

ASP FELLOWSHIP THESIS
THOM ROUSE, AUGUST 2010

"I wish I knew what I know now, when I was younger"

...Ronnie Lane

A BRIEF PERSONAL HISTORY:

Although my early history is rich with detail, as is everyone's life, I have no memories of any particular event or crucial insight that led me to photography and image making as a career. In fact, I was a late entrant to the field. Prior to the age of 40 I'd had no particular interest in photography, at least not any interest that exceeded my interest in many other things. I'm college educated with a degree in Behavioral Science obtained somewhat haphazardly over many years and several universities and colleges. The many jobs I'd held before becoming a photographer ranged from bus driver to middle management, from airport limo driver to management consultant, from technical writer to mailman. More precisely, I was an overly bright dilettante with a short attention span and generally underemployed. Prior to photography, six years was my longest tenure at any one job. In those years I was (and still am) devoted to the company of my family - my wife and two sons, and nothing else much mattered except vague and fleeting interests in a wide variety of subjects including politics, psychology, philosophy, and literature. My only true passion had been music, from trombone, to piano and ultimately jazz guitar. I practiced guitar for 8,10 sometimes 12 hours a day, only to be disappointed in my progress and knowing that I would never be as good as my musical heroes. So I gave it up in frustration and sold my guitar to pay the rent. ("I wish I'd known what I know now, when I was younger"). I sometimes rue the fact that I did not discover my passion for photography much earlier in life, but truth be told, I would not have had the necessary maturity to persevere as an image-maker. I would have, no doubt, given up photography in frustration just as I did music. I wish I'd known - It was never about becoming as good as another, its about becoming what only you can be - making the music that only you can make - making the image that only you can make!

FAST FORWARD TO 1993:

I had, for the six preceding years, sought refuge from self-employment in the business world as a mail carrier for the Postal Service. I could well have continued as a mailman, punching in and out, checking my integrity at the door, and talking long walks everyday while listening to books on tape. My wife Joanne was then working for the Small Business Administration and became aware of the availability for sale of a small portrait/wedding studio in our area. At her insistence I investigated the possibility while she and my brother prepared a business plan and not so gently nudged me towards a career in photography.

Given my personal history I was reluctant to commit to the plan and felt it would be safer and a more economically sound decision to continue at the Postal Service. In fact, this would have been the more economically sound decision, but I am forever indebted to my wife for pushing me into photography. Despite the economic volatility of studio ownership my wife and sons are pleased at the outcome and agree that it was what was best for me. If not the families economic stability. ¹

In Late 1993 we purchased Jay Elliott photography in Dekalb. IL, an existing studio with a 29-year history. I quickly realized that I was in over my head and knew virtually nothing about photography. Being more than a little arrogant about myself as a quick study, I was overwhelmed at the depth and complexity of the craft. I could not so much as load film for the Minolta RBs that were the principle instrument of our business. A very patient Jay Elliott mentored me through the first 6 months and beyond while I began to learn the craft of photography. A good and fine man, Jay gave me the best training he could, but advised me that I simply must join the PPA and my local affiliate PPA Northern IL. If I expected to advance and succeed in the business. Good advice indeed, and I have been a member ever since.

I have since looked back at some of the pictures I took in those first few years and wondered how I possibly stayed in business. In fact, images from those first few years were horrendously awful, and I can't imagine why they were purchased at all, yet alone treasured as family heirlooms. My typically wandering attention was held fast during the first years while I concentrated on learning craft in the camera room and darkroom. I have very fond memories of spending all night in the dark room, with jazz on the radio while I wasted a small fortune on paper and chemicals for competition prints that would typically score in the low 70s (anything scoring above a 69 I considered a valid success) It's remarkable that I survived my less than careful use of potassium ferrocyanide. (Who knew you were supposed to ventilate the darkroom and take care to keep it away from the acetic acid in the stop bath?)

At about five years into the new studio adventure, my attention began to wane. My intent was to steer myself towards commercial work which I thought more interesting and prestigious than portrait/wedding work. It turns out my ability to collaborate with art directors was less than adequate. My fondest days shooting commercial were with backhoes and bobcats. The art director and I got along famously, and we'd play with heavy equipment in the dirt all day, take a few acceptable if not great images, and close the day with a well deserved six pack. But in most cases I had difficulty collaborating with art directors towards an image that would satisfy both of us. I eventually realized my interest was (and still is) for images with people. My interest in the inanimate extends no further than as a compliment to the human element in an image.

¹Despite the economic vagaries of business ownership, we are proud that we got our sons through prestigious private universities in four years each. This stands as one of our proudest achievements – we're still not sure how we did it but we're thankful those dreaded tuition years are over. I was a reverse role model for my sons – they wanted to be nothing like me.

Nevertheless, the few years I spent shooting chrome on a 4x5 camera were invaluable to my experience. I developed patience with the technical demands of photography.

Kids were my eventual downfall as a studio owner. I love children, but I prefer not to photograph them unless they've been freeze dried first and their parents are locked in another room. When I judge, I will sometimes go nuts for beautifully photographed and expressive children and have to temper my enthusiasm with careful consideration of the twelve elements. I have great respect for that which I cannot do.

In those years, I was growing and improving as a photographer. I'd hang my best images on the walls and in the windows. My clients would compliment them effusively, and then ask for the same old high key smiley kid shot. It was time for a change. In 2002, on the cusp of digital transition, we sold the studio. In retrospect, it was the perfect time to sell in terms of our photographic assets. Our film cameras, color and B/W darkroom equipment would rapidly begin to lose value in the following years. And my entry into digital image making was an early rebirth in my short career as a photographer.

DIGITAL TRANSITION:

I am not an early adopter, nor am I particularly fascinated by equipment and technology. I remember some of the early digital images that looked almost but not quite entirely unlike photographs. But digital imaging advanced more quickly than any of us could have imagined. My entry into digital photography and the postproduction opportunities offered by Photoshop was a new beginning. For me, the transition from the constraints of film to the latitude and seemingly endless horizons of digital defined the difference between photography and image making. Digital was a whole new medium in which I could take inspiration not only from Rembrandt, Renoir and Sargent, but from Dali, Picasso, and Magritte as well. I quickly found myself drawn down the rabbit hole of the computer, much as I had been by long nights in the B/W darkroom. The ability to select, manipulate and composite images was immediately compelling to me and continues to be so. Yet I remain true to my roots as a photographer. Among my personal rules is that I must photograph every element in my composition. I don't use the stock images or textures of others and all elements, no matter how radically they've been manipulated in the computer, must be photographic in origin; I don't render in the computer.²

² **These are rules that I make for myself – not rules that I necessarily think should be applied to anyone else.**

PHILOSOPHY

JUDGMENT:

Judgment is one of many paradoxes in the creative process. We all cast judgment, we all crave judgment, judgment is integral to our advancement as image-makers, and yet it is the nemesis of creativity. To be creative we must suspend judgment and allow our selves to fail. If we prejudge our work, we preclude the opportunity to be creative by foreclosing the option of ignoring the rules, overcoming the rules or utilizing old rules in a new way. I am of the belief that the creative experience is rare for a photographer. Most of our time is spent learning and mastering craft. In the rare case where we are truly creative, we are only creative the first time, and then the techniques becomes just another in our bag of tricks. Evaluating our creativity is a matter of judgment, but we must not judge too soon, or we thwart those rare creative possibilities.

As a young man I was terribly judgmental about many things, including areas in which I had no expertise at all. I would cast judgment about music, literature, and film and make many pronouncements about what was good and bad. As a result, I was often embarrassed by these pronouncements years later when I finally "got it" - the genius in a work of art or music that had earlier eluded me with my limited experience. I still make these errors in judgment (though most often privately and to myself) but I try to maintain a policy of being "descriptive" rather than "proscriptive". In evaluating the work of myself and of others, I strive (not always successfully) to describe what I am judging rather than insist on proclaiming something good or bad based solely on my consideration. It

seems to me that I learn more, I share more, and I avoid a good deal of embarrassment by adopting this policy.³

That said, I do tend to get annoyed by those among us who proclaim an image good or bad based solely on his or her paradigm for image making. As an image-maker and as an organization member, I am enthusiastic about the vast range of image making styles and paradigms. Nothing could be better for our organization and our businesses than that we are distinct and unique from each other. It is my hope and wish that we enable, rather than discourage, a diversity of style within our organizations. If all our images are alike, we become a commodity.

DISCOVERY:

From the lessons of art history I have come to the opinion that we are discoverers more than we are the creators of images, a concept implied by Michelangelo when he told his assistant that he would not carve David – David was already contained within the block of marble - he would simply remove the marble that was not David. Within any defined space, at any given resolution there are a finite number of possibilities. All possible images exist in potential. It is our ambition as image-makers to recognize and harvest those images, among all the possible images, that most appropriately represent the ideas, concepts, experience and sensibility of the maker. I don't mean to sound "artsy" or "new agey" about this notion. I suggest the idea simply as a mental attitude that I find a more practical approach to image making than taking on the tremendous burden of "creating" an image.

³ **When I was first encouraged to consider judging competition, my first thought was “why would I possibly want to judge the work of others – I have my own problems”. But in my first few experiences with judging at my local affiliate, I quickly realized that I was learning a great deal and acquiring visual literacy by being so actively engaged in looking at the work of others. And I realized that, at least in some case, my comments and perception were of benefit to the image-maker, and that judgment (after the process of creation) was important to our growth and development. When I decided to take the judges workshop, my assumption was that it was just a hoop one had to jump through to become a judge. The workshop was an epiphany. Taught by Helen Yancy and Barry Rankin I was astonished by the integrity of the process and the sanctity with which it was regarded by affiliate jurors. I am fortunate and honored by the opportunity to judge as an affiliate juror.**

VISUAL LITERACY:

I am a strong proponent of the notion that visual literacy is equal in importance to technical competence and craft in image making. Because photography is an equipment intensive media, we all too easily lose sight of the fact that no matter how well we know f stops and shutter speeds, cameras and software, if we are to create good images we must first know what they look like. I am a student (but not at all a scholar) of the history of art. Since our earliest recorded history our species has been banging on logs to make music and drawing on cave walls to make images. And the same visual ideas and concepts seem to resonate, not only through the decades, but also through the centuries and millennia. There are no new ideas – we simply rediscover and redeploy the same ideas within the context of our selves and our cultures. Picasso took inspiration from drawings on the cave walls of Lescaux France made some 18,000 years before – Jackson Pollock and action painting must pay homage to the calligraphy of Chinese monks. Gustave Courbet decided to paint real people doing real things as opposed to the painting the aristocracy posed in elegant formality. (Much like many of our current brides who wish to have their weddings photographed as photojournalism and not in what they regard as the "posey wosey" formality of their parents wedding photographs). And what we consider classical posing was not invented by Frank Cricchio,⁴ nor during the renaissance, but in ancient Greece with the statues of Hermes and Aphrodite. We are tiny cogs in a long history of art making. We would do well to respect and study the traditions. Time will tell, but perhaps one of us will make a tiny but unique addition to the vast history of human art.

EQUIPMENT:

I have done my best (and not always successfully) to avoid being seduced by the equipment of our craft. Although a late bloomer, I did enter the field early enough to gain experience with film and traditional methods. In those days, a Hassaleblad purchased in 1970 was nearly identical to one purchased in 1990. Chemistry, paper and emulsions changed periodically but remained fundamentally the same in principle. Learning our technical craft was difficult, and there was always something new to learn, but we could, for the most part, become proficient with our equipment and ignore it to be able to concentrate on the images. With the digital transition our equipment and software options expanded exponentially, and the current state of the art becomes old school in almost no time at all. We are in a constant state of flux and must expend a great deal of our attention just trying to keep up. As much as I have personally embraced the opportunities of the digital transition, I am concerned that it's rapid progress deters us from concentrating on images. (It's hard to remember you came to drain the swamp when you're up to your butt in alligators)

⁴ **I say this only in jest. I have the utmost respect for Frank Cricchio. His was among the very first workshops I attended and I am indebted to him as is our entire industry.**

I am discouraged when a new version of Photoshop is announced. I would have a lifetime of opportunity available if Photoshop had stopped with version .3. But I push myself to keep up, and three months after I adopt the latest version I can't conceive of life without it. I continually remind myself that "it's about the image" and that I want to maintain control of my images – I'm not ready to concede the creation of my image to the software. I feel a need for vigilance in not ceding the process to the equipment.

PROCESS AND STYLE:

It has been a recent project for me to contemplate the nature of style: what is it and how is it acquired. I feel that I have achieved a recognizable style but I'd never contemplated how style occurs. During my early years in photography, I was consumed by just learning the technical craft. Although I'd considered the issue of style and was confused by it, I set the issue aside until recently. In retrospect I think that style finds you – you do not seek out a style. "Ready, Fire, Aim!" Looking for style is a little like looking for love - the more it is sought, the more elusive it becomes. It had concerned me that, while documenting artwork for students and faculty at a local university, I sensed that so much emphasis was placed on achieving a recognizable, individual style that, for many students, a gimmick was taking the place of genuine style.⁴ I thought that faculty emphasis on style was an inhibition to student style development, but I had no idea of how one develops style.

I've come to the opinion that style occurs as the result of a number of factors and that these factors are all part of an individual's "process". I define "process" as all the myriad elements that ultimately contribute to an individual's way of making images. These would include not only equipment and subject choices, but also such things as musical taste, religious views, and cultural background. My thought is that an inventory of ones "process" might yield, not a style in itself, but a map and a guide towards style and an opportunity to identify elements that might be changed or be altered to influence style. I'd encourage all photographers to construct a "process inventory" for themselves. Such issues (among many) might include "Do you prefer to shoot at f2.8 or f11?" "Do you use a tripod or do you prefer handheld?" "Do you spend 3 hours setting up the shot and take 3 exposures or spend 3 minutes to set up the shot and take 3,000 exposures?" "Do you love digital or do you miss film?" These along with many other personal questions about subject matter, personal insecurities i.e. ("I'm not technical enough" "I'm not creative enough") musical taste, favorite colors etc. comprise a "Process Inventory". There are no correct answers, only an individual's answers. Perhaps the only wrong answer is to answer "all of the above" to every question, in which case one might look a little harder at what ones true preference are.

⁴ For instance, one student whose photography MFA show I documented, had printed all of her images on paper bags. Yet the images themselves were not at all unique. It was telling in itself that a candidate for a photography MFA would hire me to document her show because she was afraid she couldn't expose chrome properly.

Developing a "Process Inventory" was a revelation to me. I contemplate it often and wonder what will happen if I change one element or another of my process. Deliberately changing elements of my process has become the source for many self-assignments and the pivot point for the occasional need to get out of my rut.

And ultimately, more than any other factor, I've come to believe that style is the result of three things":

Being true to ones self.

Passion

Perseverance

RIGHT BRAIN – LEFT BRAIN

High on the list of overused and misunderstood concepts (in my opinion) is the notion that we are primarily right brained or left brained with an emphasis on becoming more right brained and hence more creative. Although we all certainly have a propensity to work from one side or the other we clearly need both halves of our brains to be successful image-makers. In the original research of split brain patients by Gazzaniga and Sperry it was shown that individuals lacking communication between hemispheres of their brains exhibited serious cognitive deficits – deficits that would make it very difficult to navigate everyday life let alone to make successful images.

We clearly need both halves of our brains to succeed as image-makers, the logical, technical left as well as the intuitive, spatial right. I hope that the popular notions of right brain vs. left-brain functions return to the realization that we need both halves of our brains. The two halves are complimentary to almost any task and the ability of an older individual to integrate the functions of both hemispheres may well be the neurological definition of wisdom.

Another catchphrase I believe it is time to retire due to overuse is "Thinking outside the box". There is a danger in trying so hard to work outside the "box" that one is plastered so closely to its outside that the work remains defined by the box. On the other hand, its important to remember there is a whole lot of good stuff still inside the "box". In either case, I'm personally ready to retire "The Box" as a metaphor for creative thinking – I fear it's become an "inside the box" platitude.⁵

⁵ **And while we're at it, lets retire that damn paper clip in Word!**

VISUALIZATION – PRE AND POST:

At one time, I felt that if I did not pre-visualize my entire image, than I was somehow cheating. I no longer feel that way. For my images, and for the images of others my only concern is the image. I have great interest in the process, but I make no judgments in regard to the "rightness" or "wrongness" of how they were created. The matter of "process" is a personal one – but the proof is in the pudding and the pudding is the image. It is of no concern whether the maker took 3 exposures or culled just the right exposure from 3,000. The questions about Mac or PC, Cannon or Nikon, pre vs. post visualization are all trivia. The image, no matter how it was created, has the final word.

In terms of my own process, I create images in roughly equal proportions, in one of three ways. About a third of the time I have a very specific and detailed visualization about what the final image will be. About a third of the time I start with a specific visualization that evolves during the course of its development, sometimes in the camera room – sometimes in the computer. And, about a third of the time, I start with no visualization at all. Something occurs during shooting or, I'm simply fooling around on the computer and an image begins to take shape. I have no advice to others on what might be the best way. My only theory is that the most important rules are the ones we make for ourselves. Sometimes the pivot points in our careers seem to be overcoming something we learned years ago and have accepted as gospel ever since. It's another paradox of creativity – we must work hard to learn our craft and then we must work hard to un-learn the aspects of our craft that hold us back. Assumptions about the "right way" sometimes need to be overcome in order to advance our creativity. Once we have found the first "right" answer it's time to find the next "right" answer.

MEANING vs. EXPERIENCE

My images are often considered "non traditional" although I jump at the chance to point out the very traditional influences in my work. I am often asked, "What does it mean?" My frivolous answer is that "meaning" is in the mind of the credit card holder. When I'm on the verge of a sale in a gallery – the image means exactly what the buyer wants it to mean.

But more seriously, I think that meaning in itself is irrelevant to an image. We want to experience an image, not to know it's meaning. I perceive meaning in many of my images, and other viewers, I hope, will perceive entirely different meanings, but without the experience of the image, the meaning is irrelevant. Sometimes, it's the very mystery and ambiguity of an image that conveys the experience. No matter how significant the "meaning", if an image is not well crafted to convey an "experience" to at least one other viewer, it fails as art. You can tell me about your grandmother, her silver hair and blue

eyes, but an image gives me the "experience" of your grandmother. "Meaning" is conveyed by words – images are to create an experience. We create images because some concepts are ineffable – they can't be conveyed by words. If we knew what it meant, we wouldn't need to make the image.

In the few cases where I've constructed an image based on a meaning, they have failed miserably. I perceive personal meaning in my own work, but it only comes to light after I've finished the image and I have the insight that "Oh, that's what that was about". I am reluctant to share those personal meanings for fear of diminishing the opportunity of others to perceive their own meanings. I hope that many of my images are sufficiently ambiguous to allow a variety of "meanings" to be perceived based on the individual life experience of a specific viewer. But far more important, I hope that viewers will "experience" my work. As a culture, we are far more musically literate, than visually literate. No one asks what a melody means. We appreciate the experience of a piece of music or we do not. We don't ask what the melody means, or rarely even what the lyrics mean.

THE JOY OF OUR PROFESSION

Like many of us, I feel so very blessed to be a part of this profession! I know many people in other fields who are waiting for the weekend, waiting for the next vacation and waiting to retire. I can't wait to get up in the morning and do it again – my best work is still ahead of me – I still have everything to learn and that will always be the case. As I think back on my youth and my inability to stick with any one thing, I am forever grateful to my wife for pushing me into photography and knowing what my needs were better than I. (I hope she can forgive herself). I am certainly an annoyance to her when she is speaking to me and I'm wandering around in my head visualizing. She knows the look – she calls it "photo head". But she is a patient woman and knows that I am far more fulfilled as an image-maker than I ever might have been as a mail carrier.

She also reminds me of the great fortune given to me through affiliation in professional organizations –PPA Northern IL, APPI, the PPA and, not the least of which, the ASP. She reminds me that few professions offer affiliation that brings both acknowledgment and the needed critical evaluation. I am a weird introverted guy. Nothing means more to me than the affiliation I have with all of you, to keep your company and to share your expertise. Many of you who started out as professional colleagues have become my dearest and most loved friends. Thank you all for letting me be one of you! It means the world to me!