



PSNZ Help Sheet No 9

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So you want to be a better photographer? By: Roger Hynd

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The really enthralling thing about photography is its ability to appeal to a broad cross-section of the community, because it can be co-opted to realise many different ideas. But there has to be a catalyst for somebody to become a passionate practitioner. A mate of mine became a photographer because he wanted to capture the beauty of plants. Only later did he broaden his interest and take it further. I fell into photography after absorbing the culture from childhood (photos were always important) in a desire to make photos that recorded better the feelings that certain places gave us.

This first impulse always leads to the phase wherein you devote heaps of time and a lot of film to understanding process: composition; exposure; camera handling; the behaviour of light; darkroom technique (or increasingly, digital darkroom technique); and, later, film characteristics, colour theory, professional lighting techniques, professional modelling and composing tricks, the characteristics of lenses, and, if you make or get the chance, the way in which commercial labs handle film and prints. This is also the phase where significant amounts of money get spent on equipment, some of which is used but rarely. I think every photographer has something in the bag that they have often wondered why they acquired (40ft air-powered cable release?; six-facet multi-coloured prism filter? low-res digital camera? - sound familiar?)

This learning phase proceeds differently for different photographers but its primary characteristic is the pursuit of the new. Every idea you meet with has novelty and you can't wait to try it! But this elementary stage must be superseded if you are not to find your photography going stale.

The learning stage applies for each type of photography you want to undertake and it seems entirely possible to be well beyond it in respect of one area of interest but still immersed deeply in it for another. If we must give labels to photographic areas of interest, those in this phase will find the classic divisions relevant: portrait; still life; landscape; documentary; close-up; etc.

I knew I was going stale when the camera stopped coming out at weekends. In the course of acquiring skills and techniques I had a great time and was an active and reasonably successful contributor to club competitions. Then it all seemed to stop having meaning and the activity dwindled.

The way out of these doldrums for me was my passion for looking at the work of successful photographers. Fotofest rescued me. I had stopped spending money on equipment and books of instruction and was spending it instead on getting as close as I could to photographers whose work I admired. Mostly that meant buying books but then came Fotofest. David Hurn, Martin Parr and Bill Jay were inspirational. But the most useful thing that was said to me at Fotofest came from

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Jocelyn Carlin. It changed my perspective and it cleared the creative blockage. Looking back I cannot imagine why it had not crystallised in my mind from the reading and looking I had been doing. She said two words.

-Do projects.

Fotofest induced also a subtle shift in my photographic seeing, which has become more informed by my intellect and less by the raw wonder of achieving images that have immediate visceral impact. I have been feeding my intellect by reading photographic criticism (Amazon.com to the rescue!).

-Do projects.

Move on from raw process to doing something designed with your skills, at the earliest opportunity. It is increasingly important not to wander out at dawn on Sunday to see what can be found. It is important to wander out, but with an end in view. Projects require planning. I can see now that the lack of a plan explains why most photos taken on "outings" seem to me to fail. Group outings seem to be unproductive unless they are learning experiences for the participants or unless your club simply wants to have a good time and photography is not particularly important.

Doing projects is ultimately very satisfying. You set targets and if you meet them you can have a high sense of achievement and worth. You have to accept that doing a project can take time, even years. but because they engender self-discipline they make you a better photographer. Working on projects places you into a mode not dissimilar to professional photographers working to commissions, because discipline is required and because you become more creative when working to a clear brief.

My experience informs me that it is vital for the growth of your photography that you take every opportunity to see photos. As many as possible. Try to understand your reactions to them. It helps if you can develop some critical faculty, which means reading as much as you can, absorbing new ideas. This brings to mind more of the advice I was able to imbibe at FotoFest.

If you like an idea, steal it.

Steal it? Why not? This means you will have to come to terms with the techniques involved, thereby growing in your photography. This idea becomes very acceptable if you now take the next step and acknowledge that photography itself is not art. Neither is it a craft. It is merely a process by which you achieve your artistic or other goals.

Because I believe in this process of maturation in image making whereby the mastering technique is replaced by pursuit of interpretative skills and the execution of projects to realise your personal vision, I find arid the typical process-related debates which I read about regularly in PSNZ material. When I joined the PSNZ there was what amounted to a sneer from some (older?) members frequently expressed towards prints from commercial labs, usually labelled as "trade processed". The (acceptable) critical approach to how or where a print was made would be to point out that the chosen process was - or was not- appropriate for the subject. However the debate that I read in the 1990s was elitist rather than critical, which I find hard to accept.

I have the same reaction to the present exchange about digital process. NZ Camera Talk for December & January 2000-2001 includes a report on the southern regional convention held in Invercargill. In reference to an address by Jack Sprosen, Russell McGeorge notes that he sparked a "lively debate with some of the 'film-for-ever' brigade fighting hard against the rising digital tide - all good stuff." In my opinion it is not "good stuff". It is a disaster in which a meaningless argument about process appears to have prevented a proper critical discussion of the "digital photo art" that was presented. Again, the image, the outcome, is important, not the way it was achieved. I am uncomfortable also with any attempt to create a fence around images printed through a computer, as seems to be implied here. New categories seem to be unnecessary if you accept that digital

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process is merely one more way to the outcome. I feel much the same way about B&W photography. Another gem from Fotofest:

-professional photographers only use colour when it is significant.

This is another outcome-related proposition. It could be restated as *professional photographers only use techniques that contribute to their desired result.*

This makes it clear that divisions of photography isolating digital or colour or B&W one from the other are artificial and meaningless.

If you accept that your own vision is paramount, then you have to accept that the only images that work are those that realise a small part of it. This means that the content of a photo is more important than anything else and the techniques used to achieve it should be secondary. In reality, every photo enthusiast really enjoys analysing composition etc as well. You simply can't escape it - who would want to escape it?- but criticism that concentrates only on technical aspects is poor criticism.

In the same vein, you would expect camera and film to be entirely subservient to the outcome, and of course they are, but that does not mean that photographers are immune to the lure of the technology as a thing in itself. Most photographers I know love cameras and more than a few collect old and/or interesting ones.

This article has suggested that the undertaking of projects is the way to improve as a photographer. To finish it, I would like to share the rest of the gems that I scribbled down at Fotofest and to which I have returned again and again ever since. Here they are.

-Don't pigeonhole yourself to be a certain kind of photographer

If the division of photography along the lines of imaging technology is meaningless, so is dividing up photographers. All that matters is that you keep improving your techniques in order to realise your visions.

-Resolve your ideas to the full

Your vision cannot be said to be realised until you have worked through each idea and exhausted its potential.

-Be prepared to change concepts and appropriate new ideas as necessary

Don't persevere with something that is not working out.

-Don't be lazy; push yourself; invest in your photography

-Get beyond your comfort zone

How can you expect to grow otherwise? Babies that never got beyond their comfort zone would never walk.

-Photos that work have emotional impact.

-Get Closer

not just the usual interpretation of Capa's oft-quoted advice, but also the idea that you photograph best what engages your emotions and your imagination. So:

-Connection with your subject is important.

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-Don't be too hung up on formal composition, but make sure you understand the rules enough to break them.

-Controversy is good for a photographer

The remarks in this article are the result of two year's ruminations on the meaning of Fotofest for me. They have given me purpose to my photography.

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