

Visualization and Photo Evaluation

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Visualization

Introduction

Most of us snap pictures when we see a nice or interesting subject or want to record a moment in an event, a place, or with people.

A good photograph should not simply document and record what we saw, but also convey what we found special and how we felt when we looked at the subject.

Visualization Stages

As you develop your pre-visualization skills you move from stage 1-beginner to stage 4-advanced. Most casual picture takers only get to stage 2.

1. You shoot something nice when you see it. There is no pre-visualization; you hope that the subject will look as nice in the picture as in reality. In most cases, it doesn't.
2. You see something nice, and you can visualize how it will look in the picture. You know when to take the picture and get good results. The ratio of good pictures vs. rejects increases from stage 1.
3. You can visualize how a known subject will look under certain conditions. You plan to shoot it when the conditions occur (light, weather, angle, season).
4. You create an image in your mind. Then, you set it up and create it with your camera or in your lab (shoot from a specific angle, arrange the subject, composite).

Key Considerations for Creative Images

1. *The Thing*

- The subject is only the start. The photographer has to make the image unique and different from the way others will make it.
- Make sure you capture and reflect your own experience, point of view, and impression.
- Consider personal feelings such as conflict, contrast, humor, beauty, etc.

2. *The Detail*

- Pay attention to fine detail that is not very obvious to the untrained eye.
- Look for special texture, colors, patterns, lines, curves.
- Also think of visual elements that the eye cannot see such as motion blur, selective focus, B&W, reflections.

3. The Vantage Point

- Choose unique vantage points that are not from the standard eye level.
- Show the subject from unusual angles and perspectives.
- Capture it in ways that others don't see (above, below, very close).
- Animal, birds, and people should be captured from their eye level for a natural look.

4. The Time

- Many subjects are not interesting unless captured at the right moment.
- The moment should be right for:
 - Light- quality, color, angle
 - Motion
 - Action
 - Composition of moving elements in the picture
 - Inclusion/exclusion of elements
 - Weather conditions- fog, clouds, sun, etc.

5. The Frame

- In reality there are no frames. The picture's borders create the frame.
- Composition is the arrangement of objects within the frame.
- Composition affects dynamics, impact, and mood.
- Think about what to include in or leave out.
- Think about the best orientation (vertical or horizontal).
- Keep the borders clean.
- Consider the placement of the horizon. High in the frame- gives feeling of depth and distance; low- feeling of space and volume.
- Use leading lines, diagonals, triangles, curves.
- Bright areas get the attention.
- Consider the placement of the main subject. The center may not be the best place.

Judging Photographs

Purpose

- What is the intended use of the picture?
 - Decoration
 - Greeting card
 - Fine art
 - Documentary
 - Contest (type? venue?)

Subject Matter

- Is the picture aesthetically pleasant to look at? Does it tell a story?
- Can you clearly identify the message in the picture?
- Does the picture evoke an emotion?
- Do the light, angle, exposure, tones, and composition enhance the story?

Center of Interest

- What are your eyes drawn to when you look at the picture?
- Do you see a main subject? Do you see multiple subjects that compete with each other?
- Do technical aspects (lighting, exposure, focus) add to or detract from the subject?

Composition

- Do the subject and supporting elements fill the frame?
- Does the composition lead you to the subject? Does the arrangement of the key elements enhance the image? Did the photographer break the rules creatively to add impact to the image?
- Is the background controlled to bring attention to the subject and eliminate distracting background elements? Elements should contribute to the subject.
- Did the photographer use depth of field, focal length, lighting, angle, and perspective to enhance the composition?

Technical Aspects

- Is the sharpest object the main subject?
- Does the image have the appropriate contrast and tonal range?
- Is the picture exposed correctly to set the appropriate mood and show the necessary details?
- Are the colors correct and do they fit the style or mood?
- Is the light too harsh, too soft, or too flat?
- Could a fill flash or a reflector correct lighting issues?
- Does the light support the presentation and story?
- Is the white balance corrected for the light?

Creativity

- Does the picture show details that are often missed or surprise the viewer?
- Are the elements in the picture arranged in a way that will make a strong statement or make it interesting and/or attractive?
- Is the picture interesting? Does it show some new ideas?

Common Post Processing Problems

- Leaving dust spots
- Over saturation
- Over sharpening
- Unrealistic HDR
- Grungy sky
- Bad sky replacement
 - Inconsistent lighting, perspective, and angle
 - Halos
- Bad content replacement (cloning, healing...)
- Poorly-converted B&W images

Summary

Evaluate the picture to see that it is technically good and has some of the following characteristics. Usually, the picture needs to have at least three of them to get a high score:

- Clear subject and center of interest
- Tells a story
- Special lighting
- Strong graphics
- Element of surprise
- Emotive
- Strong composition
- Unique and creative presentation

Beware of the Illusion of Reality - the viewer can only see what's in the picture. The viewer doesn't know or care about the effort that it took you to get the picture or about any emotional connection that you have with the subject that is not reflected in the picture. Here are a few examples:

- A portrait of a rare bird in the wild, after sitting a few days in a blind, may not score better than a portrait of the bird in a zoo.
- A picture of a building that has some interesting history will not be judged based on the history.
- A standard portrait of your grandson that you love so much is unlikely to impress the viewer.
- A landscape picture will not score well just because you hiked for three days to get to the location or paid a lot of money to travel to it.

Criteria	Agree	Disagree
Creativity and Appeal		
Clearly identified subject		
Interesting subject / story		
Creative technique		
Artistic expression		
Unique way of seeing		
Use of color, texture, pattern, detail, timing to make a strong presentation		
Composition		
Strong center of interest		
Foreground/background support subject		
Good composition/placement of subject		
Strong perspective		
Use of rule of thirds, negative space, leading lines, curves, or diagonals to make a strong presentation		
Creative placement of horizon		
Image leveled properly		
Clean borders		
Best camera position (portrait/landscape)		
Technical Quality		
Sharp focus where needed		
Proper exposure		
Proper light/used correctly		
Appropriate use of flash		
Good color/tone quality		
Creative use of lighting		
Clean presentation		

My Critic / Judging

My evaluation goes beyond the technical aspects and composition. Storytelling, visual and emotional impact, use of light, unique and creative approach, and personal expression are all considered in the evaluation.

The score is not directly related to the number of suggestions for improvement. A picture that is handled perfectly, may receive a lower score than one that has impact and tells a story, but has some minor distractions. Ansel Adams said that there's nothing worse than a sharp image of a fuzzy concept. I agree with that.

It's hard to identify a unique style or an artistic approach of a photographer when reviewing individual images that are randomized. Please consider my comments, but don't change your style or creative approach based on a single reviewer's opinion.

In a pictorial evaluation, I'm not looking at the picture from a purist point of view. Some of my editing suggestions will not be valid for nature competitions.

When there's an assigned subject, adherence to the topic is critical.

Matching Your Images with Intended Use and Audience

Match your images with the intended use

Photographs are used for decoration, documentary, illustration, family record, collectible artwork, advertisement, and more. A given picture may serve several purposes, but is rarely strong when used for the wrong purpose. For example, a photo of a pretty flower with a very limited sharp area can make a beautiful picture on the wall, but will not have much value as a nature documentary picture, while a picture of a wild animal eating its prey may tell a great story, but will unlikely be used to decorate a living room. A misty morning scene can create a strong mood and make a great picture for decoration, but will not be the best picture to promote a summer vacation site.

I'm probably stating the obvious here, but how often do you think about the intended use of the picture when you create it? Do you consider the context in which it will be displayed when you compose it and make decisions on focus, depth of field, exposure, lighting, filters, etc.? How often do you consider the final format and frame ratio that the image will be displayed in, when you compose the photo looking through the viewfinder? A tightly-framed picture may require cropping out important subject area or leaving uneven borders, in order to fit the picture in a standard 5x7, 8x10, or 11x14 frame.

I often see good photographs that are beautifully composed and handled, but lose their impact because they don't fit their intended use. Here are a few examples:

- A good technical portrait of a bird entered into a pictorial photo contest.
- A pretty abstract of trees in fall in a nature photo contest.
- Complex images that need to be studied for a few minutes entered into large competitions where the judges get only a few seconds to look at each image.
- Travel log pictures from a family trip presented in a slide show to non-family guests.
- Pictures that are too small or too large for the place where they are displayed.
- A technically high-quality portrait shows every pimple and facial problem.

Remember, your photography is a form of visual communications. The language, style, and context need to fit the event and the audience.

Match your images with the intended audience

In the section above, I talked about the importance of presenting the right images, at the right time, and to the right audience. Here, I'll focus a little more on the audience. Many of us have had the misfortune of watching long slide shows, reviewing thick photo albums, or even walking through a museum, where the images didn't speak to us. I'm not talking about failed presentations due to bad work by the photographer, but presentations that failed to hold our interest. At times, even a cake and a drink don't make the "show" go fast enough. As photographers and artists, we think that good work should hold the viewer's interest, but is that true? Let's look at a few scenarios from other forms of art where you may have had a hard time relating to the work:

- A play is based on a significant historical event that occurred in a certain part of the country. The performance is brilliant. The actors behave, talk, and use symbols that represent the place and the period, but you are not familiar with the symbols, time, or historical event.
- An award-winning actor reads a beautiful poem, but in a foreign language that you don't understand.
- Your first encounter with a unique form of art (e.g., modern art).
- You listen to music that is based on a scale that is uncommon in your culture.

The examples above demonstrate that in order for people to truly appreciate and enjoy the artwork, they need to have a certain level of familiarity with the medium, style, subject, symbolism, etc. Sometimes, knowledge of the specific technique that was used is required for the viewer to see and appreciate the uniqueness of the work and the skill level of the artist. There are, of course, commonly-accepted forms of art that are easier to understand and enjoy. They may not have much depth and meaning that require interpretation, but they provide a certain level of entertainment to most people. We can see that in calendar pictures, postcards, light music, TV sitcoms and entertainment shows, and paintings of landscapes, flowers, and stills.

As a photographer and artist, you must consider the intended audience when you prepare for a presentation, publication, exhibit, or simply a review of your photographs. This is not to say that you should create artwork that targets the lowest common denominator, but that you should match the work that you show with the people you expect to share it with. It's usually a good idea to push the boundaries a little and raise the bar, but don't let your audience lose interest because they can't relate to the work. Sometimes, you can help the viewers by explaining the work and providing some background, either in person or with typed text that accompanies the pictures. You may also start with images that are easier to understand and increase the level of sophistication as the presentation progresses.

You need to ask yourself:

- Will the viewer be able to relate to the images?
- Will the viewer find the subject interesting?
- Are there enough images to tell a story or too many that they are repetitive and boring?
- Will the viewer be able to interpret the images and understand the symbolism in it?
- Will the subject matter offend your intended audience?
- What can you do to mitigate the risk of disappointing your audience?

Of course, none of the ideas here will help if the work itself is not very good, but defining good work is a whole different topic.