

Photography has been a part of my existence for all my life. My first introduction to image making came when I was growing up in Parkville, Missouri. This is a little river town close to Kansas City that is now surrounded by the city. I was one of seven siblings, and we would load up the station wagon each year for our annual summer vacation. My father always took slides and I still recall the first in his series. It was the classic Swoboda family image of my two sisters and me leaning out of the back of the '59 station wagon, just as we departed. He took a lot of family pictures, of course, and a lot of "scenics." I recall that he would always show us that a branch of a tree should be on the top, framing the image. This was my first introduction to design.

With little interest in photography during my school years, in 1970 I joined the Air Force and was assigned the task of fuel specialist, basically handling jet fuel. I was shipped to Okinawa and, within the first month, Bob Hope's USO show came through. My vantage point seemed at least a quarter of a mile back and I only had an instamatic camera. As I looked around, I saw all these 35mm cameras with telephoto lenses and right then I had it bad. I wanted one of those. Oh, I wanted one. During the next year and a half I acquired three Nikon bodies and thirteen lenses, and I still use them today.

During my tour of duty I discovered an extra room in the barracks. I was given permission to use it for a darkroom in exchange for photographing the supply unit to which I was assigned. My only call was to photograph the Colonel giving some awards (you know, “grip and grin”). I delivered them the next day, proud of my first job as a “professional.”

Mustered out of the service in the summer of 1974, I returned to my old job at a local food store. Finding it too much like the military, the job lasted only three months. In leaving the service, I had hopes for a career that would in some way make people happy. Hopefully, I have found some vestige of that wish in photography.

During this “post-service” period, an old friend introduced me to Merle Walker. We were all part of Boy Scouts of America. Merle owned a portrait studio for over twenty years. One thing led to another and I soon found myself at Walker Studio learning to print color, by trial and error.

I should emphasize that it was more error than trial, for this was an old dip and dunk processor. Many times I would pull the rack out of the bleach fix and put

it back in the developer tank. Of course, prints were ruined and new developer had to be mixed.

In my apprenticeship, Merle started taking me with him on weddings. I remember this one beautiful Italian ceremony. The reception was held in the Country Club Plaza, a very elegant part of Kansas City. The bride wanted images of all of the tables. I heard rumors that some of the guests had “Mafia connections.” As I stood up on a chair for a better angle, I noticed that many of the guests were turning away from the camera and hiding their faces with their hands. I was scared to death for several weeks after and, to Merle’s great enjoyment, he never let me forget it.

During our time together, Merle introduced me to the camaraderie and sharing of the Professional Photographers Association of Greater Kansas City and the Professional Photographers Association of Missouri. I could never imagine that someday I would serve as President of both of these great organizations. Patiently, Merle would show me “Rembrandt” lighting and talk about the triangle of light on the shadow side of the face. I just could not see it.

As the years passed, Merle received the degrees of Master of Photography and Photographic Craftsman from the Professional Photographers of America. The Professional Photographers Association of Missouri rewarded his patient teaching efforts by naming the annual advanced portrait workshop in his honor. In 1994, as a friend and former apprentice, I was given the great pleasure and honor of presenting him with the National Award from Professional Photographers of America.

Before video became a usable tool, I spent approximately ten years working with slides. Using two to fifteen projectors, several screens, music and the computer, multi-image productions were a great education. That was truly an exercise in design, concept, storytelling and the importance of each individual image.

In 1975 I photographed my first wedding for a friend. Since that time I have enjoyed a very diversified career, serving in numerous capacities from the camera to the darkroom. Home base, however, has always been the Greater Kansas City area and, in recent years, it has been my pleasure to accept assignments throughout the country.

Since my early apprenticeship, I have been able to do my own printing. Through years of practice in the darkroom, I have learned how to extract vivid color from the negative through color filtration in the enlarger and the right paper for the desired effect. I enjoyed this technique with a beautiful sunset image, and so strong is the color that the viewer often erroneously perceives my effort as having been induced through filters on the camera. With a well-exposed negative, I can recreate the strength of the color. These techniques are very helpful when the client brings in an underexposed negative and by adjusting developer temperature, and using the highest contrast paper, at times my easel has produced strong elements in the image that the client did not realize were there.

As the success of my efforts improved, so too did the competitive results. For the last fifteen years, from January to May, I am busy in the darkroom making competition prints. I am as involved as my clients in their competitive efforts and feel personally rewarded when they take home high scores and awards. For this reason, my workload in the spring surpasses a reasonable timeframe for completion in a one-man darkroom. Therefore, I am usually pushing time limits. Not through procrastination, but in the sincere involvement of helping those near a degree to pull everything possible from their negative, creating a merit image.

All of this, however, comes with a price. Many disasters await the competitive entry, such as prints sticking to each other in a shipping case or a screwdriver dropped on prints ready to head for the national exhibit. Always pushing the deadline, I once dropped my keys and lost them while running to get into FedEx before they closed. I am not beyond begging on bended knee at the FedEx door with the closed sign on it.

One set of prints were made on a special paper that is no longer manufactured. Spread on the client's table in the process of packing, a disaster with a frame shelf deleted that entry. A good friend owned a nice spray booth but was located fifty miles away. It was always a struggle to get there and final coat all of the prints and get back again.

On just such an occasion, it was a cold, wintry night and, nestled in my minivan, the heater kept things fairly comfortable. Suddenly, flashing red lights pulled me to the side of the road. A stern-faced highway patrolman said that I had been all over the road and asked me to step out. After all the exercises, finger to the nose, reciting the alphabet, walking the line (what line?), handcuffs, body search and a breathalyzer test that had a result of zero, the officer was indeed puzzled. He refused to accept my story that it was lacquer fumes. While I sat

nearby, he searched the interior of the van looking for contraband. As he exited the van, he seemed a bit light-headed and let me go with the suggestion that I complete my trip with the windows down.

Events such as those preceding led me to create a slide show parody of print competition. As the star “nerd,” complete with taped glasses, short pants and wild hair, the cast of characters contained a group of good friends serving as the jury to the entry of “Nerf Nerdingly, Ace Photographer.” To this day, the show brings laughter to seminars and that is my greatest reward.

I seem to have a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde personality. One side is a very shy, extremely private person. The other side is quite the opposite, outgoing and wild and crazy, especially when I am behind the camera or in the company of other photographers.

Frequently, I am told that I am a perfectionist and, because of that, I am extremely slow. My good friends must, as a necessity, have an abundance of patience. I recall a “shooting safari” in Vermont with my friends the Stewarts and the Beltramis. We stopped at this picturesque little town which had a stream running right through it. Everyone jumped out of the van with their cameras and

they were off making exposures. I, however, took a leisurely walk down a path by the stream. It was the beautiful Fall season, and I was engrossed in my search for design and color. As time went by, everyone was ready to leave. To the dismay of all, I returned to the van for my camera and headed off. The resulting image, *Autumn Splendor*, was accepted into the loan collection, and I happily listen to their retelling of the story yet today.

Long ago I set a goal for myself to receive my Masters degree on print merits alone. I achieved this goal in 1984, and through the darkroom have continued to work with competition prints ever since. It is an involvement that requires a dedication to the finer elements of an image and, of course, a consistent involvement in print competitions. I believe these events to be one of the very best teachers and a valued learning experience. The true competitor will try each time to surpass the scores of the last. How can this possibly fail to fine tune one's expertise?

As with anything we care deeply about, the years have been a steady learning process. As my printing expertise improved, I continued to research the capabilities of Kodak and Fuji emulsions, as well as others. Today's films are the result of a gradual process that has yielded higher sensitivity, lower granularity,

better resolving power, more consistency, higher color saturation and improved keeping properties. My own study through the years has been a constant process of pushing the negative and the paper to their fullest potential. Each film has its own characteristics, as does paper. The art of making a good print is simply finding the right combination. It has taken many years to become intimately acquainted with light and the emulsions of film and paper, along with the color printing process. It has been a long but exciting road from the old dip and dunk process.

As photographers, we are all artists and are able to bend reality and show it in different forms. What we do with films, paper and processing decides impact. The nucleus of impact is within the negative and, we might say, begins with the click of the shutter. That is when the magic happens, or it is the moment magic escapes.

Acceptance as a national affiliated juror in 1986 brought a new consciousness to the qualities of a high scoring image. With every judging experience I find great excitement in the creative efforts of others. When the turntable reveals the impact of a striking image generated by a knowledgeable approach defying age-old rules, I feel privileged to enter a score. I have great

empathy for the maker of an image who has gone through painstaking care to maintain the finest presentation possible only to receive a disheartening score. At that moment, the reaction of six individual peers can either confirm confidence in the entry or present a set of circumstances that had escaped consideration. Whatever happens, judging is the most rewarding experience when approached with an open mind tuned in to the learning process.

There are many factors that lead to the creation of award winning images. I consider design to be of foremost importance. Not academic principles of basic design, but the marriage of a vision of the eye with the placement of objects and subjects so that the greatest impact is felt, rather than defined by century-old rules of composition. It is rare that a “Rambo” type of point and shoot can produce a high score, even with darkroom manipulation. I believe that the design of the image should be carefully thought out with all of the elements within the viewing frame. Yet, achieving all of the elements of a superior image can never be an exact science.

With that said, I am reminded of another personal experience in creating a loan image. I awakened to a cold, blustery day and lazily surveyed the wintry view. As the morning mist rose from the surface of the lake outside my window, a

flock of geese glided silently to the waters below. Instinctively, I grabbed my shoes and my camera and, loading film on the run, I approached the lake with the grace of a gazelle in boots. Whipping out my trusty meter I found, of course, that it had a dead battery. Now, it is a proven fact that rubbing a battery briskly can sometimes revive a last little charge from within. Quickly dislodging the battery, and with a few brisk rubs from cold fingers, I sent the cell spinning into the rocks below. A gentle rustling from the surface of the water announced some activity from my feathered friends and I knew that my magic moment was about to vanish. Making a quick “educated guess” on exposure, I whipped my trusty Nikon to my eye and clicked away. As the geese departed, their reflection was mirrored in the water below and the loan print *First Flight* was born.

As I continue to produce client’s merit images in the darkroom, I enjoy the endless personal search for that one image that surpasses all others. Photography has truly bred into me a passion for recording life, whether it is a wedding couple in a beautiful stained glass church, children at play, or the grayer side of life crying out to be documented. Sometimes a phrase, or a song lyric, will start the nucleus of an idea that simply must be captured on film.

So it was with *Get Me to the Church on Time*. A great deal of effort and planning went into that image. Shot from a mountain top, and communicating via walkie-talkies, completion of that negative was a real exercise in planning, from searching out the location, awaiting the proper season, timing everything for sunrise and evaluating the angle of light. But as the combination of title and image brings pleasure to the viewer, the extensive effort in its creation all becomes worthwhile.

It is important to me to make every image individually unique. Several images hanging together might not seem to fit as a whole, and yet each individual image should have its own inner strength. I want the elements of design, color and storytelling to create the impact of each individual image. I would prefer not to be known for a certain “style,” but more for the individuality of every image. In the same “shoot” I challenge myself to stretch from soft and romantic to bizarre and contemporary.

In my persona, I admit to being outside normalcy. The fact is, I know I am a bit eccentric, but I have my own set of rules, my own standards, and my own demands that I place upon myself. I have no particular method to use consistently except in freedom of expression. When looking through the lens, I try to visualize

the image in its finished state. That is probably where my reputation for being “slow” started, for I am a strong believer in looking at all of the elements and mentally putting together the final image. It is important to me to look at the location, the lighting, the design factor, setting the exposure properly, and moving the subject for the best placement in the space. If all of the elements of design support it, the subject could be placed dead center for the strongest impact, as in *Highlight of the Garden*. The most important requirement is for that image to be distinctively different from any before, in short, “individual.”

For many years, rules of composition were drilled into my psyche: golden section, dynamic symmetry and, of course, “thirds.” These guidelines are still there in the back of my mind, but I am not ruled by them. There came a time in my career when I just let go. I can’t say it happened overnight...it took time. Releasing the fear from age-old concepts has improved my creativity and, I might add, I have found a lot more pleasure in the creative process as a result.

I have always felt that a steadfast adherence to so many rigid theories inhibits performance. Every photographer shares a desire to have his work seen and appreciated. Therefore, we adhere to a set of standards that can compromise originality. An image can, at the outset, be made to look static in an attempt to

follow age-old rules of balance and symmetry. Although I do not advocate a careless abandon to all standards, I am emphatically opposed to a text book approach in the use of “rules.”

It is important that students of photography, or any art form for that matter, study design and composition in order to put the elements together for initial impact. With a knowledgeable background, they may then have the freedom to decide when to use a rigid approach to balance and when to set aside basic theorems. More often than not, a bold, innovative composition is there just waiting to be seen.

We have been supplied with a great variety of film. I prefer to use whatever the situation calls for to create the effect that I want. With an aversion to being told that “it can’t be done,” I hung a print from a 110 negative in the national exhibit. The old disc cameras were smaller than 110 and the prospect of creating a merit image from one of them was even further challenging. Since they were discontinued, availability leaves that pursuit for another time.

I hold firmly to the belief that equipment is not the tool for creating an exceptional image. Like oil and canvas are to a painter, and as clay is to the

sculptor, my tools are light, elements of design, film, paper and the darkroom. The real “secret” is in the ability to combine these tools properly. Every individual image has its right design, size, format, color and texture. It seems detrimental to the image to fit it into a certain size, when all of the principles of design are creating the format through the use of light, shadow, lines, curves and color.

For the fullest impact of an image, it is vital to use the full latitude of the film. Color, or the lack of it, can make an image strong. With proper exposure and film choice, the darkroom technician can now produce color that “screams.” Equally impressive can be the subtle nuances of a monochromatic image that has been well exposed.

Discussion of the darkroom and merit images may make it seem to appear that I have no concern for every day work. Not so! In the camera room or on location, I simply adhere to the belief that every image should stand alone and be individually different. Of course, there is a “norm” in daily work, but I am always watching for an opportunity to present routine work in a most unusual way. *The Look of Color*, a normal senior portrait, resulted from just such an effort, and has been a personal favorite and very popular with clients as well.

My darkroom continues to bring new challenges every day. I continue to feel the same excitement as certain prints, whether mine or the work of a client, roll off the processor and evoke the simple response of “Wow!”

With the basic elements of the technical aspect of creating the photograph under control, my personal motivation begins in the visual design and construction of the image. With a mindset for “individuality,” the eye must now see through existing conditions to find something new. With all of the fundamentals of light, shadow and color, the challenge is to sort through the factors present, stretch the thinking process to utilize all of the existing variables, and combine them for an exceptional image.

I remember hearing somewhere that a photograph is a creation of our spirit for which nature is only a starting point. *Random Flow* presented the task of capturing the colors in a Smoky Mountain stream where, in the springtime, nature surpasses herself. Sometimes, it is as through nature, the physical power that causes all the beauty of the material world, throws down the gauntlet, defying duplication. It is a challenge I cannot ignore.

I remember a saying attributed to Yousef Karsh when he was asked what had been his favorite image. His reply was that it was the “next one.” I share that philosophy. Looking through the lens and imagining the ultimate image has become a passion that cannot be denied. Visualizing the final image in everything around me is all-consuming. In the studio, on location, or simply driving down the road, that next great image is just waiting to be captured. The excitement of creating impact through individuality has become an all-absorbing part of my being. I cannot imagine my life without creating images.

Once there were regions of our imagination to which photography could not soar, but now...always stretching, always reaching...who knows what tomorrow will bring.

## ASP Fellowship Thesis

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