

ASSESSING YOUR OWN PHOTOS

by Bill Black

Looking at your own work is difficult at best. Maintaining your objectivity is frequently impossible. First, let's understand why.

You are on vacation at the Canadian Rockies. You are in pre-dawn darkness waiting for that first glimmer of light frequently called "sweet light." It's cold – VERY cold. The thought crosses your mind that it is much too early for a sane person to be out of bed and certainly not here with freezing hands and feet. Suddenly, as the action begins, you forget everything else. The first light strikes the mountains! Your heart pounds! You spring to action! Click, click, click. Everything is perfect! Oh, what beautiful light! Click, click, click. And what is that moving into your frame? It's a magnificent moose. And with a baby, no less. They are coming your way. They seem to ignore you and continue down to the river. You shoot more frames, and by the time the action is finished and they are out of range you have several rolls of exposed film in your pocket.

Once you are home, the film is developed and you are really upset. Nothing is like you remembered. You can't imagine why you shot so much and got so little. Or, you become overly excited and proudly think that the small speck on the horizon is the finest moose shot ever taken!

The truth is, in the above scenario, that you are still remembering the cold, the hardship, the challenge and the thrill of being there to get the shot. And it is these memories that detract from your objective evaluations.

To help you get past this visual obstacle, try some of these methods and exercises.

EXERCISE 1:

When you get your photos back, set aside those with obvious technical problems, such as poor exposure and incorrect focus. You will want to look at these images carefully while you still remember the technical specifics. You need to understand what you did wrong. Make a list of those errors and try not to do them again. If it helps, make those statements in a positive way and put them on a small card to carry with you as a reminder list when you go back out in the field.

EXERCISE 2:

Separate the remaining images into two stacks ... those that you think work and those that you think do not. Do not discard the ones that you think don't work. Let some time go by. Don't pass final judgment on the rest of them until you allow several months to go by. In six months you will not allow the smell of the early dew-covered trees, the hours of frozen toes or any other happening to influence

your judgment. I have found (six months later) many nice images in the "don't work" stack that now seem to work very well (and a bunch in the "did work" stack, that now don't work at all).

EXERCISE 3:

Find the focal point or primary subject in the image. If it doesn't seem to have one, should it? If it does, where is it placed? Has it assumed a dominant position? Should it? Why? Why not?

EXERCISE 4:

Select about 60 images and do this exercise about twice a year. Sort your 60 chosen images by design elements. Select some to project on paper and draw in the key lines, shapes, design elements. Make thumbnail sketches with notes on some of the others.

a) Look at lines. How many images have a basic design of a diagonal line? How many have the horizon exactly at the halfway mark? How many have lines pointing at the focal point? How many have lines as the focal point?

b) Look at basic shapes. How many have a focal point of triangles? Squares or rectangles? Circles? How many emphasize the comparison of two objects? What is their size relationship from one to another?

c) Once you have sorted your images, make a list showing each design component and the number of your images in this sample of 60 that fit into each category.

d) Make notes about your photographic style. Do you need to diversify? Would your photography be better if you emphasized different design elements?

EXERCISE 5:

Learning to see what you have done is not easy. To help you cut directly to the major components and to help you analyze each individual image, I suggest the following method.

a) Use either a projector (for slides) or tracing paper for prints (be sure to protect the prints by using a clear piece of glass between the print and the tracing paper). Project the slide on paper. Mark the edges and circle the focal point of the image. Draw the lines of the composition. Turn off the projector (or remove the print from under the tracing paper) and look at the final drawing. Does it work as a drawing? Is the design clear and uncluttered?

b) By forcing yourself into complete objectivity you will be able to see the problems more clearly. By twisting, flipping and turning the image in a variety of ways you take your personal feelings out of the image and make it possible to understand more about your composition. So begin by putting the slide in the projector upside down and project it again. Does it look different design-wise and does it still work? Why? Why not? Do this several times in a variety of ways. Then project the image, but this time turn your back and view it in a mirror? Still work? Where are the flaws? Can you now see the image more objectively.

EXERCISE 6:

The way your eye moves around the image is very important. To keep the viewer engaged, you need to force his/her eye to happily stay within your image. To see if your photo captures the viewer, go back to the first drawings you made. Select a different color pen and project the image on the drawing again. Decide how your eye moves around the image. Mark with arrows the path your eye naturally takes. Could you have made this easier? How?

EXERCISE 7:

What color pallet do you shoot more often? In this exercise, using those same 60 sort your images by predominant color. Which colors do you photograph well? Which do you not? Do you need to become more comfortable with other color pallets?

EXERCISE 8:

Summarize what you have learned from these exercises and make a review list to take in the field with you. Work on your problem areas. Repeat these exercises and compare the new work with this work.

FINAL GUIDELINES:

When photographing on vacation or out in the field or at a workshop or in your studio, your mind should be focused. Certainly you should know your equipment and your film, that is, its functions and capabilities. And when viewing a scene or object ask yourself two questions:

1. What caused me to be attracted to this particular image? and
2. What do I want to accomplish? In other words, What is my goal?

Finally, when viewing the scene or object in your view finder, remember the following maxims:

1. Keep the image simple, and
2. What does not contribute to the final image detracts from it.

Good shooting!