

Photographic Judging & Crit

By John Meek
Edmonds, WA

The subject of judging and critiquing photographs has been discussed by many people. There are those that feel that photography is an art, much the same as painting and sculpture, while others would lend you to believe that it is a science, such as chemistry. Photographs can be used to illustrate a point or to express a feeling. Most of the photographs in the world are taken simply to preserve a memory. It is this variety which makes the job of the judge interesting, as well as challenging. Does one need to be an artist to appreciate the likes of Van Gogh? Just as some see beauty in his work, others can make no sense of the bold strokes and colors which appear on the canvas. Because one person “doesn’t get it,” is it a bad painting? I think not. Van Gogh had a distinctive style that was, and is, appreciated by many, but not by all. The same can be said for photography. Some favor portraiture while others like scenics. To some, color is passé and to others, black and white is nothing to get excited about. All are worthy of equal consideration when being judged. It is the ability to set personal preferences aside which makes the task of judging both interesting and difficult.

I have found many writings on the subjects of judging and critiquing photographs. The methods described vary as much as photographs themselves. Some authors suggest complex charts and graphs while others base their judging on experience and instincts. I have had discussions with several judges at various levels of competition to find out what they look for. Some judges value black and white more than color, portraits more than landscapes or prints more than slides. I even spoke to one that told me that he based his scores solely on the difficulty in obtaining the image! Why should that matter? Many Pulitzer Prize winning photographs were taken by someone who was in the right place at the right time, with a camera in hand. Not necessarily difficult, but the results speak for themselves.

As a competitor and a judge, I feel it is important to score an image based on its own merits, not on what I prefer to shoot or what I perceive to be a difficult subject. As a photographer, I have two basic decisions to

make. One is where to point the camera and the other, when to trip the shutter. Oh, there are many more things to consider but those are the basics. When I am the judge, I ask myself three questions. First, does the image convey a clear message (hopefully one that the maker intended) and was it worth saying? Second, is the composition appropriate for the subject, and third, does the exposure add or detract from the image? Sounds easy but you would be amazed at how few judges use this or any other criteria. Let’s break the three questions down and delve into them further. It all begins with the message.

When a photographer records an image, there is a message he wishes to convey. Since the photographer is not available to give you that message, does the image stand on its own and convey the message without words? That message can be one of “this is a cold but wonderful land,” “this woman is in bitter pain,” “the water looks so good I can taste it,” “the color is so vivid that I felt part of the landscape,” “the lions’ fighting is so intense I can feel their rage,” or a message of grief, beauty, tranquility, confusion or a host of others. As I am looking at the image, how does it make me feel? In viewing a spectacular panorama, I should get the feeling of space and grandeur. Am I getting the message if I feel confused or cramped? Most photographers will tell you that a good portrait relates the personality of the subject. Do I get a feel for the person in the photograph or is it just a face? When I look at an image of a mother that has just lost a child, do I feel her pain? The message being sent in any photographic image is vital to the success of that image. Ask yourself, “What did the maker see when taking this photograph?” If you get the message, score it well. If not, deduct accordingly.

The second question I ask myself when evaluating an image is in regard to composition. Is the subject plainly visible to me? This can be difficult in evaluating an abstract design but should be considered, nonetheless. Is the depth of field appropriate to the subject? If the so-called “rule of thirds” was broken, was the maker successful? Are there merges that could have been avoided? Was the selection of focal lengths appropriate for the subject? All of these questions and more are answered when considering the

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composition of an image. When a photograph provides a sense of balance and flows freely, it is probably well composed. That being the case, apply the points that it deserves. If, however, you get the sense of falling over or if your eyes tend to wander off of the image, it probably could have been composed better and points should be deducted.

The third thing I evaluate when judging an image is the exposure. Is the sky blown out? If so, was that the intent of the photographer? Are there details in the shadows? Should there be? If the colors are pale, does that add or subtract from the overall image? Are the colors too 'punchy' for the subject? If black and white, do I see the full range of tones or is the print "muddy?" Did the photographer use the best light available to photograph the subject, such as overcast days to shoot flowers or morning and evening light for added mood, etc. Simple questions that are so very important to the quality of the final image.

When assigning scores to these images, the methods used are once again quite varied. Some people initially view the image as having no points and add, while others start by assuming that it is perfect and subtract. Is your glass half empty or half full? I tend towards harboring no feelings until I see the image. First impressions, otherwise known as the "WOW" factor, can make a big impression. On a five point scale, for example, I award three points for an average image. When there are obvious flaws, I score it two points. Images which are lacking in two or more areas generally receive one point from me. On the other hand, when a photograph is above average, it gets four points while an exceptional image is awarded five points. Note that I did not say it has to be perfect to get five points, only exceptional. What you may deem to be perfect may not be the same for me. If your club or competition uses a nine point scale, you would adjust your scores accordingly with an average image getting four to five points. That was easy, wasn't it? I think so. Now critiquing is a different matter entirely.

When I am critiquing an image, I ask myself the same three questions that I ask when I am judging. The difference being that I need to be able to rationally discuss what I feel is positive or negative about a photograph, and do it in a constructive way, rather than destructive.

It takes a lot of courage to display an image for the first time, whether it is at the club level or in a major international exhibit. When one has finally built up that courage and chosen to share an image, it is often the critique and not the score that will determine if that maker will try again or stop sharing their images. The perception by many is that the score is just numbers while the comments made are personal.

[Note: Clubs in the northwest, as in some other areas, use three judges that score only with a separate photographer as "commentator" for critique of the images.]

If I am asked to critique an image of a mountain, for example, I may ask myself the following questions: Does the mountain fill the frame or is it a distant speck in the background? Can I see the crevasses clearly or is there a blocking haze? Are the plants and trees in their fall colors? Do they have any foliage at all? Are the highlights and shadows harsh or are they pleasing to the eye? Why did the photographer point the camera at this subject? Why did he trip the shutter?

I would probably begin by vocalizing my opinion of what the photographer saw. If the mountain is clearly the subject, I would make note of that. If it is small, I would suggest a longer lens or a different view point which would bring the mountain closer to the photographer and eliminate the power lines. Next, I would attempt to assess the composition. Is the mountain "bulls-eyed" in the center of the image or has the maker employed the so-called "rule of thirds?" Comment on the horizon, whether it is straight or tilted. Is the image sharp? Suggest that a tripod and cable release might help in reducing camera shake. If the sky is overexposed, I might suggest a split neutral density or polarizing filter. Note the word suggest. There are too many times in life when we are told exactly what to do. Photography need not be one of those times. As a photographer, I find it much better to hear suggested methods for improvement rather than to hear only what the critiquer felt that I had done wrong. In my opinion, one method offers suggestions for improvement while the other only serves to highlight what one person perceives as failures.

If you currently judge and/or comment at your club or other levels, I hope that this opens up some new methods in evaluating images. If you are not currently a judge or commentator giving critiques, why not give it a try? As you have read, it only requires that you ask three simple questions. 🍷



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