

The Changing Face of Photography

A letter to art show directors from a 27-year art show veteran

By Larry Berman

We have all heard the question, "what is art". Many thoughtful, clever and controversial answers have been given, but in the end each individual has their own understanding. Art show directors have a special responsibility in that their opinions of what is art and what is not affects tens of thousands of people. Artists and the viewing public depend on the vision and understanding of those who choose the jury and set the rules that create the dynamic venue that we know of as art festivals is created.

I've been making a living as an artist/photographer for most of my adult life, including 27 years of selling my photographs at art shows throughout the country. I also write for two national photography magazines, one of which is for digital photographers. This vantage point has allowed me to see the scope and depth of changes that technology is now bringing to the medium that I have spent my life working in.

Photography has always been technology driven with each new breakthrough allowing artists to extend their vision. Whether working with glass wet plates, poisonous mercury fumes or explosive black power flash pans, photographers have a long history of taking cutting-edge technology and using it to capture and communicate poignant moments that illuminate and define our human condition and the beauty of the world around us.

Today, technology is advancing more rapidly than ever before and use of traditional film and paper is on the decline. As new digital processes are yielding higher quality images, far less environmental toxicity, and expanded artistic possibilities, more and more professional photographers are switching to digital. Traditional photo labs are replacing wet chemical processes with digital systems and market trends show digital cameras will soon be outselling film cameras across the board.

Photographers have been rapidly adopting new tools and techniques that are, in some cases, not covered by art show definitions and standards. Some applications specifically mention elements of a chemical photographic processes (such as 'negatives') that are no longer a part of many creative photographers' methods. I understand the desire of shows in attempting to define acceptable photography somewhat narrowly so as to insure the

inclusion of what they believe will be the highest quality work as well as the full participation of the artist in the creative process. But I am concerned that these narrow definitions will exclude, or encourage less than forthright participation by, a growing number of extremely talented artists.

A case in point is the requirement that photographers print their own work. Since the perception is that so much creative work can be done in the darkroom (and it clearly can by those who choose to do so), this rule was accepted as a way to encourage work that was fully an expression of the artist, not some faceless technician. But that requirement eliminated the photographer who chose to shoot using slide film (for its many attributes) and spent years learning to make that transparency his final creative output, which the print had only to match. Now those darkrooms are being rapidly replaced by the incredible creative power of digital programs like Photoshop, and the actual output device, whether it is a Lightjet or a Giclee printer, is no longer a point of creative control.

Do not be fooled by those who claim such advances are making the art of photography "too easy". I've been working with Photoshop almost daily for more than three years and know that I've barely begun to utilize the full creative power of this process. People who are somewhat fearful of computers and the latest technology are often the most vocal about how easy they think creating a fine digital print is. In fact, the learning curve is greater, but that's a choice we make in our ongoing evolution as artists.

I'm currently shooting color infrared with a digital camera that has true infrared sensitivity. I'm using combinations of visible light blocking color filters and are achieving intense colors based on shadows and light. This may fall outside a narrow interpretation of photography but I am, in fact, creating images with light.

I first introduced this work at the Gasparilla Art Festival this March. During the course of the show I was approached by a committee member and was asked how the work was created. Her first reaction was that I should have applied under the digital category, but soon changed her mind after a fuller discussion of my work methods. The fact that a computer program was used as part of the process didn't make the work "digital art". She ended up agreeing with my interpretations and definitions.

I later spoke with Connie Mettler, director of the Arts Beats & Eats show in Pontiac Michigan. This highly successful show includes language in its application that requires the photographer to "print from the original negative. After discussing my work process with both Connie and her husband, photographer Norm Darwish, they agreed that the definitions of photography should now include a digital file as an option of how the "original negative" is defined.

In summary: There is a multitude of highly talented artists doing cutting-edge creative work using digital tools. The art show market shouldn't be blocked to them, or force them to apply under the umbrella of "digital". I sincerely hope that the top shows (to whom lesser shows look for guidance) will carefully re-examine their category definitions and take into consideration the latest technological and creative tools being used by today's artists.

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