

A PAINTER'S FREEDOM

A Defence of The Digital Photograph

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“The camera cannot compete with painting as long as it cannot be used in Heaven or Hell.”

-Edvard Munch, 1863-1944

The early history of photography is littered with the deprecating comments made by artists of traditional media who, had they lived to see the current acceptance of photography as an art form, would have been appalled. The appearance of the photographic process was treated with contempt by those who had learned their crafts over many years and to whom the immediacy offered by the camera's lens was anathema. The traditional image of the solitary man of vision labouring long and lonely hours at his chosen craft was certainly a far cry from the freedom of the snapshot which was quickly granted to an eager public by refinements rapidly brought to the initial discovery of the silver image.

Nonetheless the invention of photography hugely affected painting, not least because it put many of the less gifted workaday practitioners out of business. It also was largely instrumental in the rise of the Impressionists who turned to capturing their impression of things rather than fastidiously recording things as they were seen to be, as this was now being done with unprecedented accuracy and realism by the camera.

From the earliest days of photography an antipathy existed between the parvenu and the established methods of producing hand-crafted imagery. To a large extent this enmity has now abated but there are still pockets of resistance, most notably in the European old guard, that refuse to entertain the notion that an image made in a machine and capable of easy facsimile should ever be referred to as Art. I can attest to this lingering snobbery in England where, in recent years, I and a fellow photographer were asked to leave a gallery which we were visiting for the purpose of showing our folios. We were imperiously informed that photography belonged in newspapers, magazines and wedding albums and certainly not on the walls of respected art galleries.

The American continent and some of the more enlightened European countries appear to have missed out on these small-minded spats. In the case of America this is probably due to the fact that the United States and photography are near contemporaries and have largely grown up together, fostering a sympathy for the camera arts not earned so easily in the old world.

America's first trains were documented by photographers whereas England's earliest example of locomotion was famously captured in oils - admittedly by one of the few artists to emerge from the sceptred isle who dared to use his imagination. Nonetheless the quaint notion that a work of art must be old to be considered of value still persists today and for the time being most works of photographic art are still too youthful. Unfortunately this emphasis on the aged article is already establishing its precedence in the appreciation and valuing of photographic art, where the hunt for the 'vintage' print is on.

“All photographs are accurate. None is the truth.”

-Richard Avedon, 1923-2004

In 1984 I and some fellow students of photography paid a visit to Manchester University in the north-west of England to experience first-hand a new machine that was slowly making its way around Britain's lesser-known seats of learning. It was a Quantel PaintBox, reportedly costing a quarter of a million pounds (US \$500,000 at today's rate of exchange) and designed to digitally manipulate imagery. In truth I can remember very little about the machine, other than it was very large and was probably far less powerful in computing terms than the laptop that I am now using to type this sentence. We returned to our 10x8 cameras, studios and darkrooms blissfully unaware that we had just been introduced to the future of photography - a computing machine that would radically alter the way we made our future livings.

Almost a quarter of a century later I find it hard to believe that this first meeting with the digital domain created such a small impression as I am now irreversibly smitten by its everlasting possibilities. In truth, I was so immersed at that time in the joys of lighting, shooting and processing 10x8 transparencies to take much notice of the world outside the studio and darkroom but twelve years later I had bought my first workstation and there was no turning back.

“Why do photographers bother with the deception, especially since it so often requires the hardest work of all? The answer is, I think, that the deception is necessary if the goal of art is to be reached: only pictures that look as if they had been easily made can convincingly suggest that beauty is commonplace.”

-Robert Adams, Beauty in Photography, 1996

I wonder what those antagonists of the mid-nineteenth century would have made of the digital realm if they were still alive to see it. No doubt the introduction of yet another box into the workflow would only have served to increase their indignation. But these grey boxes have at last granted to photographers the freedoms which were once theirs to lay sole claim. Belief in the efficacy of these creative freedoms was the principal cause of their original distrust of photography.

From the viewpoint of those artists of yesteryear photography was second-rate because it did not allow much room for the imagination, for the individual stamp of the individual mind which had been the yardstick of art for centuries. A painter could begin painting his canvas with only his imagination to hand but the photographer could only create from that which already existed; that is to say, in artistic terms, the mundane.

The freedom of design now afforded by the computer has released photographers from the monotonous recording of the world as it is and offered them the opportunity to inherit those values so jealously guarded by the artists of yesteryear. Paradoxically, these technologies allows us to fashion imagery which those old painters would more readily recognize as art, facets of our imaginations in which the transparency and negative are as the pencil and charcoal studies of yesteryear; merely preparations for a more complex and contemplative finished piece.

“...a harmoniously conducted picture consists of a series of pictures superimposed on one another, each new layer conferring greater reality on the dream.”

-Charles Baudelaire, 1821-1867

David Hockney in his controversial book *Secret Knowledge* has suggested that prior to the Renaissance artists had learned how to use lenses and mirrors to trace the various elements that went into their compositions with some rather unusual effects (most of which go largely unnoticed until they are pointed out, at which point they become glaring beacons of the obvious).

According to Hockney's theory it is no exaggeration to state that many of the masterpieces of art history owe at least some debt to the lens and that the photographic process is not so distant a relative of the supposed finer arts as we might have previously believed. Would not Rafael and Titian have gladly made use of an image that held fast to their canvases in preference to one whose transient qualities was a caprice of wanton light?

It has always struck me as a sad reflection on our skills that the artists of the pre-photographic era had a greater understanding of the possibilities of light than we who can now capture it firm and forever on film and microchip. Who would claim that there has been a photographic artist who could compete in this respect with Rembrandt or Rubens? Adams and Horst would be my nominations for a contest I feel sure that we would lose. In our defence we can consider the thousands of years that passed between the time the first lines were made on cave walls to the glories of The Renaissance, and remembering that photography is not yet two hundred years old, forgive ourselves our immaturities.

If we wish to shrug off our 'poor relative' tag once and for all we photographers of the early twenty-first century must grasp the opportunities that technology has granted us. Art has forever been the master and craft its faithful servant and the union of the photographic discipline with the freedom of expression previously known only to painters has, I believe, the potential for genius.