

How to take your Photography to the Next level

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Strong images combine visual design and composition with a story.

So - How to maximise your chances: Basic, but important.

- Good Locations: make good photographs.
- Lighting: 1st hour after sunrise, and last hour before sunset.
- Stormy Weather: Don't overlook bad weather.(Loads of drama here)
- Composition: You need more than the rule of thirds. You need a centre of interest, and to control the way your eye moves around the image. Some of this can be controlled in post production. You also need a foreground. Getting down lower helps to give a sense of walking into the image.
- Mood: Underexposing slightly to add drama, or use a longer exposure. Post production can help here as well.
- Subject selection: A child in a group of adults or something that is the odd one out, can grab your attention.
- Depth of Field: Eliminate distractions by using 1.2 - F4. This is great for detail in one area while creating a dreamy background. Use spot focus.

Post Production: - Too big to cover this subject totally here

Competitive photography has moved on a lot in the past few years and unless entering PJ or Nature, it is necessary to 'develop' your raw image to make it say- Pick me. We only have about 2/4 seconds in front of the judge in major competitions, and we need to create an edge.

Some people shun the use of post processing but I am not one of them. I have never taken an image I could not improve with processing.

- Contrast/Sharpness: This has been lacking in images I have critiqued recently. Contrast is very important and uses both bright areas, darker areas, and colour. If there is little contrast in an image, it will not look three dimensional. Contrast helps our vision to naturally detect edges to register sharpness, and the shadows and highlights to record the depth of a subject. This is one of the most important concepts to understand.
- HDR: I brush this discretely at about 40% where I want more detail, but generally don't use it throughout an image now.(Remember less is more, and to never use it on an area with no detail such as a sky etc.)

Challenge yourself:

Craft is the ability to use your tools.

Art is the ability to use your tools to uniquely express yourself.

We all go through a phase where we know what we are doing, but we are frustrated by a lack of great results.

I like testing myself with new challenges, and I work best when I push myself artistically and technically with new subjects, or new approaches to my photography. This is more productive than spending money on new gear!

Impressionism:

There is a concept called 'Shoshin' This means a beginners mind. It is about being open to the unknown and emptying the mind to preconceived ideas.

It is a good way to try any photography, particularly impressionist photography.

I know some of you will turn off about now, but if you try something new, you might just surprise yourself.

Try looking at a scene or object through an out of focus lens. This way you will remove all distracting details and you will see just shapes, lines and colours. Notice what the light is doing. (less is more)

Try moving the camera up and down, and to the side, while experimenting with different speeds.

A good impressionist image will have impact, and something that captures your imagination. It usually has a dynamic composition where the emphasis is on simplicity, and it will make an emotional statement.

So what does it take to improve your photography:

Imagination, attention to detail, and plenty of practise with both your camera and post production.

Read the rules, and check your entry again for blemishes and correct name etc.

And please don't put heavy white borders around your digital images!

Finally have realistic expectations:

You are not going to go out and take competition winning images every time. After all, Ansel Adams once said that he only got one great picture a month.

Remember also that judges are only human. If you think an image is worth a second try, then enter it in another competition. If it fails a second time then maybe you need to re look at it unemotionally.

Above all have fun!