

Criteria for Photographic Art

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There is widespread skepticism among amateur judges and rank-and-file camera club members about how photographs that aspire to being works of art ought to be judged. I would even go so far as to say that most of the work produced under the heading of "visual art" is generally regarded with deep suspicion if not being dismissed outright as unworthy of consideration.

Are the criteria being applied to this kind of photography appropriate? Do we understand how to apply them? And in this confused situation are we not tempted to fall back on traditional pictorial values, even when they can be seen to be inapplicable? These questions threaten the very existence of artistic photography in the context of the amateur club system.

Traditional amateur judges felt comfortable when judging according to a set of cut and dried criteria that until a few years ago seemed perfectly adequate. Everyone understood the simple rules of composition like dividing the space in thirds, focal point, avoiding putting things on the edge and so on. Now we have to start assessing artistic merit, and that cannot be pinned down to a few cardinal rules. As a judge you have to understand what it is the artistic photographer is trying to do and if you don't understand, how can you assess the merit of the image?

Artistic criteria place an entirely different emphasis on the importance of the various elements of a photograph. Use artistic criteria to judge a pictorial photograph that has won gold medals on salons and it could fail to be selected. Conversely, judge an excellent artistic photograph according to pictorial criteria and it could also fail miserably. We are speaking of two entirely different visual languages here: two conflicting value systems. It can also be said that photography is photography, no matter what the photographer's intentions may be and ideally there ought to be a universal language of criticism and assessment that applies equally to all.

In the absence of that ideal however here are some artistic criteria, characteristics to look for, that are not generally considered important in traditional pictorial judging:

§ Honesty

- § Originality
- § Imagination
- § Inventiveness
- § Individuality
- § Insight
- § Empathy
- § Expressiveness
- § Consistency of approach
- § Vision beyond the obvious
- § Avoidance of cliché
- § Advanced design principles instead of simplistic compositional formulas
- § Awareness of current and historical art trends
- § Context within a body of work (an isolated photograph has no context)
- § Heightened visual awareness
- § Metaphor and symbol
- § Concept
- § Relevance to contemporary art and social conditions
- § Contribution to the photographic/artistic discourse
- § Style
- § Meaning (also levels of meaning)
- § Emotion
- § Truth beyond the superficial
- § Appropriate exploitation of photographic techniques
- § Appropriate means of presentation and display

These criteria do need some justification for the skeptics.

Primarily, they are not some kind of comprehensive or exclusive checklist with which to score a work of art; not just another, different set of "rules". Neither may they all be applicable to any one photograph. It depends on what the artist/photographer was aiming to do. There are many different and equally valid approaches to photographic art that can be appreciated in different ways. Looking at a photograph with these criteria in mind can however help you establish its artistic validity.

Because of the claim that just about anything that can be photographed has already been photographed, it has been argued that originality in photography is therefore impossible. For this reason traditional pictorial judges have been very tolerant of cliché to the extent that many pictorial photographs border on plagiarism. This opens the door to endless, boring repetitions and imitations of previous photography. If pictorial photographers do not take artistic photographs seriously the opposite is also true: artists do not take pictorial photography seriously because of all the clichés.

You can nevertheless find an original, new and personal way to photograph something that has been photographed before. It does not have to be a virgin subject to be original. An artistic photographer should I believe nevertheless almost instinctively avoid clichés, both in subject matter and approach. Choosing subjects that have not been over-exploited would be good for a start.

Many of the traditional rules of composition can be ignored or deliberately flouted in art photography. Where composition is an important factor it could also involve more advanced principles such as spatial rhythm, visual tension, fields of colour or tone or texture, active edge, radical cropping, spatial ambiguity, serial permutations, inversions, deliberate imbalance, huge empty spaces and non-relational composition without a focal point. Then there are photographs where the content is so powerful that considerations of composition can be set aside.

Anyone presuming to judge art photography that has no knowledge of photographic art, present and past is at a huge disadvantage. This would be comparable to a cricket selector who does not know who was in last season's team. How many would-be art photography judges are familiar with the work of David Goldblatt, Freeman Patterson or Zwelethu Mthethwa? How can anyone call himself a knowledgeable photographic judge if he has never seen and understood the work of Alfred Steiglitz, Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, Harry Callahan, Jerry Uelsman, Diane Arbus, Robert Mapplethorpe or Cindy Sherman? One could go as far as to say that the validity of any photographic judging depends on that kind of knowledge.

The assumption that art photography is just another category like nature, photojournalism or pictorial photography oversimplifies the differences. There is no definite checklist of criteria to refer to in art; only some general principles and criteria that are based on a wide knowledge of art in photography, both historical and contemporary. Assessing the validity of contemporary art has always been difficult. Many of the world's most learned art critics have on occasion been very wrong. This begs the question whether photographic art should be part of a system that involves scores.

An alternative to a system that involves judging (by unqualified or even qualified judges) would be one where artistic photographers are offered opportunities to exhibit their work publicly and non-competitively. The creative photographers that I know are not very competitive. Many of them are not worried about obtaining star ratings, salon acceptances, gold medals, certificates of merit or honours. They are however passionate about their photographic art and most would be happiest with a chance to show their work to an appreciative and sophisticated audience. If there were some sales, prizes or awards in the offing

that may be an added incentive but would certainly not be the main motivating factor. Creative people create because of an inner drive, not because they want to compete or earn brownie points. But they do thrive on appreciation.