

## CONSTRUCTIVE EVALUATION

How can you as a photographer grow?

We are all a work in progress - it's important to never stop learning. Techniques and thinking evolve, we need to maintain an open mind and evolve with the times. Keeping an open mind makes us better and more efficient photographers.

Participation in workshops and a photo club such as NPC are activities that most of us are comfortable with, yet we shy away from evaluation often because we are not comfortable receiving constructive criticism. This is unfortunate, as evaluation quickly matures our photographic skills. Evaluators need not even be photographers, they may be painters, sculptors, or anyone involved with visual design as the skills they possess provide a new perspective of our work.



Creating good art is not a rule-based skill. Good artwork originates from our imagination, dreams and passion. It is strengthened by originality and innovation and is supported by **principles of design**. Such examples include:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Balance</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Rhythm</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Repetition</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Pattern</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Texture</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Scale ...</li></ul>

Craftsmanship (regrettably unfashionable) is a foundation that supports these design principles. Craftsmanship by itself is not enough to create good art, but without it, it's difficult to recognize the qualities of a photograph. Photographic craftsmanship includes skills applied both with a camera and a computer. Examples include:

- Proper Capture - exposure, framing and focus ...
- Post-processing skills - toning, sharpening and noise reduction ...

## Evaluation vs Competition

Evaluation is an assessment of quality based on:

- *Objective* fact based criteria and
- *Subjective* opinion - a discussion of how the evaluator feels about your art

Good evaluation includes both objective and subjective observations regarding the merits of an image while providing constructive suggestions to address weaknesses. Ideally, the evaluation is expressed from someone with some mix of artistic training, experience and innate talent. These skills qualify them to conduct the evaluation.

Competition is different from evaluation.

Competition (particularly photo club competition) generally relies heavily on rule based scores and ranking to declare a few winners and by default, many losers. Due to volumes and to increase consistency, competitions lean heavily on rule-based objective criteria rather than the Judges subjective opinions. Subjective opinion is not widely encouraged (usually only comprising a small percentage of a score) as it promotes inconsistency between judges, which leads to an impression of biased scoring.



As our skills advance photographers tend to plateau through the competitive process as an objective rule-based system can't provide them with enough necessary guidance for artistic growth. As a competition judge, I have observed that many advanced photographers don't solicit the judges comments, likely because rule-based comments don't lead to artistic growth.

Competitions have several other pitfalls:

- As a photographer, it's easy to fall into the trap of shooting to win, with all the constraints that that imposes. Constraints don't make better photographers.
- Loosing can be discouraging, especially if the scoring is not well understood.

- Some photographers repeatedly win the same competition again and again, this is good for their ego, but not much else.
- Competition classify images into categories based on rigid rule-based thinking, often confusing and frustrating participants.

So can competitions help us? I have noticed novice and intermediate photographers improve quickly when using feedback from a competition, so for them, competition can provide value. Also, for some people, high scores and winning is motivating, and motivation is a good thing.

It is simply that competition is not enough for continued growth since the current judging process does not encourage subjective opinions, winning images often lack soul.

For the competitive process to provide better value, judges must be trained and encouraged to think differently, learning to express how they feel about a photograph. There may be some movement towards this goal, but it's got a long way to go.

By avoiding competition as part of their program, I believe NPC has chosen the right path. Better to stick to evaluation and nurturing that process over time.



## **Novice and Intermediate Skills**

Artistic merit is difficult to achieve if the image is technically flawed. It is therefore necessary to master the technical aspects of the camera (Focus, exposure, depth of field ...) and basic computer post-processing skills before images can be considered well rounded, good art.

Mentoring through constructive evaluation allows photographers to identify and address their weaknesses at an accelerated pace. By using an experienced mentor, technical skills, composition and story telling (impact) can be evaluated constructively. Weaknesses are pointed out and suggestions provided. There are many sources of help: a photo club like the NPC, trained evaluators in workshops / competitions and experienced artists (formally or informally trained) can move a photographer forward much more quickly than slogging along by yourself. This is especially true for the novice.

## **Intermediate to Advanced Skills**

So how do we grow?

First - master your camera. Remove any constraints that prevent you from shooting well. I often see many imaginative images poorly executed because even experienced photographers have not mastered the basics of shutter speed, aperture and ISO, never learning to shoot in manual mode.

Second - learn to post-process - at least acquire a reasonable skill level. I often see good images with insufficient post-processing - especially tone, sharpening and noise reduction (See final note on Adobe Raw Defaults).

Third - take a course/workshop that includes the principles of design and the above suggestions.

Four - find a skilled mentor capable of providing subjective evaluation.

Five - consider mentoring others perhaps in a group setting, taking turns.



## Social Media

Just like competitions, social media has pitfalls. Social media is not a great tool to judge image quality as images are often too small and too low a resolution for critical evaluation. Impactful images get many 'likes' even if they are poorly crafted.

Social media can be helpful in establishing a 'presence' or name and create business opportunities for professionals.

'Likes' will not make you a better photographer.

## The camera looks both ways

Our images are a reflection of ourselves. Looking objectively and subjectively at our own work can be an eyeopener. Also mentoring other photographers builds our own photographic skills - you often will see your own weaknesses in other's photographs. Mentoring is also an opportunity to give back to the photographic community.

## HOW TO EVALUATE CONSTRUCTIVELY

The basics of evaluation are straight forward: start by being **objective**, constructive and helpful. Don't criticize, instead suggest methods of improvement. As you develop you can apply principles of design, imagination and feelings about a photograph to provide qualified **subjective** opinions. It doesn't matter if you like the image or not, so don't mention that opinion - its not important or constructive. So lets walk through the steps:

- 1) Start by building a constructive foundation by highlighting the positive aspects of the image such as: "strong story, good emotional impact, difficult shot well handled ..." , there has to be something good to say about any image. Build the photographers confidence - don't put them down.
- 2) Walk through the technical aspects of the image as the craftsmanship supports the artistic qualities of the photo. Start with positive comments and then move on to areas for improvement: consider exposure, sharpness, tone etc. Novices often miss 'intrusions' such as tree branches appearing from outside of the frame. Bright spots attracting attention away from the subject are a common issue. Always suggest a possible solution or approach they could apply to prevent the issue in the future. Be kind but honest and complete. Don't skip over weaknesses, as you are not helping anyone or being kind.

- 3) Move on to Composition: consider balance, leading lines, framing...
- 4) Consider tone, texture, repetition and other constructs of the design principles.
- 5) Consider impact or story telling. How could it be stronger or is it already well done?
- 6) Gently but thoroughly point out weaknesses to watch for and provide techniques they might consider to prevent issues in the future.
- 7) Resist the urge to simply suggest cropping differently, instead ask 'why a portion of the frame exists - how does it strengthen the image?'

### **Final Thoughts**

I see the same weakness in images over and over again. To address this, I have suggested that constant learning and staying current improves quality and reduces effort. Sticking to my own advice about providing constructive suggestions, I would like to conclude with a handful of tips:

Don't constrain yourself by choosing poor camera settings. Capture all the detail you can - google 'ETTR' (Exposing To The Right).

Don't spend too much time post-processing files and don't shoot JPEGs (too much loss of detail). I suggest you google "Adobe's ISO Adaptive Presets". These settings adjust images at import time, reducing subsequent editing time significantly (I saved about 80% of my time). I will write a future article on this topic but in the mean time see: [Adobe ISO Adaptive Presets](#)

Another godsend is Pixel Doubling. Rather than buy a new camera to double the resolution of an image, use a computer to achieve the same result. Recent advancements in this field can lead to stunning results with little effort. Many software programs now support this feature.

Regardless of what level your photography is today, the fastest and effective method is to seek opportunities for constructive evaluation provided by other talented artists or consider providing it yourself.

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