

“A NEW APPROACH TO EVALUATING PHOTOGRAPHY” BY JIM CREW

This tutorial has been prepared by Jim Crew and is in part based on materials presented by Des Crawley at the Lane Cove Camera Club workshop series “Photography as Art”. This material is reproduced with the permission of Jim Crew and Des Crawley.

The following material is provided as a resource for camera clubs and other groups who wish to move the image making process forward and break away from outmoded judging methods.

BACKGROUND

Almost since camera clubs first appeared their format has remained virtually unchanged. The club monthly competition has followed the same path forever. The members enter their photographs, a visiting expert comments on the photographs and hands out awards based on their expertise, influences and biases. The comments provided by the visiting judge tend to follow a well worn pattern loaded with clichés and often based on what is expected rather than appropriate. We often hear a judge make comment based on standards that are well established and on which there is too much reliance. These comments generally relate to the rules of club photography and do little to progress the art.

*The horizon should never be in the middle of the picture.
There should always be a strong focal point.
The focal point should be placed on one of the thirds.
There must always be a full range of tones.*

The result of all this is that the club completion entry is much the same today as it was decades ago. There have been some changes based on fashion, such as the method used for mounting prints, but the essence of the photograph in terms of its ability to communicate a fresh thought or idea has remained static. We are on a treadmill. The judges have to judge what is offered and the photographers provide pictures that are perceived to be what the judge will like and ultimately reward.

When you analyse the club photograph of today in respect to a club photograph of 20 or 30 years ago, the only clue to its age is often the method of presentation or the yellowing of the edges. To break this cycle requires a deliberate and concerted effort without which the format will continue for several more decades.

WHAT IS PHOTOGRAPHY ALL ABOUT?

Photography should be all about visual communication – the process whereby one party, the photographer, desires to communicate an idea or a message to another party, the viewer. The viewer should react to the photograph in some definite way. They should be informed, moved, excited or angered. The photograph that is forgotten the instant after it has been viewed is of dubious value although abundant. Consider how many photographs you actually remember long after having viewed them and you will likely as not come up with a very low number.

Photographs, mainly because of the somewhat mechanical process involved, have always been derided by the art community. But the camera club photographer has strengthened this derision by producing formula photographs lacking individualism and artistic value.

The painter does not walk around with brushes and canvass in hand hoping a subject worth painting will jump out. But photographers do this all the time. We go out, camera in hand, with no idea what we want to record, hoping the prize winner will present itself.

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Prior to the invention of the camera much of life was recorded in drawings and paintings but these were not art simply because they were done by hand with pencils and paints. Art is not and never has been about recording. Art is about having an idea or message you want to transmit and then embarking on a process to communicate that idea or message visually.

CLUB JUDGING

The judging normally witnessed on competition nights is a very much hit and miss affair. The standard of judging varies enormously as does the quality and relevance of comments given and received. Although there is nothing to prevent discussion from occurring between the judge, the audience and the photographer it rarely happens in practice. This severely limits the value of any potentially worthwhile comments that may be made.

Club judges tend to follow a formula or set pattern learned from listening to other judges doing the same thing. They are also constrained by what is presented to them.

Club judges have a strong tendency to concentrate on the technical aspects of a photograph and rarely comment on the artistic merits or the communication in the form of a message, feeling or emotion. The outcome of the process is much more often than not a large number of technically competent images that are as boring as they could possibly be. They are records rather than creations.

AN IDEA FOR CHANGE

A suggested approach to providing a new direction for progressing club photography more towards creation and away from recording is to have a series of evaluation sessions based on the following format. These would be an adjunct to the conventional competitions.

EVALUATION SESSIONS

Evaluation sessions would be conducted on club nights and would follow the format below.

1. Several members each bring a panel of three to six photographs. These could be individual images or they could be thematic.
2. The members describe what their motivation was for creating the images.
 - a. What was the idea behind the image?
 - b. What thought processes were involved in planning or conceptualising the image?
 - c. How was the image captured?
 - d. What processing and enhancement techniques were employed?
 - e. Does the final image fulfil its purpose?
3. A selected panel of three members evaluates the images and provides feedback.
4. Other members can also input to the evaluation and feedback process.
5. The photographer can discuss with the panel and the other members the points raised.

EVALUATION SESSIONS continued

6. At a later date the photographer may resubmit the photograph with the suggested improvements taken into account. This could include anything from retaking the photograph to making changes to the processing and enhancement in line with the evaluation feedback.
7. In the case where a photograph is resubmitted it should be shown with the original for the purpose of comparison.
8. At the discretion of the evaluation panel a Certificate of Artistic Merit may be awarded to images that are considered worthy, complete and ready for dissemination.
9. Images that have been submitted for evaluation will be eligible for entry into club competitions.

GUIDELINES FOR EVALUATION

All evaluation should be done in consideration of our five pillars of art photography.

1. Conceptualisation
2. Capture
3. Process and enhancement
4. Evaluation
5. Output

All comments are to be constructive and supported by reasoning and suggested improvement. Comments such as:

"The composition could be improved" or *"The tonal range is too dark"* are unacceptable unless provided with reasons and suggested methods for improvement.

Evaluation must:

1. Not be biased
2. Not be based on personal taste
3. Not be dismissive
4. Look beyond the obvious
5. Be honest.

Destructive comment or comment that is not supported by reasoning and suggested improvement will be rejected by the moderator and participants.

EVALUATION CRITERIA (FROM LECTURE NOTES PROVIDED BY DES CRAWLEY)

The headings below provide some evaluation criteria that can be used when evaluating photographs. Not every criteria will be applicable to every photograph – when doing the evaluation consider those that are applicable.

Ideation

When appraising the resultant image the appraiser should be able to see the ideation that spawned the image and gave a reason for its creation.

Creativity

The principal concept of creativity answers the question - are we creating photographic art or just recording what we see?

Aesthetics

If there is no attraction for the viewers they will not look and the message will be lost. Aesthetics is what urges the viewer to stop, look and communicate.

Image Quality

We assess image quality in regard to whether matters such as sharpness, tonal control and colour purity reinforce the purpose of the image. Image quality always needs to be sufficient to convey the message without confusion.

Presentation

Presentation is the effectiveness of the craft used to enhance the display of the image. Matters of mounting, matting, spotting, labelling, nomenclature, spacing, panel relationships are assessed under this appraisal factor.

Communication

The prime purpose of a photograph is to convey a communication from the photographer to the viewer. A photograph that does not communicate has no reason to exist.

Evocation

Evocation refers not simply to eliciting a response from the viewer but also the scope and nature of that response.

Image effectiveness

In terms of image effectiveness we need to appraise factors such as the choice between monochrome and colour, high or low key, landscape or portrait and picture shape.

Influences

Can we see in the image evidence of influences drawn from our visual heritage? These influences when present must be respectful of the traditions and conventions of photography but never at the expense of innovation.

Completion

Does the image present in a form or style that suggests some features remain unresolved or incomplete? Is there scope for change, for improvement, for modification, advancement or growth? Images like many other art forms evolve.

Application

Is there evidence of a work ethic, some commitment to excellence, some indication as to the personal attributes of the photographer. Issues of substance, of style, a personal philosophy might be relevant.

Autonomy

Does the image convey a sense that it can stand alone? That it does not require elaboration, explanation, some level of supplementation or additional input in order to communicate.

Purpose

In reality, with modern photographic equipment, processes and techniques all photographs should be successful. The key to how successful depends only on how well the picture fulfils its purpose.