

## DOES SUBJECT MATTER ?



Snow Gum, Pretty Valley, Bogong High Plains    Sunrise, Snow Gum, Bogong High Plains

Claude Monet said “ to see, we must forget the name of the thing we are looking at ”. When you see something, what is the first thing you do apart from getting out your camera and setting up your tripod. Take 10 seconds before you read on and think how you might approach a subject and then photograph it. Pause 10,9,8,7,6,5,4,3,2,1, okay times up. Did you think ? “ I usually visualize or compose, crop, look at the tones within the scene, colour harmony, check the overall contrast, the local contrast, look for the important shadow detail, important highlight detail, decide on the appropriate lens, tripod height, think about possible aperture or shutter speed, check the ....” and on it goes or do you just crank up the motor drive, whack the dial on program and fire away not really knowing what you took or how it might have been exposed because you were already thinking “got that one, what’s next ”!

I don’t think I have ever met a photographer, at the workshops I do, or talks that I give, that doesn’t truly care about the images they create or ponders ways of improving them. Most are sort of dedicated to their craft, but are let down by either a lack of knowledge or are just in too much of a hurry to complete the job. There are a few who are content with “near enough”. I honestly believe when a high number of photographers photograph, they truly don’t think about the image they are about to make. They care about them, but don’t think about them. If they are photographing a building, they feel they should show it as a building, usually in it’s entirety or if it is a tree we need to see the whole tree in order not to confuse the viewer. There is nothing wrong with ambiguous photography. Photographs that make us think and perhaps confuse us with their content that makes us ask questions. Also photographs do not always need captions to explain themselves. Should not the image be able to stand alone without a three page discourse on what it is and why it was taken. Recently I read a lengthy caption on how a photographer had to travel for 2 hours through hostile country ( no tracks and sometimes crawling on hands and knees through scrub ) and then stand in knee deep water in order to get the photograph we were looking at. To me it was a way of camouflaging a fairly ordinary image. My immediate thought was, why did he bother!

Back to Monet, “ To see we must forget the name of the thing we are looking at”. When you stand in front of something, it’s hard to block out of your mind what it is, if you have in the first place noticed it for “what” it is. My prints this month of the snow gum are a good example. Believe it or not they are of the same tree, but taken 2 years apart. The print showing the whole tree caught my eye as I was driving along a track on the Bogong High Plains. I could see in the distance this Snow Gum that was just

glowing, so I parked my car, grabbed my camera and headed over towards it. It was all alone and seemed to be screaming out for attention. Just as I arrived there this amazing sky began to build behind it and I couldn't believe my luck. I walked around the tree looking to see what would be the best angle to photograph it so as to show it as I saw it, "an object of nature saying look at me and how grand I am". So in this instance Monet's saying took a back seat. I felt I wanted to photograph the tree for what it was. And if you're wondering why I placed it in the centre of frame the simple answer is it looked best there. End of story.

I chose a low angle to accentuate the tree even further and make it look even grander. If I was 4' 8" it would look like this normally, but I'm 6ft ( 183 cm ) so I had to drop down to show it how it looked when I rested on my haunches.

The second photograph with the cropped trunk perhaps gets closer to what Monet meant. We can see it is still a tree, but I think it becomes more of an object within a scene rather than a photograph of a tree. The interesting thing with this photograph is in an 8" x 10" it looks okay, but as soon as it is enlarged to a 16" x 20" I feel like I want to step into the image. It has such a feeling of depth and presence. I actually feel a part of the image.

I remember when I approached the snow gum the second time around I had no intention of photographing it as I had before, anyway it was sunrise and the other was taken on sunset. I was hell bent on making another image that had an entirely different feel about it and one where I felt I could, for want of a better expression, "communicate with it". Perhaps, and I feel certain, that I forgot for a moment that I was photographing a tree per se, and visualized the photograph in a non objective way. If you don't understand that hopefully Mr. Editor will add his own explanation of my words!

Back to Monet, we don't have to photograph everything objectively. As we all have different likes and tastes does it not stand to reason that we will interpret scenes differently. This is where our intuitive nature determines how we see, but I think Monet is suggesting we look beyond our normal way of seeing and perhaps delve deeper into the object so as to present the subject matter in a totally different way. In order to do this I think we need to slow down when we photograph. Think a little more about what we are doing so as to obtain the result we want. I know I've mentioned this before, but there is great truth in it. The process of photographing with a 4" x 5" camera actually does make you *slow down and think a little more*. Your visual concept changes. It is not a case of putting a camera to your eye and blasting off 4 or 5 images of the same thing and then moving on to do the same thing to the next subject. I actually make fewer photographs now than I use to, when I was using only a 35mm camera. Slowing down has become a habit, not something I do now and again. My aim is to make the best possible photograph I can every time I trip the shutter. ( No snide remarks here ) It doesn't always happen, but that's my aim. In fact I think the process of putting the camera on a tripod has a slowing down affect, even if it is 35mm or even medium format. I know when I photograph with my Bronica 6cm x 7cm on a tripod my approach is still the same. Really the camera size should make no difference to how you approach the subject, unless it's sports.

There is a story that illustrates a couple points here. It is about a mountaineer who sat looking at a mountain for a week and then set off to climb it within just a few days, which was an incredible feat

considering its size. When asked how he could accomplish such an achievement in such a short amount of time his response was, “ My heart was already there, the rest was easy!”

The parallel here of course is thinking about what you are doing and pre-visualization. Knowing what your film and paper are capable of, being able to see the print before you have taken the shot and then just doing it because everything has been worked out in your head. It doesn't always work out that way, but when you have the knowledge to enable you to do that, it makes photography so much easier.

Even those who photograph action and quick changing events will have knowledge of what will happen when they do certain things. Once again it is about knowing your materials and a knowledge of your craft. Do you think that Beethoven could have written his 9th symphony if he didn't know what the notes sounded like? For those who don't know he was completely deaf when he wrote it. Apparently at times, he lay on the floor to feel the vibrations of the notes as he composed.

Unfortunately there are still those amongst us who believe that if only the right piece of equipment is used success is assured. Once it was believed that if only the right camera was owned you would be fine. I fear now that the dreaded computer and photoshop maybe taking its place. We see in sports all the time athletes taking drugs to enhance their performance. They don't feel comfortable with their own ability. They are looking for assistance outside their own talent. Is this what we are doing with computer assisted images?

And whilst I'm lamenting on how good equipment is, you may like this. I was so amused, I wrote it down immediately. I had a phone call, a little while ago, from a woman asking if I do wedding photography. No, I fear not was my reply. “ Well could you tell me if there is anyone close by who could help me?” “*No, not really you would have to go a couple of hours away*”. “Oh dear, ( long pause ) look, couldn't you just come along and take a few snaps?” I swallowed hard. “ *No I'm sorry that wouldn't be possible, I could give you some names*”. “ Oh well”, she said, ( pause ) “ maybe I'll just get a few disposal cameras and give them to the guests”. “*Well, good luck* “ was my retort. I hung up the phone reassured that I was considered to be just one step up from a disposal camera. Ah, disposal cameras for disposal photographs!

Okay back to the images and how they were printed. The first image requires very little work to return it to how it was. During the base exposure I dodged about 50mm of that line of trees on the left at the horizon line and then added a few seconds to the bottom left hand side foreground. That's it. During exposure of the negative which was TRI-X a red filter was added to emphasize the clouds. If I hadn't the sky would have rendered a very pale grey as is how panchromatic film responds to blue skies. I then, in printing, would have had to burn the sky down which would have added density to the upper part of the tree, which I didn't want. The film was developed in HC 110 for my normal development time and the finished print was printed on Polymax Fine Art FB Paper. The second image was also photographed on TRI-X and developed normally, but requires a little more work in the darkroom.

The contrast of the negative was somewhat higher and so a little dodging was required to even out the exposure on the paper and make the whole print balance. During my initial exposure under the enlarger, which was 22 seconds at F8 I dodged the base of the rocks on the left hand side for about 10 seconds.

My dodger was moving around most of the time so it wasn't 10 seconds in just one spot, which would have left a mark on the print. Actually each small area probably only got 2 or 3 seconds in total. Also the shadowed foreground rock was dodged for 10 seconds and the shadow at the base of the tree for 5 seconds. Then I gradually added 5 seconds to the top 1/3 of the print and 15 seconds to the left side of the lit trunk. They're small alterations, but they make such a difference to the finished print. If you go the extra yard you often end up with the lolly pop or something like that..

The photograph was printed on what my enlarger says is Grade 0, but I know is more like Grade 1 or 1 1/4. I have been doing some calibrating lately of my enlargers and find not all is what it says. By the time you read this I will have sorted it all out, I hope. Whether it's Grade 0 or Grade 1 doesn't matter a hoot. It is the amount of contrast you apply in the darkroom that you feel is necessary for that particular picture that will convey what you want it to. That is one of the beauties of printing with a colour head, you can dial in small amounts of yellow or magenta to get the contrast you want and not be locked in to specific paper grades. I much prefer a colour head to filters under the lens, but if that's all you have keep on doin' it.

Recently I was talking to a photographer friend of mine and we were lamenting the demise of the darkroom in so many quarters and concluded that at least in the darkroom a print will evolve over time as you print and reprint it, but once all the work has been done on the computer and has been saved, the next time you need a copy the tendency will be just to call up the image and hit print. It is unlikely that the image will change from one year to the next unless of course the ink goes off or begins to run out!

Photography will always be about ones vision and how we respond to our surroundings. Good luck with how you tackle your perception.

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