

Art and Soul

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Art might be described as our attempted expression of wonder at the marvels of the universe. Peter Lingbergh defined art as *"a desire to explore the way in which we are integrated in the world of our experiences"*. I'd change that to say "(...) the ways in which (...)", because that integration is not singular. We can be open, at any given point in time, to a multitude of processes. The more open we are, the more likely we'll have richer and more varied experiences. Art most definitely is an exploration of those experiences.

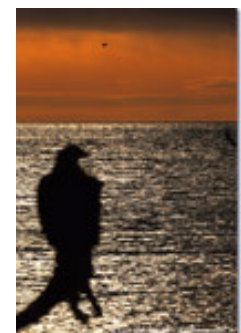
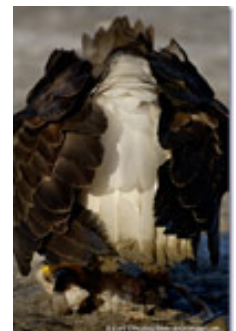
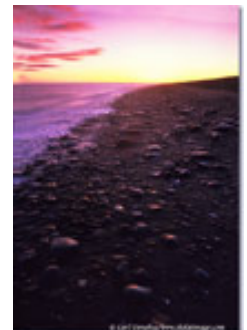
If this is what art is, how do we best serve that process? By learning more about the rules of composition, technique, harmony, color, light, etc.? Arguments rage back and forth about "the rules" in photography, in music, indeed in all artful mediums. Some scholars demand we "learn the rules" while others propose, instead, that our explorations are best served when we "break the rules". And yet, both sides miss the point. Art is not about rules, and it's not about breaking them either. It's about creation, it's about creation and exploration. Nobody has to break anything, and nobody has to abide by anything. Art, even artistry, like all creation, doesn't hinge on one's knowledge or application of rules. A person who neither knows nor abides by the laws of his or her community is no more or less human; simply being human is enough. Similarly, all one must do to produce art is to create - the well-known Nike slogan *"Just Do It"* encompasses this point succinctly. It's not whether you win or lose, or even HOW you play the game. It's THAT you play the game. Engaging in the making of art is enough.

"Lose yourself", cried rapper Eminem in *8 Mile*. Immerse yourself. Sink yourself into the process of making art. Photograph as often and as intentionally as you can. It's there. This is where creation lies. This is the root of all art. This is where your voice lies, and it matters not whether the resulting works fall within or outside of any conventions. It matters simply that you create.

To paraphrase Shakespeare, *"Out, damned rules! Out, I say!"*. Art (and hence artists) need not follow any rules or guidelines to be great, or even to be important, but nor must art break them. Rules are conventions - guidelines at best - that may be of some use, some times, for some people. You get my drift.

I was discussing art recently with a talented piano player friend, and he explained it to me like this: *"Carl, rules are a lot like Stop Signs and Traffic Signals. What's important is not that you obey them, or even that you stop, but that you know how to navigate the intersection safely."* Wise words. Certainly, an understanding of how to abide by the rules of the great red Stop Sign can help some people cross some roads (though the high number of traffic accidents we see on the daily news may point to a lower-than-expected success rate.) We can also, of course, simply pay close attention, consciously and intently engage the world around us, listen to its signals, and safely cross the intersection. I believe many of us have forgotten how to do this, largely because of our culture's poor training mechanisms and systems. We live in a culture that says we must follow the rules or we must pay fines. We're probably the only creatures ever to exist that stop and go according to the color of a lightbulb. Art, on the other hand, allows us to safely step outside of this enculturation, to wander when and where we will, and then to be witness to what is produced (art has the added benefit of not placing our life and limb at risk when we engage it). Yet, most photographers unfortunately seem to feel incredibly intense pressures not to explore, not to take chances, and not to try new approaches, but rather to stop because they know red means stop. Too often artists (and their audiences) focus intently on some collection of rules and let that be their compass.

One of the reasons I believe so many artists continue to follow the rules so closely is because too often we reward those who observe them most closely. The training starts early - in school, when a child receives a particular grade because his or her poem or painting was deemed to best



adhere to the rules laid out by a teacher. As the years go by, financial rewards, peer accolades or audience applause reinforce such methodologies. While this may serve our egos well - and often our bank accounts - it does little to serve our art. Consider whether you're moving in the direction of exploration of artistic expression, or whether you're pumping up the economy and recouping some of those rising gasoline prices with conventional images. While it's certainly possible to do both, for most of us, mere creatures of habit, it's very difficult.

Art simply has to be. Art is both a reflection and a product of our being. Art is creation, just as we are. Art allows us - artists and audience alike - a space in which we can clearly realize our connection with Creation. Art is the play of form, as is life itself. This is why it's so important. It's so critically important that I'll repeat it: art simply has to be. That's the fundamental place from which all great art has existed.

I spent a wonderful evening just recently browsing the galleries of Guy Tal's website (<http://scenicwild.com/sw/gallery/>). The richness of his work struck me first - the collections are simply stunning. But, even here among such an incredible array of nature photography, the essence of art and its process remains. Each of Guy's photos is the result of making art, of the process of creating, of creation. Not a single image comes into existence through any other process. Not all great art is or was the result of following (or breaking) some pre-assigned set of rules but it is always, can only ever be, the result of art-making, of creating. While this may seem elementary rather than revelatory, it's useful to examine. The premise exposes the value of creation over creativity (creativity as defined by originality or the imaginative and clever). Creativity is the ice cream, creation the act of eating, even of hunger itself. Creation and creativity are intrinsically linked, but creativity can only come out of creating. Creation does not, of itself, come out of what we define as creativity.

The obvious lesson from this is that if creativity comes through creation, our art is best served when we focus our efforts on creation, which is the root. Artists make art. What this means - what is vital, and what alone is vital - is that we must produce. Photographers must photograph, musicians must play music, painters must paint, and writers must write. If we, photographers, are photographing - are making photographs - then we're serving our art. If we're shooting then we're working on our art. If we do this work with intention, with conviction, with passion, and - most importantly - with awareness, then we're already there. Through this process, and only through this process, can we find our voice, our niche, our style, our creative edge, our imagination, etc.

So how do we focus on creating? Acknowledge the enjoyment we find in the process, as opposed to the product. Learn that the reward of making art is the *making*. As a photographer, I photograph because I enjoy the process of making photographs. The actual photographs themselves are not critical, so I don't spend too much energy on those results. I pay attention to the joy I find in the act of making photographs, be it hiking a trail to a destination, patiently waiting for a wildlife subject, composing a scene, measuring exposure, or even processing the image on my computer. To me, being a photographer means that I let my photography take me deeper into the process of making photos. It's an exciting process that is infinitely rewarding - more so than any photograph itself could ever be.

Lastly, I'll add this: what really matters? The sales you made, the accolades you received, or the fact that you created the art? To use a somewhat irascible metaphor, I'm quite sure another Creator is most concerned with the play, the process, with creation itself, and not the distinctions or honors those creations accrue. What greater lesson could there be for any artist to heed?

CD-NPN 0369

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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 endeavors 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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