

Criticizing Photography in a Camera Club

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The Photographic Society of America does not establish criteria for choosing judges, nor does it impose rules or standards regarding the quality or aesthetics of the photographs selected by judges.

A camera club competition is a communal experience and is most successful when the group is engaged and the judgments are reasoned and respected. However, effective criticism can be as challenging and as rewarding as effective photography itself. The following points are offered for discussion among camera club members and the judges who evaluate their work.

It's a process.

The best judges know intuitively that something more is required than simply ruling on an image (“I like it.”) and adding a word or two on what the judge would have done differently (“Crop a little off the left.”). Time is taken to describe what is seen. Even the strongest judges may struggle a bit with interpretation, but rally with evaluation, careful that the positives outweigh the negatives. Still, the respectful but glazed eyes of the group and the predictable comments of judges suggest the process could be more compelling. Criticizing photography is not simply judging. It is a whole interactive process of *describing*, *interpreting* and then *evaluating* an image.

Describe what is seen

All are looking at the same image, but everyone sees it differently. Learning to be observant is a skill in itself. Remember, it's not just the *subject matter* (“a nude female, her face hidden”) but also the *form* (“at a downward angle, crouched in a subservient position at the bottom of an otherwise blank frame”) and the *style* (“the photographer looks down on an isolated, anonymous...”). A judge is ideally an astute and practiced observer.

Don't go it alone

Because description is *factual*, it is easy and helpful to involve others in describing what is seen. The group becomes actively involved, and the judge is not burdened with being the all-seeing eye. The trade-off is time, but perhaps taking a minute to ask even one person what he sees that the judge did not mention can add richness to the discussion. The photographer should listen to what is observed rather than share what he intended to communicate.

Take what you observe and interpret it

Ah, but this is where many say, “Art is subjective and my opinion is only one among many.” Not necessarily so. If time is taken to truly see an image and describe it, then it becomes apparent that any interpretation must be rooted in the description. As such, it will not be true or false but it must be *demonstrably plausible*. The judge takes what is seen and explains what it connotes. (“The spare forms and soft colors in this landscape convey tranquility and simplicity.”) The interpretation of an image should be *consistent*, *coherent* and *comprehensive*; defensible and not simply a matter of opinion. The interpretation needn't be lengthy. Referring to an image as a good “record shot” suggests in few words that there is not much there to interpret, as long as the description supports this interpretation. Here too, it is possible to involve the group in the discussion.

“Liking” an image is simply not relevant.

It is better to keep the words “*like*” and “*dislike*” out of the conversation entirely. Much better to say, “This photograph is successful because...” The *image* is the center of attention not the preferences of the judge who is there to enlighten the group about the image. It is nothing short of irresponsible to render a judgment without justifying it objectively. The audience will be at best bored and at worst demeaned.

Keep biases at bay

Judgments are different from *preferences*. The first step in rendering an unbiased critique is to understand what our biases are. Many people think to be successful art should be representational and beautiful. Some consider digitally altered images not to be real photography. Others consider them creatively superior. Some are put off by certain subjects or even certain colors. Others favor images that do not challenge them. Some think the higher a subject is on the evolutionary ladder, the stronger the Nature image. It can be liberating to judge the image on its own terms. It is a commentary on our biases that many museum quality images would not pass muster at camera clubs.

The judgment must be defensible

Evaluation of an image must be rooted in an interpretation of the image which in turn must be based on the description of the image. Arguably, the winning images, which a judge selects in secret, should not be a surprise to the group who has heard the critique. Since camera clubs have implied standards in the category definitions, it could be useful to reflect on what makes an image superior in a particular category. For example, is the best creative image the most unusual one, the most altered one, the strongest one?

Don't be afraid of silence

The photographer spent time, perhaps considerable time, creating the image. It is respectful to take a minute to look at the image before speaking about it. This also allows others to study the image independently and the judge to take a breath. Break the silence with "I see..." rather than "I like..." Competitive club members might try to appreciate the image and not rush to judgment by immediately assessing an image as better or worse than their own.

Be kind

Critiques do not have to be negative. As unsolicited advice is rarely treasured it is not optimal for the judge to pepper comments with what he thinks the photographer should have done ("sharper focus, tighter cropping, another

angle..."). If instead the judge describes what is seen, interprets what is described and then evaluates the image on its own terms, the maker will infer what might have been done differently to create a different or stronger impression. This makes the photographer an active rather than passive participant in the critique.

Be humble

A judge is not there to impress everyone with her intelligence ("I think your depth of field..."). Nor should the judge be on a power trip setting herself above the group ("I've seen a hundred images like this one..." or "I've been there many times..."). Besides being ungracious, this ego-involvement compromises the ability to do a good job. With "one eye on the mirror," she is only half attending to the images and the audience.

Humility

This last point seems essential. Just as it is personally risky for a photographer to offer a creation up for review, it is risky for a judge to drop the protective armor of superiority and focus on the image. For the photographer and the judge, learning to truly see can be a reward well worth the risk. 🌸

(The concepts in this article are drawn from a book called *Criticizing Photography* by Terry Barrett.)