
AFTER IMAGES

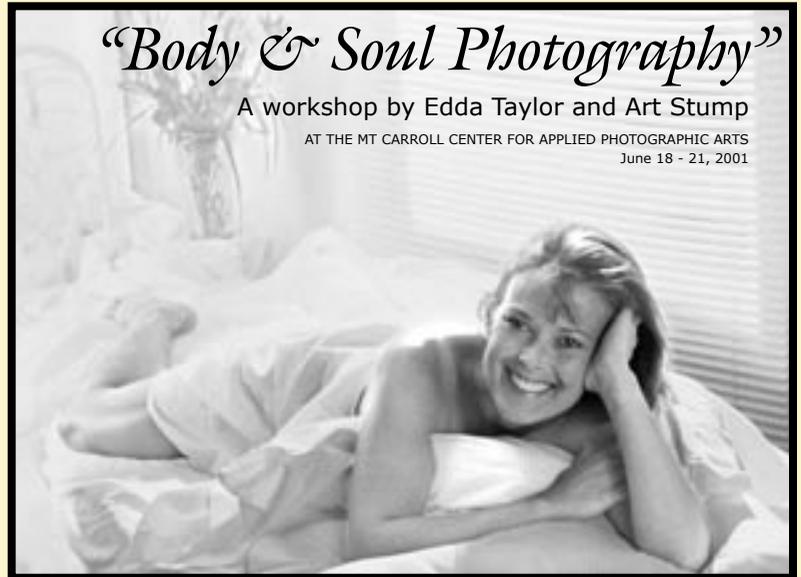
*A Personal Perspective On Workshop Explorations
by Art Stump*

KNOCKING AT THE SALON DOOR

Sometimes days after viewing a model's portfolio or a colleague's work, from among all the pictures viewed the echoes of one or two images still play in my head. These special pictures stand above the clutter of countless others, continuing in my mind's eye long after I've seen them in person.

These are the powerful pictures, the select few that have truly moved me. They have resonated in ways I didn't completely sense when I first viewed them, even though I knew at the time that I liked them.

It's much the same with ques-



tions asked by students in the course of a workshop. Broader perspectives on questions easily get lost in the busy particulars of the moment. However, deeper patterns and meanings in teacher-student exchanges sometimes coalesce after the fact, begging additional questions not directly asked during the workshop itself.

For example, as I demonstrated

lighting setups, a number of students raised questions about the various equipment and paraphernalia used. This is expected, of course, but time and again I sensed the halting pause of a further, unspoken question. While students asked specifically about the functions of particular pieces of equipment, the tone and underlying context of their queries dealt more with issues of permission.



MODEL: Ann Jenkins

“Am I really allowed to do that?” was the question I heard asked indirectly, again and again. And it’s a question I’ve heard many times before.

The tacit question of permission raises its head more often than you’d think in photography seminars and workshops. It reveals a fundamental fixation on and adherence to rules and their associated hardware. It suggests a dependency at work, perhaps an unhealthy dependency, clearly one that deserves a closer look.

In many established teaching environments students are taught the fundamentals of an art form, such as photography, at the feet of sponsored equipment. In such environments particular manufacturers’ brands and models of equipment are presented as the key to the techniques being taught. And so they are. But in these kinds of learning environments, the basic fundamentals of the demonstrated techniques, as well as deeper understandings of the physical principles underlying those techniques, can be upstaged or even bypassed altogether by an inordinate emphasis on the capabilities of the hardware used.

This is not an unethical or evil situation. It is simply an unfor-

tunate by-product of the heavy commercialism and sponsorship typical of the highly competitive industry that is photography today. The manufacturers' support and sponsorship, which we laud so freely, come to us at a price.

There were incredulous looks, for example, visual gasps as it were, as I rolled up flash heads on stands to populate the set of a "hard light" demonstration setup. We all know that there are any number of companies ready to sell scrims, flags, cutters, and cookies of various shapes and sizes to facilitate the control of light on a set. Their hardware litters the floors in many photography schools. Still, any available piece of hardware, such as a flash head on a handy nearby stand, could deliver much the same effect.

This option may not be explored in a school whose sponsors are manufacturers of photo equipment, where flash heads and flags each have specific, ordained functions. The care and use of such devices is taught as "fundamental principles". To deviate from their prescribed use is to risk confusion, disapproval, and failure to hang at national.

Please remember this number one:

The principles of light behavior remain unchanged, irrespective of the current technological state of the photographic arts. Tools, technologically advanced or not, facilitate the application of principles, they do not change the principles nor supplant them.

Tools ease our employment of timeless photographic principles, they do not obviate them. And they certainly *should not* define them. To the extent a given photographic tool or instrument circumvents the student's obligation to understand and engage the principles of light at work, that tool or instrument has no place in the teaching of fundamental photography.

The principle explored in the workshop example above was the interruption or redirection of light on its way to our subject, thereby changing the picture we were about to make. The means by which — and ease with which — we accomplish this manipulation of light is where tools and technology come into play.

The function of a fill card or

reflector, for example, is to redirect light, making it bounce to where the photographer has decided there is not enough. To achieve this redirection, the photographer could use either a technically sophisticated piece of equipment designed specifically for this purpose or an ordinary piece of generic cardboard designed for something altogether different. The looming white wall of a nearby building, the opposing surfaces of a room's interior walls, or even a number of strategically hung white sheets could serve the photographer's need just as well.

While one of these methods may prove quicker and easier than the others to employ in one setup, in another setup a different method may be chosen because of its greater flexibility. In either case, however, the underlying principle at work is the same, and the well-trained eye of the photographer should be able to observe the very operation of that principle, as it plays itself out in the scene at hand.

Complementing the role of reflectors are devices, such as flags or scrims or cookies, whose function it is to intercept light on its way to the scene, thus preventing its presence in the picture. Again the photog-

rapher could opt for equipment designed and marketed expressly for this purpose in order to achieve the desired results quickly and easily. However, the fundamental underlying principle, that of creating shadow with light, is universal and totally independent of equipment brands, features, and price points.

To set up a more interesting fall of light in a scene, for example, the photographer could position a number of cookies and flags on stands between the light source and the subject. These engineered devices would clearly do what they were designed to do: interrupt incident light in the scene and create shadows.

Alternatively the photographer could simply do as we did in the demonstration, move stands or other paraphernalia already present on the set into roughly the same positions. These opportunistic stand-ins could be holding cards, cables, flash heads, umbrellas, or anything generally opaque. Their presence would cast shadows just as surely as devices engineered and sold for that purpose.

This “make do” approach to a solution is not often seen in photo schools. Students

are primed to expect a piece of equipment engineered to solve the problem at hand, and more importantly, *to define the problem at hand as well*. And therein lies the crux of the matter. The very presence in the classroom of a particular piece of problem solving equipment strongly suggests a prior identification of the problem *by those presumed to know such things*, the designers and manufacturers of the equipment.

This suggestion is not lost on students, who eventually come to expect the various capabilities and features built-in to their equipment to not only solve their problems, but to tell them what their problems are in the first place. They come to understand their role as students to be not probing, questioning, and exploring the behavior of light, but waiting, expecting, and receiving the results of others’ explorations. They have slipped quietly to the end of the discovery chain, where they have become the administrators of problem solving hardware.

A much larger overriding question, of course, should be the primary focus of the photographer’s attention, student or otherwise: “Should shadows be in this scene in the first place?” If so, what should their

shapes be? How large or small, how light or dark? Inserting shadows, removing shadows, and altering shadow shapes and intensities are in fact the prerogatives of the eyes creating the scene. They are the prerogatives of the artist, which is to say, the photographer.

Using equipment specifically designed to facilitate the production of shadows will make their creation and manipulation easier for the artist, but in the end these manufactured shadows remain... simply shadows. They are but a few of the many created elements in the artist-photographer’s picture.

Please remember this number two:

As photographers, you are above all else artists. You should see a scene as a painter sees it, wonderfully swept with light right before your eyes.

Each of you is, after all, an artist painting with light. Light itself has become your pigment, a camera your brush, and film your canvas. As an oils painter you would feel free to spread your pigments with

the brush of your choosing, or with a palette knife, or with the handle of either.

The resulting effect would differ with each application, but the underlying principle would

remain the same: get paint on the canvas where you want paint to be. That is what makes the picture.

In the era of brush and pigment the artist was forced to

struggle at length with every subtlety woven into a picture. The process was protracted and laborious. And it was the process itself, as much as any of the tools or materials used, that enabled the artist's vision to infuse itself continuously into the picture's creation. It was the process itself that gave the picture its soul.

In stark contrast to the passion of that process, when fundamental photographic principles are taught in environments heavily subsidized by commercial interests, they degrade quickly into rote exercises of equipment instructionals. Students in such environments receive premixed solutions to a litany of prepared questions, questions designed to illustrate and market the equipment's capabilities.

Innovation and invention, the lifeblood of the creative process, become the exclusive purview of corporate engineering departments, marketing departments, and quota driven sales forces. In these cases students are invited to accept engineered solutions to problems they have yet to recognize.

Rather than having to struggle with the dissatisfaction of a particular state of affairs — that is, having to work to define



MODEL: Kim Dentice

a problem as their eyes have experienced it — students are inundated with solutions in the form of proliferating hardware features.

The implication is that there surely was a need or problem in the first place, that is, a defect in the photographer's picture, since here is the gizmo that is its solution; and, incidentally, here are the gizmo's instructions. The photographer's own artistic struggle, exploration, and experimentation have been totally circumvented.

We are by nature living, learning creatures. Even as we learn things, we learn *how* to learn things. It is what we are. To the extent we are taught first of all to go out and use tools, employing such-and-such rules to fix such-and-such problems, problems which we may or may not have even recognized, we are taught on nature's flip side not to innovate and not to invent.

We are taught rather to accept and to be passive in our craft. In the aftermath of such instruction, what we have learned is to order our portion of resourcefulness out of a catalog, and we have lost the ability to tell the difference.

Please remember this number three:

The true artist in the photographer does not use technology simply because it is there. It is the artist's creative eye, not the cleverness of technology that scripts the roles of light and shadow in a scene.

Just as a poorly trained athlete can become muscle-bound, so a poorly trained photographer can become technology-bound. Even as purveyors of high tech equipment boast of the virtually infinite combinations and permutations of effects which their chipsets can produce, the inherent degradation of the creative process slips in almost unnoticed.

As the photographer defers increasingly to the inevitable advance of technology, the "creative" input contributed by the photographer becomes increasingly a series of selections made from pop-up palettes of slick effects, effects which the equipment's sophisticated chips can offer up in seductive plenty. The photographer's dwindling role in this dazzling arena of chipsets and algorithms becomes one of multiple choice.

It is a rare artist who can master such an alluring tool, bringing it into service in the

production of art rather than lying comfortably and passively in its embrace. Having received both question and answer in the same breath, the unsuspecting artist is lulled into creative stagnation. Slowly but surely the artist within gives way to the technician within, and the purity of the artist's inner vision is blunted — or lost altogether.

Bottom line, the highest purpose of rules in teaching photographic principles and techniques is to enable learning and exploration, not to stifle the creative process. To do this rules should be more than a collection of operating instructions.

Rules should enable the photography student to leverage the power of the basic truths and principles embodied in those rules in the creation of the student's own personal vision.



MODEL: Ann Jenkins



Please remember this number four:

To the extent we focus on rules and equipment, we do not focus on seeing. We soon become not seers of light, but operators of machinery.

This is, I believe, one of the most menacing side-effects of the rush to digital and will soon present one of photography's greatest challenges to its standing as an art form.

But that's another chapter.

The views expressed are solely those of Art Stump, Art Stump Photography. They are intended to further challenge the thinking of the photography students who attended the June 18 - 22, 2001 "Body & Soul Photography" workshop at the Mt. Carroll Center for applied photographic arts.

Art Stump Photography
4600 S. Michigan
South Bend, IN 46614
www.artstump.com

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