resist trying something new just because someone, judge or otherwise, challenges it. We should consider their comments and learn from them and not let them *beat us down* for daring to try something new.

We must always aim to produce work that is more creative and technically proficient and never stoop to producing the lifeless photographs some are more comfortable with. This is the sad reality of being different in a world that rewards homogeny. There is an old Japanese saying “the nail that stick out gets hammered”. I prefer “it's better to be yourself than to conform”; it's by standing out that we progress or learn. In history those who stand out are those who succeed. We have the right to experiment but we must ensure we learn from our experiments and learn from others comments. I would however be concerned when a judge or any other critic of my work is not prepared to justify their comments. It's all too easy to criticise but those criticising must give a be prepared to provide a valid comment. This can't be simply one of the arcane rules that photographers so often live by but advice and support from their experience and their own journey as an artist or photographer. The nail that sticks out is trying to say something to try a different way otherwise you journey of creativity and expression is meaningless. These rules are helpful as are learning to master the controls on your camera but they are just starting points. Bending these rules and testing the boundaries are the way we improve in our creative journey. When you start to take control of your creativity learn from others and value your own art that's when the magic happens.



I was once given three very important pieces of advice:

- 1 Find a trusted friend who you can ask to comment creatively on your work and provide criticism where necessary but in a constructive and supportive way. Someone who you trust and can give you the time to discuss your work and improve. Someone who understands you are on a journey and wants to support you not “beat you down” but importantly to encourage you. Someone who will say what they think and, importantly, justify it even if that challenges you; better still if it does challenge you. Someone who is as helpful in the technical as they are the creative aspects of photography. Photography is a mastering of both aspects jointly, an approach which improves with practice and listening to supportive feedback as you experiment with both.
- 2 Never excuse poor work by suggesting that the person commenting doesn’t understand what you are trying to say. If possible, ask them why. There are intrinsic problems with competitions such as those in camera clubs and the many other areas where we put our work up for judgement. There often isn’t the capacity or time for this support. Instead of railing against the judge at the time; after the event ask your supportive critic what they think and listen to their comments especially the hard to hear ones. That’s how we learn and develop.
- 3 Not to spend my hard-earned money on this or that piece of new kit but rather invest in books with collections of photographs. Work through these in the comfort of your favourite armchair perhaps with your favourite tippie and ask why or what the photographer/artist was trying to say and how they went about it. My wife, my most trusted critic, regularly enters her work in salons and sometimes does well and sometimes not. One of the best aspects of salons are the books or CD’s of other photographers work they produce. These give the marks awarded and sometimes comments, looking through these and asking why is so helpful.

A great judge once said to me that a good image “engages the eye but doesn’t jar the brain”. I often refer to this when speaking to people about what makes a great photo. It must engage the viewer and take them on a journey but it must not have something that causes you to shy away. Little things engage the eye and equally small things



can jar the brain. My wife is superb at seeing a little part of an animal that, in the split second of exposing the photo are not as they ought to be and that, to her, and to me as a naturalist jars the brain. These are the once seen never forgotten moments that will stick out every time you look at a photo. Equally she was showing me a photo of a baby elephant the other day squirting water into its mouth. The action the moment captured were exquisite as were the small tusks just starting to develop. These all certainly engaged my eye.

I once had a marketing manager working for me who advised that, when next on an escalator on the underground, watch the other people glancing at the myriad of adverts competing for their attention on the wall. See which ones cause them to look twice or hold their stare and ask why. These adverts have done what was intended they have engaged the eye and not jarred but, held the brain. The reason is to sell a product of course, but when I produce a photo, I am doing it to say something to the viewer. I am not producing something that is beautiful necessarily but something that conveys a message. I once met a lady called Lisa Langell who said “*Photography isn’t just documenting that you saw it – its capturing how you experienced the moment*” and I would add sharing it or taking the viewer there.

As a professional wildlife photographer this is so important to me. A photograph captures a moment in time and needs to convey how I felt and thought at the time. I firmly believe that photography is also about sharing your passions with the world through your photographs. Wildlife photography provides me with the opportunity to capture pictures that say “Wow,” and pass that on to other people. I am trying to share with the viewer what it was

that drew my attention in the first place? I used to shoot factually – this is a lion that's how you tell, or this is a lioness in Africa with her cubs. I now try to shoot with 'emotion' and try to highlight that feeling in the image. When I fail to do this either by my lack of technical or creative ability then that's when it deserves criticism and I must take this to encourage me on my journey.

I don't make my photographs to abide by the oft repeated and rigid rules given as a starting point for those new to photography but to challenge my own and those of the viewer. If that results in something that others resonate with in the same way that I look to the art of others to help me learn and stay relevant, then that's a bonus. If others find inspiration and my photographs "engage their eyes" and take them on a journey, I'm thrilled. My art, and the way I choose to create it, needs no more endorsement than that I had the courage to make it in the first place. To hold it up for others to experience despite the risk of being misunderstood, or worse, ignored. Not everyone will like what I create but that's not really my concern. My job is to make it, to be faithful to the voice inside my head and heart that insists I do it my way, it's my art. That is often the point of art, not only that it be made, but that it be made the way you want to make it. The making is much of the reward.



Another comment given to me long ago by David DuChemin, an amazing French-Canadian photographer, was that "You will wrestle daily with discomfort with your own work and that's positive. You should never let the discomfort of others become your burden and certainly don't allow their rules to become your chains"

In this day of instant comment on social media, I would add that unless those criticizing your work are prepared to give you the time to explain why, then their criticism is of limited value. As my late father used to say "Never share an opinion or thought you have heard but haven't personally researched and tested lest it be false and you are seen to be a fool".

It was Helen Keller who said "Life, is either a daring adventure or it is nothing."

Surely the same can be said about art and the process of producing it. Adventure is by definition a risky undertaking of unknown outcome, an exciting or unexpected event. In the same way making art through photography is and should be seen as an adventure, that is a prime purpose and how we learn. When Picasso was asked if he knew what his paintings would look like before he even put paint to canvas, he replied, "No, of course not. If I knew, I wouldn't bother doing it."

Photography is an art and making photographs is an art form. It's an exercise in exploring possibilities learning from them and discovering what we want to produce and how we can do it. Any artist starting out at art school will learn the techniques of handling and using a brush, pastels or other medium that's not what counts it's how they use

these to express their art. The old masters used to follow the great teachers to learn to draw or paint, to learn techniques of brush work, handling colour, reproducing texture etc then they used to experiment. When they experimented, they put their experiments up for comment amongst others in their field. It's also worth noting that it's not always until many years later that these experiments are appreciated. In my own small way, I have always enjoyed and pursued shallow depth of field in wildlife photographs but there was a time when we were encouraged to produce everything sharp and in focus, thankfully that *trend* has now gone forever, that is, other than for when you want to put an animal in its landscape.

Too often I see photographers getting tangled with the technical and who ask me on workshops which shutter speed, aperture or lens they ought to use. My reply ought to be to try one and see what happens. This, however, is never the answer they want so I bow to the expected and give advice. This is however advice based on what I would do and won't help the photographer to produce their own unique work. Similarly, I so dislike photo judges who say – I would do this or that without giving reasons. In the new photographer minds it's the fear of getting it wrong or being seen to lack the skills others have that so often drives them to ask these questions; or worse still not to. It would be far better if I replied, when asked “*try ‘such and such’ and you will learn*”. As an educationalist I absolutely know that we always learn much better when we figure something out for ourselves. On a one-day workshop or even a safari I always feel I ought to give advice as after all that's what the individual has paid for and what I as a professional photographer ought to do. However, I so long for that moment when the delegate asks “*why?*” and explores it through questioning for themselves and comes up with their own and better but more importantly explored solutions.

There is such an overwhelming torrent of, quite frankly drivel, written about photography in so many places such as magazines and worse still the internet. Such is our insatiable consumption of social media that we begin to follow it and accept that it must be right. He or she advocating it is a professional after all. It's just so much easier to be told, for example, what the best telephoto lens is. All you then have to do is buy it, slap it on the camera, then point it at the animal and you will produce amazing results. What we seldom do is consider why it is that photographer a) says something and yet photographer b) says something else often completely opposite. Both surely can't be true but we seldom question that. It's the “Emperor's new clothes” fable told by Hans Christian Anderson. If everyone else says it then it must be me that's wrong or lacks the skill and understanding. No – have the confidence to say that it's everyone else who is hiding their lack of understanding by quoting things without question. They too don't understand but won't admit it. To go back to my late father's quote, “*never repeat something that you haven't personally researched and tested lest it be false and you are seen to be a fool*”. I do so wish those spouting forth supposed wisdom had heard him say that. It's not you who is the fool but often those telling you and the tailor in the fable who is. There are so many such tailors on the web who are just looking for likes or sponsorship or as “influencers”. Calling yourself professional or an expert, as so many do, is not the answer professionals in my day used to have to have to earn that accolade. Demonstrating your skills, your work and the soundness of your advice and being prepared to be tested by being questioned by your peers is what makes you a true professional.



My advice thus is – it's your art go and make it, experiment with it and above all enjoy making it. Find a trusted person to give you basic guidance and who you can return to if necessary to question and explore again. With all this knowledge go away and figure it out and develop it for yourself. Find something you don't know how to do or an approach you don't understand and embrace it. Use gear and approaches' you haven't in the past and bend the rules. Subject your work to the comment of others you trust and who will give you the time and space to explore and importantly, the support to learn. We all learn from those we trust who give us time and space; we never learn from those who tell us that's the way to do something without a reason.

Enjoy creating photographs, your most important photographs will not be your best, they are the ones you learn the most from. Do enjoy the feeling of making a great photograph that turns out exactly as you planned. Perhaps better. It's sharp in all the right places, the colours work together, and it has a certain something that works. Enjoy it because you have worked hard to get there but your best photographs will be those where you have tried something new, taken a risk and learnt something in the process. Always look back at what you are producing, your own brand of compelling art and strive to find a way to improve on even this.

When I started out film cost money and every time you pressed the shutter you counted the pennies spent. Now we have the luxury of experimenting for free. In my early days I shot many of thousands of transparencies and hopefully improved as I did. One day I looked at all those boxes of slides and thought why am I keeping them, they take up room and teach me little. My skill has progressed and I will never look back at them. I sorted out the important ones – family, key events, key trips etc – and put the rest in large back bin bags. As I held these bags over the skip at the council tip, I thought gosh what about all the money I have spent on these. Then in a moment, some would say of madness, I let go of the bag and confined these photos to oblivion. I realised as I did it that these slides, the money spent to produce them was my learning process to get me to where I was and that they in themselves were of little use. Thankfully we don't have to pay money to take photos nowadays, but perhaps we ought to consider pressing the delete button on old photos on our computers more often. It's the lessons learnt, the adventure of learning and making the art that's important. Exhibit your work and put it out there for comment, that way you will earn. It is only important though if you progress and are prepared to and have trusted guides not the tailor the emperor employed in Hans Christian Andersons tale.



Making great photographs, like anything in life that's worth doing, should be an adventure. Go out and enjoy yours.

More reflections and musings of a wildlife photographer.

If you have found this interesting, please visit <http://www.naturesphotos.co.uk/musings-of-a-wildlife-photographer> for more of my thoughts.

If you are a member of camera club and would like me to come and share more of my thoughts on what it takes to be a successful wildlife photographer ask your programme secretary to visit my website [here](#) and look at the talks I provide together with the feedback from clubs where I have been in the past.

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