

The Art of the Print: Some thoughts on creativity and craft

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Surprise was my first reaction when a guest speaker at a recent photo club meeting, talking about his fine art printing, pronounced that ‘fine art’ prints could only be B&W prints made in a traditional darkroom. With that comment, less than 15 minutes into his presentation, he may have alienated a large portion of his audience. Naively, perhaps, I had thought this debate to be behind us, but apparently not. I could conjecture at length about why this person had such an opinion, but that is not the issue. More importantly, in case such an opinion is more widespread than I had imagined, it could be beneficial to consider an alternate point of view.

Our club has been digitally integrated for quite a few years, and in general we have long since not bothered to distinguish between prints made in the darkroom versus those made via the computer and inkjet printer. We simply look at prints. While the fellow printers in any audience may have questions on technique, everyone (especially the general audience) is appropriately more interested in the merits of the image itself. Has the photographer successfully communicated with the viewer?

How then should we digital printers respond to such a comment on fine art? If the phrase ‘fine art’ is invoked, then shouldn’t we be focused on the art rather than the craft, being careful not to confuse the two? I have made B&W prints in my darkroom, but sold my enlarger after I bought an inkjet printer and found out what I could produce through the computer. Interestingly, I sold the enlarger to a friend who has since developed his craft of darkroom printmaking and far surpassed my meager efforts in that realm. However, after investing much time and effort to learn the craft of inkjet printmaking, I feel that I’m making prints of a quality that I could not achieve with traditional means. They are not better than what a skilled darkroom printer could create, nor worse, just different since the materials are different. Another friend, a painter, is rarely interested in other artists’ techniques for canvas preparation, brand of paint or brush, but rather the artistic

merit of the painting hung on the wall. Further, he manages to express himself with oil, acrylic or watercolour tools, thinking only of which one is right for the intended piece. Why do some photographers try to limit themselves and others, with insistence on traditional or modern printmaking techniques? Is a novel by Salman Rushdie lesser art because it was created on a computer keyboard than one created by Norman Mailer on a typewriter, or the works of Charles Dickens written by hand with a quill pen?

How can you look at a digital B&W print by John Paul Caponigro and believe it is lesser art than one produced by Bruce Barnbaum in a darkroom? Both are excellent examples of the medium of printmaking, regardless of the method by which they are realized. In addition, by excluding colour prints from the definition of fine art photography you would be alienating many of the works by André Gallant, Richard Martin and Freeman Patterson, not to mention Caponigro again, works which are considered by many to be both extremely creative and technically well executed, thereby worth consideration as fine art.

Fortunately my friends and fellow club-mates are like-minded, and craft takes second place to art. Learning the craft of your choice (or several if you are so inclined and talented) is very important, since without strong craft your expressive voice will not be clearly heard and understood. Fine art isn't about the choice of craft, however, it's about the finished work being both creative and of a high technical (i.e. craft) standard. To force a specific form of craft on an artist will more likely limit creativity rather than expand it.

Many books have been written about the appreciation of art, and much applies to photographic art as well. One measure of success as an artist is whether a connection has been made with the viewer. As we all bring our personal histories to the viewing of the image, the viewer doesn't necessarily take away the message intended by the artist. That's fine. Some of the most successful images are intentionally ambiguous to provoke the viewer. Also, the message doesn't need to be of earth-shattering import in order to communicate. The image can be about anger or outrage at some human or inhuman

condition, a thought-provoking portrait, or a simple landscape where the artist just wants to share the joy experienced at that moment of image capture. The medium of communication (silver-gelatin or inkjet) is irrelevant as long as it is well executed and thereby effective.



This set of images demonstrates the progression from initial capture (top) to what I had visualized when I took the image (middle), and the final interpretation (lower). The first step might have taken an hour in one session in Photoshop. The final image is the result of repeated critical evaluation and evolution of the image over a calendar period of several months.

This brings us to the concept of the execution. Having the technical skill to manipulate an image in the darkroom or Photoshop is of limited use if you don't know what is needed to move from the captured image to a fine print. (I am assuming throughout that the initial film or digital capture has also been well executed, to provide good technical raw material for printing.)

The art of a print is the result of a creative *process*, not the choice of craft. The process I refer to here is one of critical evaluation, refinement, and patience, allowing time for the print to mature before the next iteration of evaluation and refinement. There is no difference in this process for darkroom or inkjet prints; the difference is merely in the toolbox used to express the artistic vision. I see the main benefits of digital printmaking as the precision and reproducibility with which adjustments to an image can be made. Neither the enlarger nor the computer will make decisions for you on how to crop more effectively, where dodging or burning are needed, or whether you need a bit more or less contrast to make a more expressive print. These are all aspects of the much larger creative workflow from capture to output, a workflow which has more similarities than differences when comparing traditional darkroom to digital printmaking.

Further, the definition of fine art should not be subject to how long it takes to create the work, or the effort that has gone into it. Some people are just more efficient or more creative, and sometimes a straight print captures all of the artist's intended vision. Perhaps our guest speaker at the club spent long hours in the darkroom and equated that with quality or creativity. I confess that I'm much more efficient with digital than chemical printing, but I make no presumptions that I'm somehow more creative as a result. The creativity has instead developed as a result of exploring, reading, thinking, talking, looking, seeing and in general being exposed to new ideas. I suspect almost all fine art prints are the result of an evolution in both the concept and the specific execution. It is certainly true that the digital workflow can be efficient, but care must be taken to avoid efficiently producing lots of mediocre work, on both technical and creative scales. Taking our guest speaker's comment literally, we must also understand that traditional darkroom printers should not presume that all their work is, by definition, fine art.

Similarly, there are some photographers who feel that exotic darkroom (or computer) techniques somehow imbue the work with the cachet of fine art. Remember that all that the viewers see is the final product; they are unaware of how many chemicals were used in the darkroom or how many layers are in the Photoshop file. We should all strive to make our work good enough to stand on its own in terms of both artistic imagery and

technical execution. Artistic legacy is not measured by the bulk of mediocre images you take, but rather how effectively your individual images, themes or projects communicate with the viewer.

There are both subjective and technical criteria for evaluation of the quality of a print. Few of these criteria need be dependent on the craft. The common technical criteria involve visible issues like the best use of available tones from the chosen medium and the enhanced impact from well-executed dodging and burning. The artistic value arises from the intangibles of intent, passion, personal vision and knowledge of and commitment to the subject, and more. All the above will contribute to the success of the work, and move it from the category of photograph to fine art.

Where that line is drawn is, of course, highly subjective and you can debate that topic endlessly if that is your desire. I prefer to spend my time either behind the camera, working on the next project on the computer, or drawing inspiration by viewing the creative work of friends and fellow photographers.

To find your expressive voice, you need both craft and creativity. May you continue to explore and grow in both areas, regardless of the medium you choose for that expression, and without the arbitrary limits or labels that some people might try to impose.
