



What camera should I use and what style should I adopt?

On my workshops or at camera club talks I often hear people telling me how their equipment is holding them back and asking my opinion re what to buy instead. Often delegates tell me that they really need to upgrade their camera and then they could take amazing photographs like the others are doing on the workshop they are attending. Another variation on this subject that I am hearing more and more these days is around the manufacturer or type of camera. Many tell me that if they swapped from manufacturer A to manufacturer B then they would be bound to improve and can I recommend a manufacturer B. There is also now the debate regarding mirrored v mirrorless and many other variants of the same thing. My retort is always the same and I guess is nothing new but as I find myself saying it so often that I thought I would at least document some of my thoughts here.



If there was such a magic box that we could point at a subject and that would produce a perfect picture every time. A magic box that would work despite the conditions, behaviour of the subject, lighting etc then I think I would give up photography tomorrow. There simply isn't now, nor will there ever be, thank goodness. To quote Ansel Adams and many others, photographs are made not taken. Despite the equipment, it requires the skill and the vision of the photographer to produce the truly great photo.

Many times when I am asked for my thoughts on one of the questions of the moment such as mirrored v mirrorless, Canon v Nikon v Sony v Olympus or some other gear related issue I repeat the same mantra. If I went into a car showroom tomorrow to buy a new car what would I be asked? Hopefully something like – sir do you want a car for long distance and comfort, a 4 x 4 for off road, a people carrier for a family, a city run about and, do I want electric v some other fuel. I would hope the car sales person would try to elicit what I wanted to do with, and how I would use the car, before showing me any. I don't expect any of us would enter a car showroom expecting to find a magic car that would do everything. In the same way in my view there is no such magic camera. Then there is the question - is electric better than fossil fuel - well maybe it is but surely it depends on how I will use my car. In the parallel camera debate is mirrored better than mirrorless? Just like the fuel for my car, sometimes the question should rather be - how will you use your camera? Despite what the manufacturers of photo magazines tell us there are some things where mirrorless simply don't "cut the mustard every time", at least at the moment. Thank goodness I don't have to sell cameras indeed I don't even set out to sell pictures rather I just want to make photos that people enjoy, photos that make them think. The tool I use, just like my car, must fit the sort of pictures I want to make and the situation where I want to make them.



It's far too arrogant for me to try in any way to compare myself with the great masters of the art world but there is nothing wrong in my sharing their struggle. Many were

ridiculed in their day and many fought their own internal demons (like modern day camera club judges!) but the one thing they all shared was a wish to produce their own art, their own interpretation of what they saw and to convey that to the observer. The German art critic and novelist Julius Meier-Graefe put it well when he said

“All great works are trophies of victorious struggle.”

To the best of my knowledge none of these great artists thought that if they had a better brush or better paint then they would produce better work. Nor did they think that if they transferred from oils to pastels or watercolour to pencil then they would produce better art. They used the medium and the tools they knew and that worked best for them in assisting them their style as they sought to produce a work of art and to convey a message. Most of them did not have it at all easy. They might have been members of groups of likeminded people and with them shared ideas and approaches, but they didn't have access to all the thoughts, inspiration, expert (and I mean true expert) opinion that we do now. They struggled too and I suspect a great deal more than any of us ever will need to in our photography. What they did however was to look past the rejections, the failures and the criticism, and focused on their art alone because they believed in themselves. To me photography is the same, you need to focus on developing your own style and your own art. Just like a painter or sculptor believe in yourself and in many ways you can draw such parallels with the great artists of the past.

Picasso apparently once said

“Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once you grow up.”

Do you remember when you were a child? For some of us it's longer ago than we would like to think! When you were a child you had no limits or restrictions on your creativity. You didn't want for new brushes, new pencils or new kit. I know some modern children may do and perhaps that's a sign of the times and where we are going but that could be the subject of a completely different set of thoughts.

As a child your parents might have given you a sheet of paper and some pencils. You scribbled on that paper, and explored as you expressed your child-like curiosity. You had no concept of “good” or “bad” in your art. You weren't forced to colour inside the lines! You could explore and through that exploration, learn. Then as you got older your parents, your critics and your teachers started – perhaps unhelpfully – to tell you what not to do. Hopefully they seldom told you what to do and anyway if they did then you had to take this advice and adapt it otherwise it was their creativity not yours. In the same way slavishly copying another photographers style and approach mimics their creativity without the benefit of being in their head, it doesn't help you develop your own. They may have told you to “colour inside the lines”, to make your picture “more realistic” or to follow the perceived “rules” of art. In the same way your camera club judge tells you to observe the rule of thirds, not blow out highlights, to include a little bit of red in your picture and other such rules or platitudes. Some of this is of value but just like a child we must not let it stifle our creativity. Yes, maybe a good art teacher just like a good photographer might teach you an approach, a style and a technique which helped you become more expressive. However it's you who composes the picture and you who presses the shutter. It's you who works hard to convey a message, a thought and to create the image, to make the photo.



Picasso told us that every child is an artist. But how can we remain artists as we get older? Well my thoughts are simple forget the rules that others impose on you, forget the striving for more and better kit and try to just play and have fun. Express your true self, without some censor, Facebook clicker or photo judge sitting on your shoulder and telling you what to do or what not to do. Don't idly ask others for their feedback on your art or your photography by

posting thousands of pictures on line and waiting for the likes to pile in. I will show my age now but for me it's just like collecting green shield stamps but with green shield stamps at least you could exchange them for goods.

Just as a child doesn't need approval from others on their art rather create art, create photos for the sake of it— because it is fun. Its always wise to develop a small circle of trusted critics, I have them, but make sure these are people who you can trust and who will give time to explain what they're saying and why. Furthermore, don't always slavishly follow their comments and criticisms, just like the masters of old build your own style.

When I make a picture - and yes I do make it not take it – think carefully about those words. I want people to look at it and to stop as they try to understand what I felt and what I am trying to convey in my work. You see for me my photography is about capturing a moment, how I was thinking, what the scene in front of me was saying to me. Its for me to decide how I might interpret it so that I can produce a piece of art conveying just that; how I felt, what the scene was saying to me and what I wanted to say to the observer.



I often repeat a phrase I heard from a wonderful and award winning photographer from Arizona called Lisa Langell. She is best known for her evocative images that create both a visual and emotional connection for the viewer. She tells us said that:

“Photography isn't just documenting that you saw it - its capturing how you experienced the moment”

Recently I had a number of photos in a small exhibition with a few fellow photographers. As part of the process we all took it in turns to “man” the exhibition. This gave me the ideal opportunity to observe how people viewed the many images hung on the walls. Some simply came in and rushed around glancing briefly at each and every print before leaving equally as quickly. Now I am not judging them in this, I am glad they came in. Maybe they were on a lunch break but far more likely they were all doing what we all find ourselves doing these days. We all too often find ourselves squeezing something in between two equally pressing engagements. I similarly look at people's comments on Facebook or other social media and try to guess how many were typed with one hand as the author rushed for a train or between other pressing engagements. There is nothing wrong with that, our life and our tasks have to be completed in an ever reducing time frame but as photographers it has made our production of art, our creation of photos much more difficult. If we want to be seen, to be noticed and to convey our message we have to stop that person rushing for their train and engage them, to make them look twice. The advertising world has to do that to sell whatever they are pushing when they produce the bill board we rush past or advert in a glossy magazine we flick through at the dentists. We have to do the same with our photography!

I once knew an excellent artist and critic who told me to sit and look at people reading magazines or rushing for a train and see what stops them in their tracks. Whilst at the exhibition the other day I was on the look out for the photos people stopped at, even momentarily. I didn't ask myself what photographic rule did that photographer use or what camera or some other platitude often repeated by judges. I simply asked myself what part of the human experience did the photographer touch on that made that person stop and how did they do that. When a photographer achieves that goal, they don't do it with a new and grander camera or a new special style, they do it because they understand what they want to convey and how it will be received. They



fully understand the message and the story they want to tell. They think carefully about what they want to say. Just as the advertiser does with their goal of selling a product; we as photographers should aim to do the same as we seek to convey a feeling an emotion and to penetrate the thicker and thicker skins of the observers of our art in the never-ending rush which is the modern world.

I don't think that by writing this I will have dented the sales of cameras, or I hope upset some of the excellent judges out there. I won't have made you a better photographer or answered the question which type of camera should I buy but I do hope I have helped you realise that each and everyone of us can be great photographers even with our iPhone or maybe our even our old box brownie!

Just to finish Sir Don McCullin CBE, a British photo journalist recognised for his war photography and images of urban strife, famously said:

"Photography for me is not looking, it's feeling. If you can't feel what you're looking at, then you're never going to get others to feel anything when they look at your pictures"

If you don't feel anything or try to convey it in your photograph, you can't expect others to appreciate or share it. By exposing yourself and your feelings you create images that come from a deeper place inside yourself. That's dangerous but exciting too. Live your life on the edge. The more you put more of yourself in the image the more important and stronger it is. None of that can be achieved by slavishly following a mantra or by using that bit of kit over another. Do instead think of the photo kit you lust after like the car you need (not want) to own. What are you going to do with it how will it help you to do just that best and that's not necessarily the fastest or showiest in the show room or the one in this weeks magazine or someone told you to buy.



Maybe you should do as I was once told to do. Instead of looking through the photo catalogue when it drops on the mat each and every month for the new desirable bit of kit simply buy a book with the work of one of the great photographers, any of them, there are many, or even one of the great artists. Settle down in an armchair in a warm comfortable place and look slowly and carefully for the book. When you see a picture that says something to you rather than wondering what camera photography used or what magical photographic rule they applied ask yourself what were they trying to portray and whether they managed it. Ask yourself how they went about portraying this, what position they were in when they took the photograph, maybe what settings you suspect they might have used to create the image and with that newly acquired knowledge set about improving your own photography. Don't seek to emulate their own work make it your own but just like a child walking around the world and try hard to produce an image of their favourite grandparent or the tree in the garden set about doing it in your own style but learning by observing what works for others. It'll be much cheaper than a new camera and will help you to become your own photographer not someone who hankers after gear or emulating somebody else. It's my belief that in time you will become much more satisfied with your own work.

Bob Brind-Surch

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