

A Great Mouth for a Picture

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Almost as soon as I walked into the Perthshire gallery my eye was caught by a small oil painting displayed on an easel of its own. I bent down for a closer look, incredulous. For there, selling for a cool £2300, was a perfect copy of one of my published tawny owl photos, faithful in every detail to the original transparency. Later that day, with the help of the Internet, I tracked down another “original oil painting” by the same artist of the very same image, selling for a similar price through another gallery, this time in the north of England. Copyright infringement issues aside, this episode left me deeply bothered on two counts. How are we to judge the integrity of “artists” who believe that it is acceptable to copy the work of other image creators, then present it as their own? And more importantly, why did the representation of this scene in oils on canvass rather than on photographic paper qualify it to sell as “art”? Is it really the medium that matters, not the message? If the received wisdom that images become art by being hung in a gallery is true, what hope is there for nature photography to move into the art mainstream when few important galleries are willing to give wall space to a genre dismissed even by other branches of the medium as romantic and frivolous?

It seems to me that one of the major obstacles to a critical debate about nature photography practised with creative intent rather than simply for visual gratification is the absence of a literature on the subject. While other, longer established branches of photography have attracted critical examination of their origins, evolution, guiding ideas and practitioners - and gained acceptance along the way - wildlife photography is bereft of such an analysis. The period during which it has become a mass participation activity has, unfortunately, coincided with a time when contempt for ideas is rife and attempts to apply rigorous thinking and analysis are derided by those terrified of an intellectual label. The result is critical anarchy in which he who shouts loudest is given most credence. This is a great shame because the need for serious nature photography to move into the galleries to communicate its message to a wider audience is more pressing now than ever before. Any means we can use to advance its status - and gain new allies - should not be dismissed out of hand.

Central to any dialogue about art is the question of what constitutes good work. What are the components of the critical framework we need to allow us to distinguish the enduring from the ephemeral? In the article preceding this one, [The Art of Disconnection](#) I described how a metropolitan based art establishment was ill-equipped to judge the merits of work whose focus was not on aspects of the human condition but rather on relationships within the natural world and between it and us. Perhaps then, our work as nature photographers should be judged in part by how reactionary it is. Contemporary mainstream art - that found in galleries - is characterised by an absorption with self manifest in an obsessive pursuit of self-expression. Often, the subject acts merely as a vehicle for the artist to tell the viewer about him or herself. This has not always been so - as a vast catalogue of religious artwork testifies. Nature photography, in contrast, has always tended more towards preoccupation with the subject rather than self. True, each fine nature photograph bears with watermark of its creator but the identity and personality of the photographer remains opaque behind the narrative about the subject. The composer Harrison Birtwhistle, in discussing the function of the conductor, has argued that his or her role is to realise the music for the audience - to clarify the composer's intent - rather than apply their own interpretation to it. In the context of nature photography, that would mean the photographer acting as translator for the viewer, leading them towards an understanding of wildness, but leaving space for ambiguity. The photographer's role is to say “this is what happened”, rather than “this is what happens.” It is this very ambiguity and subjugation of the self that merits serious nature photography “reactionary.” If you accept this premise, this basic framework of understanding, what are the characteristics of the photographs that give it form? How can gentle, mild-mannered nature photographers become reactionaries?

We can start by working hard to produce images that are true to natural process and expression rather than aesthetic convention - or commercial imperative. Nature isn't always tidy and well lit: squirrels aren't always cutely nibbling nuts nor lions throttling wild-eye ungulates to death. But owing to the ubiquity of these clichés in print - and lack of critical comment on them - it is easy to fall into the



trap of believing that these are the only worthwhile representations to be made. The uniqueness of vision that every artist strives for must extend, for the nature photographer, into seeking and portraying unique experiences too. In doing this, he or she acknowledges the individuality of the subject and that it's not just "subject matter". Respect for the subject, I believe, is heightened by taking the trouble not only to learn its name but to following its life for some time - the surest way of gaining that vital fresh insight. This is a degree of respect, incidentally, lacking in some of the iconic portraits of the 20th century. Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother" is a case in point. In an interview 30 years after the picture was taken, Lange stated that the woman "seemed to know that my pictures might help her, and so she helped me." This is hard to square with her prior admission that she was interested in neither "her name nor her history". The subject of the photo, Flora Thompson, was eventually discovered living in a trailer park in California in 1978, having received during her lifetime not one cent from her image. Had images of natural pathos and drama entered the public consciousness as profoundly as Migrant Mother or Steve McCurry's Afghan girl, many more nature photographers may now have moved beyond a concentration of interest in technique and equipment. Lange's prints, technically, were often quite poor and they provide as good an example as any of the endurance of content over technique. Nevertheless, good technique is the clear voice in which the subject is introduced to the viewer and in an ironic way, the high technical standard of much contemporary nature photography is itself a reaction against the inarticulate mumbling of "work" created in other genre and media by artists with self-knowledge but only rudimentary skills with which to express it. In truth though, many nature photographers remain wedded to a relatively limited number of safe techniques and accepted modes of expression which too often fail to prompt a re-evaluation of the subject. Employing anti-aesthetic techniques that go against conventions of composition, lighting and colour are useful if they stimulate a fresh look at a subject but obstructive if they draw attention only to themselves. The photographic process itself, like the photographer him or herself, must take second place to the subject.

Perhaps the single most important attribute of a "fine nature photograph" is its ability to engage the viewer's intellect as well as their heart, to lead them into lines of enquiry about what is happening beyond the frame. This is the subject's story, not the photographer's. Many professionals complain that the plethora of quality stock is making commercial survival ever harder and indeed, buyers are spoiled for choice. But what people have needed since our earliest days is narrative. People crave good stories. Too often the stock pictures that have tended to define nature photography in the public - and galleries - end up superficial. They look fabulous for an instant but don't endure because they are generic and don't trigger enquiry or wonder in the thoughtful viewer. The photographer who has a story to tell and the technical skills to present it in such a way that it is new and fresh has nothing to fear from the market.

Photographers are often reluctant to talk about their work - sometimes wisely - but the time for accepting demurely the cold shoulder of the art establishment is past. Edenic, celebratory nature photography is beginning to look as anachronistic as the religious paintings of the Baroque in a world where species extinction and wild climatic fluctuation should disturb anyone who professes an interest in the natural world - and human welfare. We need to engage, to explain, to cajole because we need powerful allies who will help us take our stories to an influential audience. It's time to stand up and be counted as artists.

Note: this article comments on the relationship between photographers and the British art establishment and the author acknowledges that different attitudes to photography pertain in parts of the U.S.

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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.

Several thousand pictures from The Images from the Edge collection are accessible in its [searchable online database](#).