



Beauty, Cliche, and Other Empiric Tidbits

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Recently, Eric Fredine (NPN participant/ESS Moderator) posed the question on the NPN discussion forum, "Do successful photos require beautiful subjects?" In the spirit of NPN how-I-would-have-done-it critiques, I would have phrased the question more like this - "Do beautiful photos require beautiful subjects?" And, in keeping with the first N in NPN, I would have probably qualified the question by inserting the word "nature" into the question somewhere.

Eric's question in question was prompted in large part by a minor hubbub surrounding one of my photographs of decidedly mundane subject matter. When confronted with such a photograph, some thought that it represented poor editing and was a "joke." Others opined that perhaps the camera shutter had been tripped "accidentally" or wondered, if the photograph was created intentionally, was it even worth the effort? Eric and a few others thought otherwise and hence his (and my) question about beauty.

Over the years I have acquired a rather substantial number of books on photography. A surprising number of these contain few, if any, photographs. The books primarily traffic in photographic theory and history or "philosophy" (as it has been called here on NPN). Aesthetic theory is favored over technical theory, and, within this framework, much is written about "beauty" in photography.

One such worthy book is, in fact, titled Beauty in Photography (Robert Adams, Aperture, 1996). Adams is a well-respected/collected landscape photographer. His photography of western landscapes always includes evidence of the heavy hand of man and many would not call it "beautiful." Many would. Nevertheless, his statement about beauty is very compelling and highlights the ambiguity associated with the word itself - "The word beauty is unavoidable...it accounts for my decision to photograph...There appeared a quality, beauty seemed the only appropriate word for it, in certain photographs that opened my eyes, and I am compelled to live with the vocabulary of this new sight...though over many years I still find it embarrassing to use the word beauty, I fear I will be attacked for it, but I still believe in it."



I believe that Adam's "embarrassment" and fear of "attack" for his use of the word beauty is due in part to the fact many feel that "beauty" is in the eye of the beholder, and, under this sophist guise, a sofa-sized velvet Elvis is on par with a Rembrandt. But for those with even a modicum of art knowledge, this is obviously not the case. Nevertheless, an "informed" opinion does not negate the opposing opinion that, for many, and to their eye, the velvet Elvis is a thing of beauty. What a dilemma.

Now, at this point, if we wish to don our angel wings, all join hands and spin in a little circle on the head of pin, we can come right back to, well, the notion that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. But let's not go there. Instead, let's consider another idea about the use of the word "beauty" that might also be cause for embarrassment to Mr. Adams and a host of others (including me) as well.

Beauty and its derivative, beautiful, are frequently used to describe photographs which are most facile - visually pleasing photographs of the previously-seen that have been, by mere repetition, committed to the memory banks of the exalted. If the ubiquitous, "this-is-beautiful" commentary used to describe these predictable photographs is any indication of the populist meaning of the word beauty/beautiful, then many might again be "embarrassed" and "fearful" by association with it. Clanking mugs aside, for them (and me) beauty in photography is not defined by the obvious or the predictable - pretty photographs of inherently beautiful subjects. In fact, the near-endless procession of "perfect" technically executed photographs of intrinsically beautiful subjects creates a kind of trivializing overkill that reduces this kind of beauty to little more than predictable cliché. Do we really need, as Robert Adams asks, "...the ten thousandth camera-club imitation of a picture by Ansel Adams," even if it is executed in glorious Velvia

technicolor?

Many of these predictable photographs are, indeed, pleasing to the eye, but they represent beauty only if the definition of beauty is as shallow as the surface of the paper on which they are printed. These photographs are certainly successful in the world of decorative art as described in Einstein's Space & Van Gogh's Sky (Leshan & Marggenau, Collier Books, 1982) - "decorative art ...whose function is to make the world a more pleasant place to live in...whose intent is simply to distract the individual..to render the observer unconscious...while he is still technically awake...to reduce awareness by rhythm, line, color, or words." Or, simply put, art that is simple and pleasing. In our high-stress pressure-packed world, decorative art that "relaxes" and "soothes" the observer is, unquestionably, a valued and desirable commodity for many.

At its best, decorative art can be visually arresting, but the predictable/obvious beauty that it describes is not the beauty that many strive to represent with their photography. Their pursuit "...is not some timid diversion or self indulgent entertainment, but goes to the heart of who we are as civilized...human being." (Andy Grundberg, The New York Times). These photographers inquire into "...not the nature of the physical world, but the nature of our reactions to it." (E. H. Gombrich). They attempt to create nothing less than new ways to organize and perceive reality. As Emmit Gowen stated about the medium and his place in it, "Photography is a tool for dealing with things everybody knows about but isn't attending to. My photographs are intended to represent something you don't see."

If that's a little too much "fluff," consider this - in the book on being a photographer (LensWork Publishing, 2003 revised), David Hurn /Magnum states, "For me, most great photographs displaying beauty reveal a sensation of strangeness, not predictability, a kind of shock non-recognition inside the familiar. They are the opposite of cliches: they have a quality beyond the obvious. But even if it is difficult to define, beauty still lurks behind the scenes." Robert Adams expressed a similar view, "For a picture to be beautiful it does not have to be shocking, but it must in some significant respect be unlike what has preceded it...(and)...by whether it reveals to us important form [the coherence and structure underlying life] that we ourselves have experienced but to which we have not paid adequate attention. Successful [photography] rediscovers beauty for us."

For many, true beauty is most often found in photographs that give us a fresh look at the familiar that enable or cause us to "see" their subject and our relationship to it in ways not "seen" before. In that process, these photographs create an intellectual and emotional involvement with thoughts and feelings with which we are not familiar. In short, not-seen-before photographs that involve a triad of the observers faculties - vision, intellect and emotion. True beauty, not always pretty, is more than skin deep.

To reveal nature's "inner" beauty, a photograph can not mask that beauty behind a facade of obvious visual tricks. A photograph must instead be "honest" and "humble." It must possess a quality of being uncontrived (no matter how complex its making) that Robert Adams calls "grace." The photographer's vision must be present but self-effacing. The primacy of the subject, not the ego of the photographer or photographic technique, must reign. Truth must elevated over transformation, restraint over drama.

Many photographers consider visual and/or sentimental excesses prime "creative" technique. Sally Eauclore, to whom I was a consultant on her seminal work The New Color Photography (Abbeville Press, 1981), stated it most clearly - "Their lust for effect is everywhere apparent. Technical wizardry applies rather than recreates on-site observations...they burden it with ever coarser effects. Rather than humbly seek out the 'spirit of fact,' they assume the role of God's art director making His immanence unequivocal and protrusive." Photographs that exhibit this "aesthetic" have been roundly lauded in popular photographic publications and applauded with many a clinking mug on photo forums, but, in fact, it is these photographs that are responsible for the connotation of beauty - "the merely pretty" - that Robert Adams, myself and many others shun. "Pretty," unlike beauty, is most often brazen and loud. It rarely whispers or hints at secrets yet to be learned. There is no mystery, all is fully revealed and nothing is left to the imagination. It has all been seen before. Other than "technical wizardry," there are no surprises.

Why do we shun this definition of beauty? It is not because we consider ourselves or our photography to be "elite" or "superior." Nor is it because we consider decorative art that is visually pleasing, mentally relaxing, and emotionally soothing to be without value. And it's certainly not because we harbor an irrational desire to see Velvia and ND grad filters eradicated from the face of the earth.

Rather, it is because we know what we already know, but, we want to know more. Endless photographic repetition of what we already know serves only in becoming wallpaper and cliché. With it, we neither experience nor learn anything new. What we do value and try to create in our photography and seek out and appreciate in the photography of others, is a sense of "newness" in the act of seeing - discovery, surprise, learning, revelation and growth about something of "depth" with which we are familiar but haven't paid enough attention to - the Beauty that resides in Nature, and in all of us, that lies beneath the surface and beyond the obvious.

It's as simple, yet, as complex, as that.

Editor's note - Mark Hobson offers photo workshops - on location in the Adirondack Mts of New York or online - that for more info

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