Editor’s Comments

Looking Back, Looking Forward

Last year I had a fascinating conversation with a photographer who explained that he had not been blown off-track by any of the winds of change in photography. He was specifically referring to the digital workflow, but extended his comment with the following: “In fact, I’m still doing the same work today that I was doing 40 years ago. Except for the dates on my prints, you could not tell which of my finished pieces are contemporary and which came from the beginning of my career.” He made this claim as a point of pride: that he was being true to his creative vision.

Perhaps, for him, that’s true. No doubt for me — I suspect for many of you, too — such a statement would be a serious indictment of our lack of artistic growth. I cringe at the idea that I would be producing today, in my 60s, the same kind of work that I produced in my 20s. Certainly, I must have learned something, grown in the process, abandoned some unfruitful adventures, risen to creative challenges, and responded to the world with my art in, hopefully, more interesting and meaningful ways. I understand the motivation to resist the common zeitgeist and to be true to one’s creative vision. But, certainly this does not imply we should be true to the creative vision of our youth without an iota of artistic progress or deepening vision.

So, with this in mind, I’ve been thinking about my 47 years in photography — what I’ve learned, and how my work has evolved. Of course, each one of us traverses our own creative path. What I’ve learned on my path may be
totally irrelevant to what you’ve learned on your path — or, if you’re just starting
in photography, might learn in your future. Nonetheless, it can’t be valueless
to share what I’ve learned. So, here are a few observations about the most
significant foundations of photography that have shifted for me during my
almost five decades in photography. I think sometimes it’s useful to step back
from the details and look at the larger picture.

Rules and beyond rules
Early in my career, a print in a mat board was the only option for original
work. For most of photography, this is still a standard — and perfectly accept-
able — method of presentation. Not for me. I’ve learned that I prefer a relationship
with photographs that is tactile, in close proximity, not separated by a glass or
Plexiglas barrier, and that promotes a much more intimate experience with the
artifact. Indeed, for the first hundred years or so of photography’s existence,
this was considered the normal way to encounter a photograph — handheld,
up close, intimate. Photography as wall art is a relatively recent development
in photography that took root in the early decades of the 20th century.

As a 20th century photographer, I learned the mat board paradigm as The Standard Method. It took me quite a while to even consider an alterna-
tive — let alone see how my photographs demanded it. Over the course of
25 years, my work evolved, slowly, out of the mat board and into folios, chap-
books, and digital publications.

It’s amusing to me, now, that my evolution was so difficult and even, at times,
painful. The real challenge was not the development of alternative media or
presentation methods, but rather the challenge of embracing new ideas and
of letting go of old ones. Habits and rules (and peer pressure!) can be power-
ful forces. On the other hand, a substantial part of artistic growth is to contin-
uously examine those rules, traditions, and habits — and forge a path beyond
them whenever necessary. It took me years to learn that the creative process
is one of learning the rules, then learning how to move past them.

This requires courage of one’s convictions to set aside established standards.
The challenge of doing so has the enormous benefit of forcing one to ques-
tion our artistic impulses and decisions. Self-doubt is an incredibly important
part of the artistic process; only through self-doubt can we arrive at reasoned confidence.

Following the established rules is relatively easy; formulating your own rules requires introspection, hard work, willingness to experiment and fail, failing, and not allowing such failure to discourage you. I tend to think of art as *personal expression* and both words in that definition are of equal importance.

**Art as image and idea**

My introduction to photography was through landscape — Ansel Adams, et al. My early assumptions were that great photographs were faithful, occasionally exaggerated, but essentially intensified representations of an objective view the world. Such thinking may have seduced me into becoming a photographer, but what eventually lit my fire and motivated me to dedicate my life to photography was the realization that photography could be a great deal more than mere objective reproductions.

In my youth, I was dedicated to learning the skill of photographic reproduction; eventually, I realized that photography could be more akin to visual poetry than to prosaic description. With the passage of decades, I became less and less interested in emulating Ansel Adams and more and more interested in the work of Wynn Bullock, Joseph Sudek, Minor White, André Kertész, and the other visual poets of photography.

The great leap occurred for me when I realized that photography is less about *seeing* and more about *feeling*. In my youth, I was mostly concerned about sharp lenses and accurate tonal reproduction; over the decades I’ve become more interested in deeply felt sentiments, insightful observations, and clarity of expression. In my youth, I was interested in connecting with the subjects I photographed. Now I’m most interested in the connection made, via artwork, with my deeper self and those who view my artwork.

Perhaps the most practical implication of this revelation has been the simple idea that I am not a photographer, but rather a *storyteller*. By “story,” I don’t mean some tale unfolding over time with a beginning, middle, and end. Instead, I mean that my artwork is about *ideas*, and not limited to how things look. Perhaps the most influential quote that has driven my photographic career
is: “A great portrait is not one that shows us how someone looks, but instead tells us a little bit about who they are.” I think the same can be said about landscapes, still life, abstracts, all the other subject material we can photograph. The medium of photography may be visual, but the power of photography is its ability to communicate ideas — a power that is considerably enhanced if we are willing to combine image and text.

Early on, I learned from multiple sources that, “Any photograph that needs text needs to be a better photograph.” In my youth, I believed this. Twenty years later, I recognized it as hogwash. If art is about anything, it is as much about ideas as it is about the visual. Media is the vehicle, but ideas are what makes art important. Without ideas, an artifact is just a trinket; with an idea, even a trinket can be a work of art.

That said, it should be noted that “idea” is a complex idea. Obviously, not all art can be — or should be — reduced to words. If words are the best medium to express an idea, then words should be used to express it. Sometimes, the best way to express an idea is without words, with the visual, sensual, physicality of visual artwork. It is an overly-simplistic notion to think that ideas can only be expressed in words. Language is a powerful tool, but exhibits its limitations when compared to direct experience. By emphasizing “art and ideas,” it is important to note the difference between that phrase and “art and words.” The lesson that has required decades for me to learn is that art can be very successful without words, but is almost never successful when it is without ideas. Photography is an art medium that can be enhanced with words, but knowing when and how to do so is part of the craft of the medium.

**The art life**

In my youth, I thought that art-making was about artifacts. This seemed so obvious as to be self-defining. Looking back, I realize that making art is not at all about artifacts, but rather about living the life of an artist, a life of creativity, of experimentation, of learning, of exploring. The artifacts are merely the archaeological remnants of that art life. What counts is not what we *make*, but what we *do*. A friend of mine succinctly put it this way: *Photographer*, in practice, is not a *noun*, but rather a *verb*. Photography is a way of life, not a means of production.
The primary implication of this idea is the separation of process from result. In my youth, I was thoroughly focused on the result — particularly on the commercial concerns that can accompany the result. I was addicted to the idea of earning gallery representation, print sales, publication, and all the other trappings of success. In practice, I learned that becoming a commercially successful fine art photographer was akin to the dreams of a young boy who wants to become a Major League Baseball star. It happens to a few, but is as much a combination of luck and fate as it is the direct result of hard work and talent. Photography, like baseball, is aided by hard work and talent, but hard work and talent are no guarantee of commercial success. Commerce is a function of society, unpredictable tides, and the whims of the marketplace. There are simply too many uncontrollable variables to use commerce as a measurement of success in art. The more intelligent approach is to recognize, in the words of Stephen Bender, that “the art life is one you should be willing to pay for.” In fact, most of us do.

I wish now that I’d spent less time in my art life worried about selling my artwork. Had I been passionate about golf, or Frisbee throwing, cupcake baking, fishing, or jogging, I would never have dreamed that I should be paid for my hobbies. There is something about art, and I think perhaps about photography in particular, that seduces us — I apologize, seduces me — into thinking that it should be sellable. It’s a nice fantasy and one that actually does come true on rare occasions. But, the rules of commerce are different than the rules of art-making. There is no question, for me anyway, that making art is far more important than selling art. Art-making is about the creative life; art-selling is a business.

We can all agree that selling work is great, but the truth is that if we never sold a single piece of work, we’d still pursue photography for what else it provides us — for the life it provides us. The truth is that we don’t make photographs because of money; we make photographs in spite of money.

So, if the art life is not motivated by fame or fortune, what is our motivation? After 47 years, I’ve concluded that the strongest reason to be a photographer is because of the connections that are nurtured by a life of art-making. We take time with subject materials, look more deeply, see more acutely — and that connection is nurtured by photography. It’s necessary to think about what
we want to photograph, *why* we want to photograph, how we want to present our personally expressive artwork. That process connects us more deeply with ourselves, with our inner life, even, to some degree, with our somewhat vain quest for immortality. We learn about ourselves.

And, from time to time, something we create touches someone else, sometimes deeply. Our efforts to make art connects us with our fellow human beings, both contemporary and possibly in the future, after we are gone. A life of art is a personal path and one whose primary consequence is the thoroughly predictable, enjoyable, coincidental, and *non sequitur* connections that happen as a consequence of the life we choose to live.

**Conclusion**

When I first picked up a camera and decided I wanted to pursue photography, I would never have predicted that I would learn these lessons. It seems as though all the anticipated benefits I predicted in my youth have failed to materialize. They have all been replaced by benefits far greater than I could never have dreamed. A life in photography is not at all what I thought it would be. It has been much, much better.