Beyond the Surface – Thinking About Photographs

An Object Itself

The photograph is an object. They are sometimes large, sometimes small, and sometimes they are objects contained only in a visual sense.

They exist within themselves apart from their maker, whether they are collected in photo albums, boxes, on museum and gallery walls, reproduced in publications or within the cyber-world. It is in these places where we come to experience photographs that influence our understanding and interpretation of visual meaning.

Like other visual arts mediums, the photograph has its own physical characteristics as an object. These include a support and a surface. While a photograph has a plane, it may contain a sense of depth as an object and it may not, depending on the context in which it experienced, whether on a museum wall, in a photo album, in a publication, on a digital monitor or as part of a public installation.

Supports could include paper, plastic, metal and various objects, while the surfaces incorporate light-sensitive silver halide materials into the gelatin emulsion that may also incorporate dyes and pigments, revealing a tonal description. And now, there is the digital realm to consider and contemplate, and the nature of the pixel containing all the possibilities of description and meaning, whether it is on a computer monitor or contained in a cell phone.

These attributes define the essence of a photograph. The formal qualities of a three-dimensional vision contained in a two-dimensional plane with boundaries, determining what is seen and what is not. The support in which it is presented on, suggesting its texture and shape. The surface, whether a black and white or color photograph, further articulates its descriptive qualities and meaning.

It is this range of descriptive possibilities, the effects of chemical and digital processes and the role of the light source that will further communicate the possibilities of visual engagement and pleasure (beauty) and the interpretive meanings suggested.

What’s Inside

What’s contained within the viewfinder frame lines is one of many deliberate and considered aesthetic choices. These choices include the thing photographed, the specific details that are included to heighten and hold our visual engagement, what the photographer chooses to include and exclude, the voice that is doing the seeing and speaking, the particular moment the shutter is released as well as the nature in which what is being seen is revealed. John Szarkowski spoke about these photographic aesthetic attributes in The Photographer’s Eye as The Thing Itself, The Detail, The Frame, The Vantage Point, and Time. Three additional attributes essential to understanding the aesthetic considerations of a photograph include Light, Focus and Color. The use of these aesthetic considerations (choices) will reflect the photographer’s intentions and set the range of possibilities of meaning and purpose.
Photography deals with the actual, though the factuality of a picture, no matter how convincing and unarguable, is different than the reality itself. The subject and the picture are not the same thing, though they seem so afterwards – the image, the photograph, will survive the subject.
The photograph is tied to the facts of things. These facts, either discovered, found or created do not reveal the story, but offered scattered and suggestive clues that go beyond simple description, but rather propose the possibilities of a not so obvious undiscovered meaning.
Frame

The central act of photography, the act of choosing and eliminating, forces a concentration on the picture edge. Compositional considerations of line, form and balance extend not only in the four directions suggested by the viewfinder or ground glass edges, but also the spatial considerations of foreground / background relationships – the transformation of a three dimensional world into the flatness of two dimensional. These relationships of the edges, in all directions, reflect the intentional visual and conceptual concerns in how photographic meaning is considered. What is contained within the frame is either energized or passive depending on how these edges are considered, allowing the picture to resonate within the edges and/or beyond them.
In equal consideration as the frame, the act of choosing the distance between the subject being photographed and the camera (and photographer) offers the uncanny ability of photography to reveal what our eyes would protest as unattainable with simple human vision – a point of view different from what our eyes perceive.
Time

The photograph is static, but the moments of the world flow, interrupted only by the deliberate fragmentation of time by the release of the shutter. This discrete parcel of time is not just a literal moment of time, whether frozen by an exposure of a short duration or the accumulation of movement, but also where the world is transformed by the decisive moment, 1/125 of a second as suggested by Henri Cartier-Bresson, once the shutter is triggered.

"The decisive moment, it is the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as the precise organization of forms which gives that event its proper expression." -Henri Cartier-Bresson
Light

As photography utilizes light-sensitive materials, whether analog or digital, the photograph needs light (and the lack of light) to reveal (and obscure) its visual sensibilities and concerns of content. The presence of light and its level of intensity serve as visual guides in seeing what is in a photograph.

Deborah Luster, *Felton Williams, Angola State Prison, Louisiana, 1999*
Focus

Not only does a camera see from a definite vantage point, it also creates a hierarchy by defining a single plane of focus. This plane, which is usually parallel with the film plane in the camera, provides a sense of emphasis within the photograph as controlled by the literal focusing of the camera’s lens, depth of field and the distance from the camera to the subject.
Color

In the introduction to *William Eggleston’s Guide*, John Szarkowski suggested, “for the photographer who demanded formal rigor from his pictures, color was an enormous complication of a problem already cruelly difficult. Its failures might be divided into two categories.”

The first category offered is described as black and white photographs made with color film – an inattention to the role and function of color. The second category of failure is photographs made of beautiful colors in pleasing relationships – color for the sake of color.

Color is not a separate issue, “but rather as though the world itself existed in color, as though the blue and the sky were the same thing.”

An additional possibility is considering how to utilize color is the compositional tension that can articulate photographic meaning through the descriptive nature of color in revealing details as well as the color of light to imply mood and psychological tension.
Thinking About Photographs – The Difference between Taking and Making

All photographs are considered and intentional choices. These choices are suggested by a need or desire to secure a moment, an experience, a revelation, a curiosity, or a discovery on film and contain it as an object in a photographic print.

The shutter release is not simply pressed and the photograph taken, but rather made, through a process of mental construction – visualization – interpreting the actual, reality, the thing itself and translating it into a visual language, a photographic language, through the intentional use of aesthetic choices unique to the medium. This mental construction elaborates, refines and embellishes - from looking and the gathering of visual information to seeing and a careful study, analysis and organization of that information.

The quality and intensity of a photographer’s attention to seeing determines the vitality and visual engagement of a photograph. When viewing a photograph, will the viewer just glance or pause and also see? This attention to seeing, the thing itself, the detail, the frame, the vantage point, time, light, focus and color, will resonate the photographer’s visual and conceptual concerns. However, these formal considerations made in a camera need to be translated to the photograph, whether a photographic print or digital file, where the importance of tone and description will further articulate the visual sensation as well as the intellectual and emotional attention. It is a complex, ongoing, spontaneous interaction of observation, intuitiveness, searching, imagination and intention.