

The Art of Disconnection

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Let's hear it for Epson! Now that photographers are able to produce their own archival prints with ease and economy, this company and others like it has allowed many to make the transition from mere "photographer" to "fine artist." For surely someone who offers "fine art prints" of their work for sale is, by implication, an artist. In the field of wildlife and landscape photography, this is an interesting title in view of a long-standing prejudice of the British art establishment which considers even serious landscape and wildlife painting too inherently romantic in its approach, frivolous in its content and, heaven forbid, sentimental in its intellectual stance, to merit the accolade of "art." It is fair to assume that these prejudices extend into the "craft" of nature photography, whatever the intent of its practitioner.

About a decade ago, I sat on a panel at a BBC Wildlife Magazine nature photography symposium trying to debate these very questions with Jeffrey Boswell, Tom Mangelsen and a representative of a London photographic gallery. Since galleries today play at least as significant a role as the academies in defining "art," it is fair to consider him as part of the "establishment." He was adamant that the sort of work show-cased in the (more recently BG) Wildlife Photographer of the Year Competition was in no form art and never could be. It has taken me 10 years to understand why this is a fundamentally flawed idea and how someone could come to believe it. Along the way, I've also grown to understand what separates the picture with sentiment, from one which is just sentimental.

Perhaps it is for nature photographers who want to do something other than make feel-good photos to take a lead in defining and explaining their agendas. But we have to be candid in distinguishing between illustrative and "art" photography : just because a photo has that elusive transcendent look of otherness - because it "looks like a painting" - makes it automatically art no more than painting a cucumber yellow makes it a banana. I take the view that it is the intent of the photographer, his or her consideration of the content and context rather than merely the aesthetic components of the picture, that determines if the picture has artistic merit. Two pictures may, in pictorial terms, look similar, but the one that was made only in response to light, line, form, texture and colour, when the contents perform as subject matter for the photographer's creative satisfaction rather than having an independent status as a subject connected to the world about it, is sentimental. I think too that it is disingenuous for photographers to ascribe content, to claim a particular intent, after a picture's conception. While painters make discoveries and gain insights about a subject during the time a work is being executed, photographers can do this only by engaging with the subject before releasing the shutter. It seems that the possibility that we may do this doesn't occur to nature photography's detractors.

We can, of course, be our own worst enemies. Is it any surprise that many collectors fail to take seriously photographic prints when many "fine art" prints are sold for give-away prices? Clearly, their creators lack confidence in their images. The lack of credibility as purveyors of fine art is compounded by questionable claims of "Limited Edition" print runs. If I was ever to buy such a thing, I would like to be assured that the means to produce any more after the stated run was complete no longer existed. All identical slides, negatives and scans would have to be destroyed to ensure the run was truly limited. Any other way denies the buyer the exclusivity that such a promise implies. Perhaps we have to decide if an image is for selling as art prints or for publication if serious collectors are ever to be attracted.

I should say at this point that the majority of my own work remains sentimental. Its effect, if not its intent, is to invoke a warm feeling (or none at all) rather than to provoke consideration of events beyond the frame. These are Metaphor-Lite sight bites. While it is easy to say what art isn't - I'm founding my argument on the belief that sentimentality is the antithesis of art - saying what it is is much harder. These are days when charlatans shamelessly parade intellectual banality and kindergarten technique as "work" (ironically or otherwise) to the gullible. Tat has become a tradable art-commodity. Art history is bunk. The word, in short, has become so devalued in the public mind, its meaning so diffused, that it slips easily through the net of definition. So, in pursuit of my original line, let's say that a work of art allows the viewer to take their



sentient response to it into a larger context. A successful image doesn't stop where the frame starts; it inspires other thoughts, lines of enquiry and different ways of thinking. That larger context may be provided by the creator's accompanying words, and the scope of its success is enhanced by the understanding of the content by the viewer. In short, the image engages the viewer at an intellectual as well as a limbic level: the picture's content is more than the sum of its aesthetic parts.

But what is content without a viewer's ability to recognise and interpret it? It seems to me that "art" as it is generally discussed in Europe, is exclusively anthropocentric: if the work fails to comment on the human condition, it is inadmissible and dismissed as sentimental. But what if the content acknowledges the primacy of natural process and comments on relationships within the natural world and between it and us? Is this really any less valid? Might it be that ignorance of the natural world, or unwillingness to acknowledge our place in it, on the part of a metropolitan based art establishment deeply nervous of empathy is the real reason that such work is not labeled "art"? Blinkered as it is, does "the establishment's" opinion really count?

It would be easy to conclude from what goes before that I am aggrieved at the lack of recognition for serious landscape and nature photographers and the way their work is dismissed by mainstream galleries. In fact, I care far less about that than how such a state of affairs reflects more generally on the diminished status of natural history in education, that it has become acceptable for educated people to have little or no knowledge of the non-human world around them. This has not always been so and Britain in particular has a fine tradition of producing natural historians whose interdisciplinary appreciation of the natural world, usually gained at first hand, cannot be matched by lab based scientists specialising in one or two species. And it is not just the art establishment that is metropolitan based. As a nation, we (the British) are too and the "countryside" is for most a place of recreation rather than a place of living and study. Most depressing of all is the denial to so many children of mud-on-the-boots natural history tuition, of the opportunity to learn about the nature in the field as part of a formal curriculum. There is no doubt that children know much more today about "the environment" than when I went to school, but as indoor entertainment becomes the norm, it is questionable how much they know about their environment. Perhaps seeing it through our photographs and hearing about it from our mouths is better than nothing and that this is a new front that we need to open if we want concern and interest to be converted into pro-environment lifestyle choices.

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Niall Benvie, who runs [Images from the Edge](#), is the UK's most prolific writer on natural history photography, publishing almost 70 articles and a book (amounting to over 135,000 words) between 2000-2002 alone. But the scope of his writing extends much wider into issues of land management and the polarisation of nature and culture as well as travelogues and commentaries on subjects as diverse as species re-establishment programmes and eco-tourism.

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