

Judging Creative and Abstract Photos - Some Thoughts

Mark Greenland

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What is a “creative” or abstract photo?

Photographs can be accurate factual records of their subjects, or they can treat reality as a jumping off point, to explore a *fictional* world, created by the author, usually by manipulation with software. As in literature, fiction requires a story. Photographers often talk about “narrative”. Of course, an unmanipulated photo of real world events can tell a powerful story - sometimes an untrue one, but “creative” photos aim to present something that never existed; not to mislead but to entertain.

Photos which seek to reproduce reality (I’ll call them “representational” though they are sometimes called “pictorial”) can be judged by how faithfully they reproduce the subject, or by how interesting the subject is. A judge of such a photo will place high value on technical perfection and on how clever or lucky the author was to *notice* the subject and to bring it to the viewer’s attention. Landscapes and portraits often fall into this category and judges usually understand well enough how to judge them.

However, when a judge is presented with a picture which deliberately misrepresents or distorts reality, the firm ground of scientific realism gives way to the uncertain footing of fantasy, and judges are apt to become uncomfortable. By what standards are such images to be judged, and by what precepts?

Creative vs Abstract

First, a helpful distinction can be drawn between creative and abstract. Creative images present recognizable elements although they may be combined with other elements in an unexpected way. The image might have a “treatment” (such as a texture or other effect like HDR or ICM or colour tone) which announces an artistic intent.

The important thing here is that the judge should consider carefully what *story* or *mood* is being communicated. The technical aspects should be assessed for how well or poorly they serve the narrative. The exercise is similar to the evaluation of fictional literature. The primary interest is in the narrative, and the use of tools such as metaphor, grammar and tense etc is secondary. In this respect, this writer can see no reason why any photo competition should have a separate category for “creative”. The judge’s approach should be as it always is: why was the image presented, and has the technical execution communicated that intention as well as it could? (Maybe some competition organizers believe that people who can’t afford sophisticated software like Photoshop shouldn’t have to compete with people who can? Let’s hope there’s a better reason than this!).

So, creative images set out to tell a tale or invite the viewer to invent one, and often enlist software effects. Such images can be judged in a conventional way as discussed above. (Another way might be to assess only technical competence and faithful reproduction of the subject. Don’t go that way!).

By the way, creative work sometimes relies on gimmicky effects. In photography, we’ve seen Fractalis, HDR, the Ortin effect, some forms of ICM, prominent textures and vignettes burst onto the scene and then wither to a cliché. As in all art, there is a premium on novelty, but be wary of any effect which overpowers the narrative. If the effect *is* the narrative, the integrity of the image is called into question, and the judge can be fooled. Effects can be very helpful but only if they are subordinate to the narrative; they are much more effective when they don’t draw attention to themselves.

What is an Abstract?

A precise definition is unnecessary, but in general, an abstract is an image which interprets the subject to present the author's experience of it. This is usually achieved by presenting the subject in an altered, metaphorical way. The objective is to excite some emotional response unimpeded by mundane reality.

What is NOT an abstract is a landscape edited to look "arty". Most aerial shots, rusty metal, smoke and melanges of coloured substances like dye or ink, are "straight" non abstracts. They can be evaluated conventionally.

How Do You Look at an Abstract?

Many abstract paintings require prolonged and patient study to parse out the idea the artist sought to convey. Further, the author might be motivated by places, people and events which the viewer needs to know about to understand the picture. The idea might be the author's feelings about a place, an experience or even just a colour harmony. Fortunately, photograph judges very seldom encounter such images. We usually have only a few seconds to judge each image and we have to work on first impressions. People who submit photos for judging know this and can't expect a pure abstract to get the analysis it might deserve. So we usually see only partially abstracted images such as trees and beaches blurred by intentional camera movement, or deliberate defocussing.

In a similar way to "creative" imagery, the author tries for a nuanced response, like the effect of some kinds of music. In fact, abstract art is like music in the sense that the consumer of it is intended to hear/see the composition as a single undivided whole. If a listener starts to analyse the relationship of the percussion section to the other sections, the impact of the piece is lost.

Therefore, it helps to view abstract imagery in some unusual ways for photographers. For a start, imagine the work at a huge size, say an entire wall of an art gallery.

Then again, squint at it, so that only the outlines are visible. Move away from the image so that it becomes small. Ask yourself: what (if anything) am I *feeling* when I look at this? Does it remind you of something? Try to analyse how the colours and shapes affect you. Is there a story in the colours, for example red for excitement or drama, or soft nuances in mauves and pinks? Is yellow uplifting or comforting?

There are also conventional ways of looking at it. Is there a centre or focal point? What led you there? Is there a pleasing repetition (rhythm) of shape? Are symbols in play? Is there balance? Does it look the wrong way up? Does it look like pictures you've seen before (that is, is it purely derivative without original content)? Can you recognize an attempt by the author to advance the field in some way? Does the image have "character"? Is it memorable?

As always, ask yourself why the author submitted the image. Was it probably because the image looks like something previously successful? In other words, is it *kitsch* (naïve artistic cliché or pretension)?

Obviously, these suggestions might be difficult to implement (though practice will help a lot). If you prefer to apply more objective criteria, try these:

Does the image have form, or is it amorphous blobs? If it's blobs, are they making you work too hard? Are you involved on a purely intellectual level, trying to make something of it?

Do shapes in the image remind you of something? Judges seem to be attracted (relieved?) to find something recognizable. There's nothing wrong with that, but be wary: you may miss the author's intention if you are distracted by such resonances.

Is there pleasing contrast and exposure and do those qualities evoke something more than intellectual effort on your part?

The author of the website “visual-arts-cork.com” suggests the following methodical approach to judging abstracts:

- How does the photographer divide up the frame?
- How does he/she direct our eye and where do we linger?
- How does he/she use colour to create depth, attract attention or endow certain shapes with particular significance?
- What specific forms does the work contain and what do they mean?

What NOT to say

Here are a couple of things you should keep to yourself. Don't announce what you think the photographed subject was. This just informs the room that you have missed the point of the photo. The first director of the Museum of Modern Art, NY – Alfred H Barr Jr – said: “The observer must learn to look at the picture as a graphic representation of a mood and not as a representation of objects”.

Don't demand sharpness or good exposure, unless a lack of either undermines the apparent intention. Don't demand prettiness: it's not a beauty contest; you would not want every portrait subject to be perfect looking. Don't demand the contrast of a conventional photo if that would dilute the emotional impact. Don't complain about the lack of a centre of interest unless you're sure one is needed – remember that the impact of the image might lie in the effect of the frame as a whole.

Don't limit your comments to the technical; try to let the author know that you have considered the emotional/aesthetic aspects. In this area, words like “sad”, “beautiful” “exciting” “depressing” “horrifying” will lie at one end of the spectrum. (To spare sensitive authors' feelings, judges are no longer allowed to use the words at the other end of the spectrum, but they are words like “bland” “boring” “derivative” “unintelligible” and “impenetrable”).

It is worth remembering that photographers who submit abstracts know that they take a great risk, because such images seldom score highly. That is because they depend entirely on detailed analysis and a subjective personal response in the judge, which is very much a matter of luck. A good judge will understand that, and look for a way to commend any appealing aspects as well as suggest possible improvements. It's much better to encourage than discourage.

It's never helpful when judging art generally, to say that you "don't like" it. (Equally, it's not methodical to say you like it, but authors seem readier to forgive in that case). It's better practice to discuss the image objectively even if you're describing your subjective response. For example, "the colour palette of this image makes me feel uncomfortable without offering any narrative support for that intent".

Don't Despair

Judging photos is more difficult than judging paintings, in this respect: you won't know anything about the author's stated intention; you won't know about the author's background or journey and what has influenced him or her; you won't know what project or exploration the author is on, or what he/she has done before. You could be looking at a fluke by an unskilled author, or the evolution of a lifetime of considered study. So, you have to be brave but articulate. It's OK to say that the image failed to communicate anything to you, but explain why your eye just slid right off it and you had to drag yourself back to do your job. Maybe the colours didn't convey anything to you. Perhaps some texture or contrast might have saved the image from fatal two dimensionality. Maybe you couldn't see any attempt to do anything more than repeat other images we've seen too often.

You are not expected to synthesize from an image elaborate theories of social and philosophical importance, unless of course you actually got that from it. Mostly, it's just a matter of noticing whether you were moved by the image, and articulating why.

