

Bald Eagle Photos and the Artful Portrait

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Over the last 10 years, nature photography has flourished, attaining a popularity it hasn't previously experienced. The rapid technological advancements of lightning fast autofocus modules, improvements in reliable TTL metering, digital capture and increases in disposable income have led to more and more people practicing the art and craft of nature photography. A proliferation of workshops and "how to" books dedicated to dispersing nature photography secrets (both technical and geographic), along with countless internet forums dedicated to nature photography are in part responsible for the this boom.

What we're seeing from this, particularly in wildlife photography, is a profusion of wonderful images, classically composed, perfectly exposed (whatever that means) and flawlessly executed. Wildlife photographers have become adept at composing classic, clean images of their favorite subjects, combining elements of graphic design with lush complimentary yet unobtrusive backgrounds. Terms such as lines, balance, perspective, eye contact, head turns, etc, are household phrases in the nature photography community. What we're not hearing, or hearing very little of, is *'idea'*, *'emotion'*, *'evocative'*, *'personal'*, *'expressive'*, etc. These are the key to artful portraits. If we believe art to be a form of expression, then prospective artists must have something to express; you, the photographer, are in complete control of your work. You just have to practice at it.

Start with "idea." Idea is the spark that ignites creation. Idea is beautiful. It's perfect, absolutely complete. Idea is conception. And just like conception, it is the spark of something beautiful, something unique, and something beyond ourselves. So cultivate idea. Give time to letting ideas come to you, to allowing the space in which ideas can develop. Practice whatever is the catalyst for idea to spark within you. For some people it may be meditation, for some it's a walk in the woods. For some people it may be to study the art of favorite artists. For some, the catalyst is simply to photograph, to engage the process of making art, and the ideas will come through that. For some it may be all or none of these. Find what rubs you, what stimulates idea within you, what warms and excites you in such a way that idea begins to come forth. Find it, and practice it often.

Emotion is a tough one to find, because it can be so personal, because it can be too personal, too fickle, too unreliable. Emotion is so difficult to define, yet so easy to identify. It's subjective and doesn't translate well for the mass market or audience. Mostly though, it's frightening. Because it can, like entering the lion's den, make you vulnerable. But emotion is also the most rewarding, because it seeps deeper into yourself, through the permeable skin, through the constant chatter of the mind, and into your body. Emotion in art *feels* as if it reaches our very soul. But that's what great art does. It stays with us long after we experience it, because it sinks deeper into our being. Similarly, the fact that it's not a guaranteed outcome holds a juicy allure all its own. As Ed Abbey wrote, "things hoped for have a higher value than those things assured."

Aldo Leopold said "Our ability to perceive quality in nature begins, as in art, with the pretty. It expands through successive stages of the beautiful to values as yet uncaptured by language." Expanding on this idea, it becomes clear that presenting merely the pretty is art at a relatively base form. At a deeper level, art is able to both express and evoke qualities and reactions that are more fundamental, more critical, than merely pretty. I think this is one of the reasons why abstract art is often so revered and often so reviled. It tugs at skins other than our outer layers. For some audiences, this is something to shy away from. For others, it is greatly valued. The classic compositions and presentation of wildlife portraits, while pretty, often hold very little other value. Images that express ideas not quite so accessible will inherently have a smaller audience, but often a more admiring audience.

Expression can arise from many different experiences, and have many different interpretations. What are you expressing with this



photograph? What might you like to express? What would the subject like for you to express? Are you trying to take a photograph of a bear, or are you trying to impart some sense of who you are? I think it is requisite that the artful photographer explore the expression of his or her experiences; everyone's experiences are unique to themselves. Further, our expression of those experiences will come only out of who we are, how we feel, think and relate to those experiences. For a more personal reaction, dig a little deeper, go beyond "this eagle is nice" to find adjectives that deal with the sensory rather than the cognitive. Dig deeper still, and try to find the sensory itself, rather than the words we use in our attempt to define it. Fear is more powerful than thought, so express fear. Humor is a universal experience, so endeavor to express that. Mystery is always a gripping expression, so practice voicing the mysterious. Spend time trying to learn what mystery is, what mystery makes you feel, what that feeling is like. You needn't even put it into words, just come to know it. If you're familiar with a feeling, your expression of it will be more honest, more intimate, and more complete. Mostly it'll be more you.

Finally, explore different expressions. Though it often feels otherwise, art is probably the safest place in which we can be ourselves, we can learn about ourselves, we can try new experiences, we can open other doors and taste new, fresh and possibly exciting delicacies. But more about that in another article.

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Carl Donohue is a passionate wilderness advocate, and this love of the wild has taken him from the outback of Australia to the mountains of Alaska. His photography reflects this passion, and his love of nature is expressed with his camera. Carl's writings and images have been published both online and in print. His photographic endeavours have won competitions locally with the *Southeastern Photographic Society*, and nationally in *Hooked On The Outdoors* magazine. He currently lives half the year in Atlanta, GA, and is frequently found in the southern Appalachians, playing guitar, hiking, mountain biking, kayaking and photographing the area. The rest of the year finds Carl guiding exciting backpacking trips into some of the most remote and pristine wilderness areas in North America. Visit www.alaskanalpinetreks.com for more information on guided backpacking and hiking trips in Alaska. For a comprehensive collection of his stock nature, travel and adventure photography, visit www.skolaiimages.com.

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