



Just Do It

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Just do it. Then do it again. And again and again.

Throughout my life in photography, for one reason or another, I have spent, and still spend, considerable time viewing the work of other photographers. As a creative director in advertising, one of my duties was to review photography portfolios from shooters seeking assignments. As a commercial photo studio operator, I was also subjected to a steady bombardment of photography portfolios from students (and others) seeking the coveted position of studio assistant. As photographic consultant to the author/writer Sally Eau Claire during the writing of the landmark photo book The New Color Photography (Abbeville Press, 1981, 289 pgs., 166 color illus.), I was privileged to view the portfolios of many of today's modern masters - Meyerowitz, Pfhal, Shore, Eggleston, Sternfeld, Jenschel and others to numerous to mention. And, of course, there's the not insignificant time spent in the forums of NPN.

When viewing this diversity of photography, one thing becomes immediately apparent. Everyone's vying for attention, trying to stand apart from the photographic hordes. Right from the gitgo, some shooters draw immediate attention to themselves with impressive presentations in expensive and/or unique handcrafted presentation cases, everything from hand-tooled metal and leather to handcrafted wood. Professional commercial shooters, in particular, spare no expense. Investments in portfolios can reach thousands of dollars.

The portfolios of Fine Art photographers, on the other hand, are generally pathetic, tattered brown envelopes in battered cardboard cases containing a wide array of poor quality copy slides and dog-eared prints. The first impression that the presentation creates is that of a starving artists in a garret. I often feel like I want to buy a print or make a donation so they could have cash for a hot meal, but, I know that they, like all addicts, would probably run straight to a dealer and spend the money on film or some other photographic drug. What a dilemma.

And, what a contrast - commercial portfolios that I only want to handle with kid gloves versus fine art portfolios that seem to require the use of rubber gloves. The difference is interesting to say the least, but, once I get past the dash and flash and down to the nitty gritty, a remarkable similarity between the camps emerges. Those that stand out based on photography alone (the only thing that matters) have one obvious and pervasive quality - focused vision.

Focused vision - the relentless pursuit of a single subject from a single point of view over an extended period of time that demonstrates undeniable authorship.

If someone were to take the photographs from the strongest portfolios, print them all the same size on the same paper, and then mix them randomly together in a bin, I could easily separate them into groups by author with no trouble at all. It wouldn't take a degree in anything to see the vision at work - every strong portfolio presents its photography in a coherent, related series of photographs which creates a cogent narrative. In each individual portfolio, each photograph is dependent upon and related to the whole body of work. The focused totality of the body of work gives each photograph a synergy that it might not otherwise possess, and stamps the photography with an unmistakable authorship. And, yes, signature photographs emerge from such portfolios with predictable regularity.

In the commercial photography world, reassembling a portfolio from a bin is not much of a stretch since most successful pros are specialists - food, fashion, reportage, still life, glamour, etc. The closer they get to the top of the heap, the more refined the specialties become - food on location, food in the studio, beverages only (as a subset of food), or annual report/corporate reportage, war reportage, sports reportage, etc.

In the fine art photography world, all successful artists invariably practice a "specialization" similar to their commercial brethren. Obvious examples include Ansel Adams' B&W photography of the American West, Joyce Tenneson's flowers, Irving Penn's still lifes, and Richard Avedon's portraits. Some argue that if you've seen one photograph by Adams, Tenneson, et al, you've seen them all. Their vision and subject is unwavering and unmistakable.

To put it all in a convenient nut shell, they repeat themselves over and over and over again. And yet, the photography rarely seems repetitive. To the contrary, the very repetition itself creates and strengthens the vision and voice. The obsessive devotion to subject

pursued with a singular vision also produces the “greatest hits” photographs that we all know so well by these photographers. Without the body of work produced by relentless repetition, these “masterpieces” would not exist.

Nothing that I have read by or about Ansel Adams indicates that he was able to plan or even to predict which of his photographs would emerge as a “greatest hit.” One of his “greatest hits,” Moonrise, was photographed in what could only be called a spontaneous, catch-as-catch-can, helter-skelter fashion. Adams employed no technique or device in creating Moonrise that he had not used (a thousand times?) before. In all probability, the fact that he was going through the motions that he had gone through a zillion times before was what enabled him to capture the image in the brief time that was available to him. He was, in a phrase, repeating himself, and in doing so, unknowingly creating a “greatest hit.”

So, let me repeat myself. All great photographers do the same. Avedon, Penn, Bresson, Adams, Witkin, Meyerowitz, et al - they find (or create) a niche and then they hammer at it over and over again. They create a focused body of related work of a particular subject over an extended period of time, and, from that vision-defining body of work, emerges the “greatest hits” for which they are well known.

How does this apply to us here on NPN? Well, in my opinion, there is not nearly enough “focused repetition” displayed on NPN.

The first thing that I do when I see an interesting thumbnail in a forum is to click on the poster’s name to see more of their photography. I’ll even take the time to visit their website, if they have one. What usually greets me is a mishmash of photographic subjects and techniques by a single photographer. Even on the PhotoPortfolios.net site, a focused body of photographs is the exception, not the rule. Even though the photography generally displays a high level of craft, if I were to go back to the earlier exercise of same-size-image-on-the-same-size-paper-in-a-bin, with few exceptions I would be challenged to identify the work of individual photographers or reassemble their photographs into groups.

Is this the result you’re looking for with your photography?

If you’re a pro or a pro wanna be, do you think that blending in with the scenery, so to speak, is the way to attract the attention of art directors, creative directors, photo editors or stock agencies? If you have gallery/fine art aspirations, do you think that a gallery director will be impressed by photography that has no distinguishing characteristics or theme? And you “hobbyists” out there, is there a lot of personal satisfaction in creating photographs that look like everyone else’s?

Now, if you answered yes to any of the above questions, you might want to consider getting off the train at this station, because, beyond this point is where photography gets really difficult. You may have thought that choosing equipment, film, or mastering technique/craft was challenging, but that’s mere child’s play when compared to the real key to creating meaningful photography - selecting a specific subject and making an unwavering commitment to it.

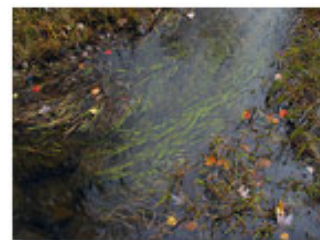
As Brooks Jensen wrote in [Things I’ve Learned About Photography](#), “the hardest thing to do in photography, as in life, is to make a commitment.” Interestingly, and perhaps not coincidentally, he wrote that just before he wrote “the production of a ‘greatest hit’ is always the result of immersing oneself thoroughly in a project.”

On the other hand, it’s really simple. If you want to distinguish yourself from the crowd, start now. Pick a specific subject that is near and dear to your heart, and one to which you have regular access. If you live on the east coast, unless you are unemployed and independently wealthy, don’t pick a subject on the west coast. If you live in NYC, the mating habits of urban rats is probably a better choice than the mating habits of Bengal tigers. If you live in Alaska, tropical rain forests are probably out of the question. If... well, you probably get it by now.



Be as specific as you can in your choice of subject matter. Landscape photography, as an example, is a very broad category. Alpine meadows is not. Peaks in the Wasatch Range photographed at sunrise is not. Avian is broad. A season in the life of a loon is not. A year in the life of an avian sanctuary is not. And so on.

Whatever your choice of subject, once you make it, make a commitment to it. Focus your full photographic attention on it. Simplify your photographic modus operandi to meet the needs of your chosen subject. How you “relate” to the subject itself will inevitably demand or suggest specific equipment or techniques, but by all means, keep it simple. Let as little as possible interfere with the development of a direct unencumbered relationship with your chosen subject.



Never underestimate the possibilities that arise by using an unconventional technique or equipment relative to what your chosen subject usually suggests. In one of the published books of my photography, *Allegheny General ~ Portrait of an Urban Hospital*, I used, as my sole camera, a rotating lens panoramic camera - photographing open heart surgery in operating rooms, a death in the emergency room, birth in the maternity ward ala Leica M style, B&W film, handheld, available light reportage. I had never used the camera in that fashion before. The result was a very unique perspective on a day in the life of an urban hospital. I took a risk and it paid off.



Some of you might be of the opinion that specializing turns you into a “one trick pony,” or, as has been expressed on NPN in another article, that “..the other problem with...immersion in one area...is that it leaves you with a narrow vision of the possibilities of the whole of photography as an art form and craft.” I respectfully disagree.



As a Fine Art photographer, if you want to be aware of the possibilities of the whole of Fine Art photography, visit museums and galleries as often as possible. Seek out the photography of masters anywhere you can find it. But, if you want your photography to actually hang in a gallery or museum, focus. As a pro, if you want to be aware of the whole of commercial photography, look at as many publications, general interest and corporate, as you can get your hands on. Pour over the commercial annuals - Black Book, Showcase, etc. But, again, if you want your photography to appear in publications, specialize.



You may be reluctant to categorize yourself, but, have no doubt about it, like it or not, those who hold the keys to the gates of galleries and museums and the buyers of commercial photography will put your photography into a pigeon hole. Gatekeepers are busy people with very specific needs. They have neither the time nor the inclination to wade through the morass (no matter how technically proficient) of a generalist to find what they seek. If an art director/photo editor wants eagles, he goes to the eagle specialist first, not the avian generalist. If he wants waterfalls, he goes to the waterfalls specialist first, not the landscape generalist. As a creative director, if a photographer doesn't demonstrate a specialization or coherent vision to me within the first 5 photographs of a portfolio review, the first word out of my mouth is “next.”



With very few exceptions, gatekeepers are not interested in the “renaissance man” - the jack of all trades, master of none. They want the “master” of one.



So, why not go out on a limb and do something different? What do you have to lose except your anonymity? Start with a “mini” project. Give yourself a little time and do some experimentation to work out the details. Write a brief “artist's statement” to yourself about what you are doing. Focus. Focus. Focus. Then take a deep breath, and just do it - over and over again. Like swinging a bat, eventually, you'll make contact and the hits will follow.

And before you know it, I (and the rest of the world) might be able to pick you out of a photographic crowd.

Editor's Note - Thumbnails are links to full size images, presented in slide show format.

New NPN Forum! Beginning this month, the new Photo Series Forum will give you the opportunity to post a group of related photographs for critique as a series. Unlike the other specific-category forums on NPN, the Photo Series forum will be an “open” forum - birds will mingle with bovine and botany, and man will peacefully coexist with nature. The only criteria for posting is that the images be related and that they support the premise of a simple artist's statement of intent.

For those striving to develop a personal vision, the Photo Series Forum will present a unique opportunity for photographic learning and growth that goes beyond the single image critique. You now have a venue on which to create and display a visual narrative, a place to “say” something with your photography.

Hope to see you there!

Comments on NPN creative photography articles? Send them to the [editor](#).



MARK HOBSON is a family guy lucky enough to be living in his favorite place on earth, the Adirondacks. A former agency creative director and commercial photographer, Mark has brought his love of the wilderness and photography together to form Nessmuk & Stoddard Trekking.

Mark's photography has been used by Fortune 500s such as Kodak, Xerox, Heinz, PPG, and Bausch & Lomb. As a creative director he has produced campaigns for clients such as; I LOVE NY, Lake Placid, The Adirondacks, Cooperstown and the Finger Lakes.

His Adirondack photography has been exhibited in galleries in the NE. He has won recognition as a repeat finalist in the Carnegie International Nature Photo Competition. Mark has also been a judge for the Kodak International Snapshot Competition as well as the Kodak Camera Club.

Mark offers comprehensive written portfolio reviews for amateur and professional photographers. Contact him at photoworkshop@charter.net for details.

Be sure to visit Mark's website at www.adirondacklight.net.

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