

The Evolution of a Print



Dancing Snow Gums, Bogong High Plains

I guess the first thing we need to ask ourselves is exactly where does a print begin? I don't think it is in the darkroom or on the computer. That may sound a little strange to some of you, but hopefully if you stay with me to the end of the article it might make a lot more sense.

To me the print begins by making a decision to go out and photograph. Although I have no idea what I may come across I do know that the area I will go to will produce a certain kind of subject matter. For example let's say I decide to go to Wilsons Promontory or The Great Ocean Road, then I know that I will be offered a variety of landscape or seascape photographs. Let's say I'm off to Sydney, then my landscape is entirely different. I am preparing my mind for the type of subject matter that I might find. In a sense I am tuning into the area I am heading to. I am starting to think about what I may find.

That I think is the first step.

As we hunt around the area we have gone to, we begin to see things, and suddenly something photographic presents itself to us. Now if you are into pre-visualization then you may start to think about how you might print what you are looking at. For example, there may be a bright spot somewhere within the frame that you know in print form will probably be a bit of an eyesore. You decide whilst you are looking at this through the viewfinder that that area will need burning in or toning down so as it doesn't become too distracting. You may also check around the rest of the image and decide on other things within the frame.

If you arrive at a comfortable conclusion then you will consider what exposure may best suit the print you have created in your head.

Example here is you may actually decide to give extra exposure so as to put more detail into the shadow area which may dominate the print, or you may decide to give less exposure because the highlight area is the dominant factor in the picture and you need to reduce the tonalities in the scene at the negative exposure stage. So you can see, already the print is beginning to take shape and you haven't even made the picture yet.

You may of course, at the time of exposure, have no idea what you are going to do. It could be because you are rushed to take the shot because of the situation or at that time you *just can't visualize* what the scene could possibly look like in print form. What you are looking at is appealing, but no great revelation comes forth on what you should do as far as a finished print is concerned.

I have met some people at my workshops who actually feel a little guilty because they cannot, or find it difficult to, pre-visualize an image. Truly this is not a problem and the breakthrough comes the more you print. The more you know what's possible, the more you understand what the paper you are using can do, the more things begin to be clearer. It is like so many things in life, experience makes way for confusion.

Now whether you have or have not pre-visualized the scene before you, sometimes makes no difference as to how the print may turn out or how it may change over time. Liken a print to a novel: the first draft will surely not be the one that goes to press. And how often are second printings of educational texts updated with the latest information? A print can be no different. As we learn new techniques or become more proficient in what we are doing then of course it is only natural that our final product, or a revisit to that product, will produce a different result. And when it happens it is *so exciting!*

So a print can evolve from its original concept or as new knowledge and techniques are learnt, but don't forget the original image will come from you, from your ideas and your view of the world and this will shape how you approach the subject and how you feel about what you are looking at. The image will not come from your camera. It will only record what you see, what you point it at. The film also is useless unless you breathe life into it with an image that you see. Without your input there is nothing. The film would be lifeless without you.

You know you may have changed camps and be photographing via a digital camera now. It makes no difference to the original capture. All you have done is changed labels, nothing else. You may think you have been converted to digital, but you have only changed labels. Conversion is when you change from being an Atheist to a Christian. A Labour supporter to a Liberal supporter. Your heart and soul change completely. Some might say when you change football teams. I might have a hard time defending that one. But hey, whether you photograph with a camera that records with film or with pixels doesn't change the fact that you still photograph.

Just remember that without what you see and without your interpretation of what you see, there is nothing. What is the answer to "How do you make a meaningful photograph about what you are looking at?". "By caring about, or responding to, what you are photographing". This then has a part of you in the picture. It gives the photograph some soul, some meaning and this is usually where the great photographs come from. I'm not only talking about landscape photographs, but many other types as well. Portraits that speak and show the true worth and soul of a person. Architectural photographs that give a building a personality. The list goes on. It's all in you and how you interpret what you see. It's down to you. Nothing else.

You know I often refer to taking out my dinky toy camera and taking a picture. My dinky toy is my point and shoot. My shirt pocket camera. Not my 35mm camera as reported 2 issues ago. The editor got it wrong. Great images are made on all formats even dinky toys. It is who is holding the camera that is the difference. Kid yourselves if you think differently.

So where are we? We have captured the image, and the film has been developed. Let's say for the exercise that it was normal development. We could have though given extra development or less development and again this would change the contrast of the film. To me any of these decisions contribute to the final print. From our initial interest in the subject to the point here, we have made many decisions. All the time the final image is evolving.

So we develop the film normally and make a contact print. Now we need to print the negative. I bet when you think about the evolution of a print, this is where most people come in. But do you see how much has happened up to here.

Our next step is to decide what contrast level to begin with. Remember a couple of issues ago I mentioned where is a good contrast level to begin printing. Check back in your magazines if you have forgotten. If you use filters you may begin at Grade 1 or if you are using a colour head then perhaps 40 units of yellow is your starting point. Again another decision that will contribute to the print. It just doesn't happen. You have to make decisions on what you want to do.

Let's talk about the print I have offered you this issue. Print A is a straight print showing me all the information that is on the negative. It also shows me that the contrast has to be raised to create more separation between the light and dark areas. And print B is the final print at this stage.

This print had seen a few changes in its life. The first thing I noticed about the trees as I was walking around the area was the lyrical shape. I was drawn to them because of it. The light fog drifting in behind was an asset. It helped to soften the background. I remember making the exposure with not much more in mind than capturing the image before the fog lifted and making sure that the trees were strong within the image. With this in mind I gave extra exposure to the negative so as to push all values up the scale. I wanted to keep the light values of the tree trunks as high up the tonal range as possible. This way they would print light with a luminosity I was after.

The first few prints I thought were okay and achieved that. I remember looking at them a few days later after I had dried and flattened the prints and had an different view of the image. I felt that more could be done to emphasize the trees because that is why I photographed them. As they stood they just didn't seem to jump out at me.

Solution? Perhaps raise the print contrast a little or print at the same contrast, but print a tad darker and then bleach back the trunks a little. There's one thing you can't do via photoshop. I know someone who tried bleaching a print via the computer. The bleach wrecked his LCD screen.

So I printed with a bit more contrast, but that made the blacks much too black and also too black in some areas I didn't want to be black, so I opted for the other method. I gave the print about an extra 5% print exposure, gave the top half of the print an extra 20% exposure, the bottom left and bottom right corners an extra 20% exposure and the entire bottom one fifth and extra 10% exposure and then very carefully and selectively bleached the main trunks of the Snow Gums just a little. I mean just a LITTLE. That's all it took. The difference was only slight, but enough as far as I was concerned to make a difference. It's very easy to get carried away with the bleach once it's in your hand. Self control is very important. Bit like working in Photoshop. You can get carried away without even noticing you're doing it.

The other thing I did from the original was to crop the image much more. That came about from fooling around with it and just seeing what I thought worked better. You know I always say to workshop participants that you get three chances to crop an image. The first is in the camera when you are setting up and trying to find the best camera position. The second is when you have the negative in the enlarger and you are making a print, and the third is when you trim the photograph whilst mounting it. If you miss all three then you are open for criticism.

So for now the final print is what you see here, but maybe as I learn new things or view this image in a different mood then perhaps it may change again. Or it may just stay the same. We will see. This then, I hope, shows you how a print or a found image can evolve as you progress. But remember as Uncle Ansel said, "there is usually only a small difference between an acceptable print and an exceptional one". Good luck with yours!

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