

## Clarify Your Vision: Focus the Photographer First

### Text and Photographs by James Austin M.A.



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*Nina, a dressed-up Chihuahua, cycles down Deco Drive at night with her tip jar.*

take pictures with camera-phone quality, their image-making technique--and mine, too--tended toward capturing images that wouldn't be meaningful for anything but email attachments. We were pulled everywhere at once. There was too much visual overload at the festival.

What we needed to do when photographing the Art Deco Weekend, was to see more deeply and to be open to surprises and possibilities for fresh pictures. We needed to focus the photographer.

#### IDEAS FOR CLEAR VISION

Remaining open to possibilities takes practice. With the continuous flow of visual choices that flowed past us during the festival, how could we have created the pictures we wanted? The answer was mental focus. Cameras can auto-focus. Photographers must focus themselves. To keep your vision clear, choose your mental ideas. At the ADW, I practiced these "Five Inner Focusing Methods":

#### Five Inner Focusing Methods:

**I. Center Yourself.** We never see just one thing. We see a miasma of movement, color, and human interaction. Thus, concentrating on a single subject at a festival can be tough.

Center yourself. Take deep breaths. Sit quietly. Steady your camera. Let the scene come to you. Wait until your heart stops pounding with excitement. "The heart at rest sees a feast in everything," as Hindu wise men say. With this centering approach, you see more deeply.

As the scenes changed too fast, we photographed the subject and forgot the background. When the cars in the auto parade drove by me, I made several boring pictures of them. Later, with the same cars parked in front of the Deco Drive hotels, I found time to sit down and create thoughtful compositions. When the antique roadsters were viewed close-up, details of their design emerged. I shot vertical pictures from a low angle to place the shapes of Deco hotels in the background. Centering allowed for a more thoughtful composition.

**II. Make A Photography Shot List.** Try to keep concepts in mind that help you direct your photos to specific subjects. This technique keeps me from getting caught up in the flow of a festival. I walked Deco Drive and mentally reviewed a short shot list: lifestyles of people at the festival, vendors and their wares, Deco Drive Hotels, period cars. By having these concepts in mind, I concentrated on a few pictures and let irrelevant images go by.

**Hot neon signs glowed above classic Deco hotels. Cool teal-colored Atlantic waves kissed the nearby beach. Shimmering hot 1930's roadsters rumbled past shaded terrazzo-floored hotels. Miami's Art Deco Weekend was underway.**

In the midst of all the contrasting hot and cool styles, W.C. Fields walked past, puffing his cigar. Mae West purred alongside him. These two joined a cast of thousands that danced and laughed before Art Deco hotels for the 28th Art Deco Weekend (ADW) on Ocean Avenue in South Beach, Miami, Florida.

The three-day festival was a challenging event to photograph, because those of us who were trying to take home a piece of the weekend in our cameras were so caught up in the flood of sensations that thoughtful photography was left behind. As photographers around me used their 8 megapixel cameras to



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*Close-up of a classic Buick Eighty-Eight hub cap.*

**"Cameras can autofocus; photographers must focus themselves."**

photographer. The photo at the beginning of this article shows festival-goers reaching out to caress Nina, a dressed-up Chihuahua riding astride the handlebars of her owner's bicycle. I shook the owner's hand and talked with him before taking this picture.

Physical photography is not for everyone, as it requires that you relate directly to your portrait subject. At an international street festival like ADW, many people don't speak English. They are out for a night of fun, and some didn't want to be photographed. But, if you're patient, you'll find the right moment. Remember to respect your subject. Photograph from the grace within you to the grace within the person you're photographing. Listen to the person. Shake her hand. Learn her name. When you're done, thank her. You'll become a photographer, not just a picture-taker.

#### IV. Check your picture background, then check your emotional background.



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*A volunteer hands out festival guides.*

Pay attention to the background in your image. Here, I wanted a picture of the ADW guidebook, and I asked one of the volunteers to stop for a minute as he handed them out. The idea was to get the background working with the foreground. Backgrounds should be used to add to the main subject by setting a sense of place.

Monitor your own emotional background as well as the picture's background. When making pictures of people at an event like ADW, ask yourself how you're feeling. Use H.A.L.T. for an acronym: are you Hungry, Angry, Lonely, or Tired? If so, how does your mood impact your imagery? Are you cautious about moving in and getting the picture you want? What's stopping you? If someone says no to your picture-making efforts, can you move on to the next image or find a win-win way to create the picture you're seeking? Fill your own physical frame before you fill the picture frame.

#### V. Practice humility, and check your ego.

Despite what you *think* you know, be a beginner again! Long to learn and be awed by your subjects. Try to energize your curiosity. Ask your subjects about themselves. Don't practice the cliché of the arrogant photographer. Let your pictures whisper in a world of shouting imagery.

I get in trouble when I fail to make the time to see beyond myself. I need to ask what I'm really shooting and how the image can be made more directly. For thoughtful images, I need to learn about who and what I'm photographing. The more I have to learn from my subjects, the more meaningful the imagery becomes. Centering myself allows quality to emerge from the chaos. A shot list keeps me focused, so that I end up with quality, not quantity. The human contact of doing physical photography brings a reality into the images. Checking both the picture's and the photographer's emotional background weeds out the clutter. Being low-key and getting to know vendors and organizers of the ADW not only clarified my vision, but also made me realize that preserving the past makes for a better future.

#### VI. Questions for Beginning Photographers to Ask:

- 1) How can I center myself before I make pictures?
- 2) Is there a way to simplify this picture?
- 3) What is drawing me to make this picture?
- 4) Am I just photographing with the same mental set I usually have? If so, what would be a fresh attitude?
- 5) What are the overall themes in my imagery?
- 6) How can I give back to what I'm photographing?
- 7) How can I make the 2nd, 3rd or 48th frame better?

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*A Honda Element with South Beach hotel colors reflecting on it, using daylight fill-flash.*