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Addendum to the BW Nature Competition assignment….

Well, I just completed my ratings and observations for your recent black and white nature competition, and, I have to say, I'm honored that you think my opinion has some value. It's a humbling exercise and I feel, once again, that I want to apologize for my biases, point out some patterns I noticed and provide a suggestion for some interesting navigation ahead.

Apology

First and foremost, the apology. Full transparency…I know for sure that I'm not a better photographer than any of you.   Although I've been an avid photographer since 1966, I've missed more great shots than I've captured. I've had very little photography and art training. I'm not connected to the art world in any significant way.

My artistic preferences are simply the result of my DNA in some combination with my life experiences…and, hanging out as much as possible with colleagues like you who openly and generously share what they know and learn. So, I'm just a heavily biased data point. Please take my comments with that grain of salt.

Observations

So, with that warning label out of the way, I see some patterns as I reflect on the images in this competition. Just as last year, I see a preference in the black and white images that favors greys. I found myself, this year and last, saying, "more contrast". Most color photography is about color. Black and White photography is about composition. Composition is structured with contrast, so if it's not strong contrast, the composition doesn't usually hold the image together with any real power.

The selection of subjects tended toward Central Coast Iconic. The problem is that these subjects have become trite… unless you do something with them that has your unique style. The average American is producing 22 images a day mostly with a cell phone and then putting them on social media channels. People seeing all these 'honey spot' social media posts are traveling to all these iconic sights. I must see 10 or so images a day of each of these subjects and the cell phone cameras are so smart that they look technically good even though the photographer was just pointing and shooting and posting in 5 seconds elapsed time.

Without some strong intent and voice differentiation, these images are no longer going to register as powerful…so, I assigned a lot of "3" s even though the images were well executed. It makes me wonder if the competition process itself is encouraging too many of you to play it safe with your choice of subjects.

There are some techniques to help break free. Carve out three hours and focus on one subject or one small plot of land. Put the camera down for the first two hours. Stop looking for an image. Explore with all your senses.   Smell things. Taste things. Touch things. Listen. Let your mind wander. Let the image find you and don't pick up the camera until it does. If it doesn't try again in a few days and keep doing that until an image calls you. That's your voice calling back to you. That's the voice that makes your work unique and powerful.

Suggestion

The nearly total mechanization of photography has been here for years and is growing exponentially. For that reason, I stopped doing much single image photography five years ago. I used photographs and other images and blended them to make digital montage images. It's much more creative and got me out of my comfort zone which was getting too crowded. It's more like painting with photographs instead of paint. I took painting workshops so that I could understand that process and then came back to digital montage.

Then I realized that our prints are seen with reflected light, but the world was adapting to screens and seeing images with projected light which is much stronger and more interesting.

So, I started printing on transparencies and backing the transparency with silver or gold leaf so that the viewer saw what looked like both projected and reflective light. When I got that process down, I realized my digital montages were too limited by my photographs which tended toward more opaque compositions than the projected light won't travel through.

In the past five months, I've learned how to use AI image generation to make the images that are more translucent and allow silver light reflection through the color. So, I'm tracking the growth of AI as I try to apply it. I'm stunned with its power. Within a year, I don't think you will be able to tell the difference between camera generated and AI generated images that look like they are photos.

Three months ago, AI wasn't that capable of generated a photo look alike of a heron. Here are three heron images that I did last week…from my imagination straight to computer image file in 45 seconds…no camera involved. I imagined them, selected them, and I added about 35% photoshop and plugin changes. Basically, I collaborated with a very smart technical 'bot' (short for robot".

Of course, we've all been collaborating with very smart technical software for years…some of it AI based, but this is a very different experience. I conjured the scene and the heron landing, but the bot offered a dance metaphor and gesture that I didn't ask for. I was smart enough to choose to use it and asked for some subtle variations and bot gave me the concentric rings in water in the second image. This is truly a co-creation.

When I posted them, most of my Facebook friends, even photographers, thought they were photos even though I labeled them as AI. It's a digital image for sure but not a digital photo. I did a whole series like this before I finished my second fried egg in the morning.

We are, I think, in the first year of a new world in image making. I know its massively controversial for a lot of good reasons, but I strongly suggest that we embrace these tools and figure out how to make art with them. It's a new art form…like photography was once a new art form…but it won't take a century to arrive. It might take a year. We don't have to give up photography, but the imaging world is on another track and is about to rush pass us like we are standing still.

Organizations like Padre Trails, Imagemakers, and the Center for Photographic Art are going to have to figure out how to handle this new world. Do we fight it, ignore it, co-opt it, or embrace it? My suggestion is we make friends with it and use our skills to lead this new art form. We can always drop out and go back to photography, but it may get hard to catch a speeding train while standing still on an old platform.