

Towards a Personal Style

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Most anyone with a small amount of training can successfully operate a camera and make technically proficient photographs. And now, more than anything



before, digital cameras have reduced - if not eliminated - the technical barriers to producing high-quality imagery. Despite the ever-increasing popularity of our medium and despite the billions of new photographs created around our planet *each year*, few images reveal the *unique personal style* of the photographer. In a world overripe with vast quantities of imagery and image makers, the temptation to mimic and appropriate images is undoubtedly great. While

many nature and landscape photographers are content to capture 'me too' images of grand vistas and scenic icons, unique photographic style remains elusive even to very experienced photographers.

Brace yourself: photographic style cannot be taught or learned. Your unique photographic voice is not going to be revealed or enhanced through reading this article, reading a particular book, or even attending a workshop. Photographic style is the byproduct of experience, intensive image-making, self expression, and much experimentation. It is a subconscious evolutionary process that cannot be forced. Do not fret: you already have a unique photographic voice! Your style is a component of your *self*. Revealing your unique qualities - the qualities that make you...*you* in your photographs might possibly be the most challenging aspect of photography. These are the strongest photographs you are likely to make.

Anyone can do the craft. Only the individual has the unique personality to build a point of view. Al Weber

So what exactly can you do to reveal your voice in your photographs? To express your inner *self* through your images? I offer ideas herein that have been and will continue to be useful to my own growth as a photographic artist:

Forget the photographers you admire, what they've taught you, and the images that they've made. Most photographers spend their formative years studying the works of others. Virtually all photographers learn to create images this way. We see, we like, and we copy. It will be difficult to express your *self* in your photographs if you can't learn to separate your own voice from that of your idols. In studying your own favorite photographs, whose vision do they really reveal? To be sure, there's nothing wrong with having photographic idols and studying and honoring their work. Being inspired by another photographer's works and using such inspiration in the process of learning and developing your skills and vision is a good thing; crafting your own photographs in their style is not.

Define your subject(s) and passions. Rare is the photographer who is successful in many different genres of photography (you know the phrase: jack of all trades, master of none). It's not easy to master your subject and style if you're



not really sure just what your subject is or why you photograph it. Similarly, you can't convince others to appreciate the photographs you create if you're not passionate about your photography yourself. Your love for your subjects will come through loud and clear in your photographs, and those who view your work will respect and appreciate your in-depth knowledge and understanding of them. For example: when exhibiting my photographs, I have

"We don't take photographs with our cameras. We take them with our hearts, we take them with our minds." Arnold Newman

been approached by people who have expressed their admiration for my work and told me that they could feel the connection I had made with my subject (some of these individuals were not previously in tune with these subjects and/or landscape photography). This is powerful stuff, and flies in the face of those who suggest that our medium is mere documentation.

Avoid the predictable. Let's face it; it's nigh impossible to make unique and personal photographs from Yosemite's Tunnel View. You also can't tell me anything about *you* with a standard scenic photograph of Horseshoe Bend, Delicate Arch, or any other well-known (especially roadside) locations. In fact, I'll suggest that your photographic voice is quite difficult to hear amongst the din of the grand scenic landscape. I am as awed by the grand landscape as any other photographer, but it is difficult to say anything new photographically with scenes that have been depicted in countless paintings and photographs for more than 150 years. Finding your voice in your photographs means avoiding the customary and the predictable. There is nothing very new or personal about repetition, and the commonality of well-established roadside icons and vistas virtually precludes them from the realm of self expression.



Break the rules. Rules are necessary in your formative years (rule of thirds, forced near/far perspectives, symmetry, etc.), and these rules often help to create the kind of images that are easy on the eyes and the imagination of viewers. Yet the rules

"Photography has no rules. It is not a sport. It is the result which counts, no matter how it is achieved." Bill Brandt

also force us into a limited way of seeing and designing images. Break them. You can't make ground-breaking photographs by following convention.

Take risks. You won't know if asymmetry, centering your subject, unusual framing, and so on can successfully work unless you ignore the rules and experiment. Film is cheap, pixels are free. Experimentation is one of the keys to finding your personal photographic voice.

"Thirty-six satisfactory exposures on a roll means a photographer is not trying anything new."
Freeman Patterson

Photograph in light that you usually shun; intentionally avoid approaching a potential scene as you always approach potential scenes. Dare to be different. Failure and success are both gained

through experimentation. You cannot succeed without some failure along the way. This is never a bad thing – just a natural part of the process. For every negative that I print and attempt to sell, there are scores more in my files that are 'failed' experiments. To my surprise, I have often come to value and have a fondness for some of these photographs down the road.



Ruthlessly edit your work. John Sexton once said that the most valuable tool in his darkroom is the trash can. You need to and should love your own photographs more than anyone, but don't let that love prevent you from using the circular file or DELETE key. Ruthless editing is essential to your growth as a photographic artist, so don't be afraid to let go of the not-quite-there images. We all make them; consider them stepping stones or *practice* images for your best ones. You need to be the harshest critic of your own work, and your photographic growth cannot happen without your sincere criticism. Reject any photograph that you cannot honestly call *your own*.

"I find the single most valuable tool in the darkroom is my trash can." John Sexton

Attend exhibitions, view prints, study photographs. I know what you're thinking: "Wait a second; doesn't this contradict what you said earlier about repressing my favorite photographers and their photographs?" You're likely



familiar with the phrase "standing on the shoulders of giants". Similarly, we cannot achieve and surpass photographic greatness if we do not have a firm understanding of the history of our medium and if we do not know the Masters and the works they produced. Furthermore, there are many varied methods to print and present our work. How do we learn about these methods? What does a masterful print look like? What constitutes a strong series

or body of work? How is a series best presented? My own growth as a

photographer has occurred through a variety of schooling, book study, and practical experience. Yet for me some of the most consistently invaluable learning tools have been to study prints, attend exhibitions, and to view monographs to see how others approach their subjects, how they design their photographs, and how they present their work. Again, avoid modeling your own work or methods in the likeness of others. Digest and synthesize these invaluable teaching tools of the greats into the creation of your own unique works. Learn and be inspired – don't imitate.

Be patient. Remember, photographic style is a subconscious evolutionary process and is the byproduct of experience and intensive image making. Forcing

"A photographers work is given shape and style by his personal vision. It is not simply technique, but the way he looks at life and the world around him."
Pete Turner

any step of this process might very well doom it to failure. Don't worry about whether you have a unique style, and don't agonize over how to develop one.

Enjoy the process of making photographs and let things flow naturally. The Masters of Photography didn't become Masters by forcing their style, nor did

they become Masters overnight. Discover your *self*, focus on your subjects and your intent, and your unique style will naturally find its way to the surface of your photographs.

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