

JOHN PAUL CAPONIGRO

TECHNIQUE



1. Classic prints exhibit extended depth of field and dynamic range with high contrast idealized color.

AESTHETICS OF THE PRINT

Half of the battle is knowing how to do something. The other half is knowing what to do.

When it comes to making fine photographic prints, the road has been well mapped by our predecessors.

One of the best ways to educate yourself about great print quality is to look at a number of great prints (directly rather than through reproduction). And, to keep on looking. Education, or enrichment, is a dynamic, evolving, lifelong process. Every time you look, sensitively with awareness, your vision grows. There's always something more to learn.

Keith Carter, one of the most celebrated contemporary photographers working today, considered and still considers looking at great photographs drawn from the history of photography – in prominent museums, galleries, and arts festivals – his graduate studies. We can learn from the greats. Howard Schatz, one of the most versatile contemporary photographic masters, makes looking at a wide range of other people's images a daily practice, confident that this stimulates his growth. We can learn from almost anyone.

Although there's a clearly defined set of objectives within the medium there's plenty of room for creative decision making. That's never been more true today, as the medium continues to evolve at an ever increasing rate, the number of craftsman working with it increases, and diversity is increasingly embraced.

The great dancer/choreographer Twyla Tharp once said, "In order to think outside the box, you first have to have a box." So what makes a great photographic print? It helps to know what to look for. And it helps to articulate what you find.

A combination of elements (and their relationships to one another) is often evaluated when assessing print quality. Speaking very broadly, you could say, it's all about reproducing detail.

Focus and extended depth of field go hand in hand to successfully represent the subject of an image and its context. There are accepted deviations from this norm. Soft focus may be used to reduce distracting detail. Selective focus may be used to direct attention away from less important elements and toward more important elements. Motion blur may be used to enhance gesture.

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2. *Synthetic color is a deviation that makes representation challenging to support but may generate additional impact.*

Sharpening (analog and digital) can be used to enhance the descriptive qualities of an image, by making line and texture more pronounced. Push sharpening too far and an image begins to look graphic rather than photographic. Noise may become apparent. Contours (bright halos and dark lines) may be accentuated unnaturally. Texture may become overly crisp or even brittle.

Noise (introduced by capture, editing, or output) is typically minimized. While the presence of noise is often overlooked, accentuate noise and subjects are de-emphasized as atmosphere and medium are emphasized.

Gradation, or the ability to reproduce smooth tonal transitions continuously without posterization, is prized. Harsh tonal transitions quickly make an image appear graphic or even abstract, reducing the illusion of volume/space and calling attention to contours.

Perhaps most prized, is the ability to produce images that appear filled with light. But which qualities of light? Brightness? Hue? Saturation? Yes! More! More! More!

In general, when considering brightness, high dynamic range, high contrast images are favored. Dark blacks and bright whites. Shadow and highlight detail. Contrast providing maximum separation between adjacent tones, but not to the point of reducing the number of tonal values.

There is a bias towards idealized hue (where the local hue of objects are reproduced 'accurately' – the redness of a rose uninfluenced by environmental considerations), moving next to ambient hue (where temporal and atmospheric effects modify local hue – the rose may turn orange in yellow light), and last to synthetic hue (hue that is invented and may not be representational – a rose may be changed from red to blue).

Saturation is preferred at high levels, but not if it exceeds the limits of believability. (Or, we'll have none of it, in the case of black and white images.)

Elimination of process artifacts. The conventional goal is for the medium to be transparent or virtually invisible, providing the viewer with the most direct unmediated experience with the subject possible. Chemical staining or printer artifacting (banding, nozzle clog, headstrike) calls attention to process and competes for attention with the subject represented by the medium.

Again the overall tendency is to deliver more information that is believable.

Appropriate materials. Materials either reproduce a maximum amount of the above information, or the materials used seem most similar to the subject, or they are used to draw attention to the artist's subjective decisions.

Appropriate scale. Typically subjects in photographs are presented at a reduced scale. (below a certain size, roughly 8x10", images become miniatures, drawing the viewer into closer proximity, imparting a sense of intimacy), sometimes subjects are presented at life size (the most representational scale), and occasionally at very large scale (immersing the viewer's entire field of vision, often creating an overwhelming effect).

Appropriate presentation. Certain images seem most appropriate in certain contexts. You don't expect to see Mickey Mouse in a fine art museum, just as you don't expect to see the latest conceptual art in an amusement park. Similarly, different presentations (finishing touches such as lighting, framing, installation) seem appropriate for different types of images. We're used to seeing comic books exposed in bundles



3. *Reduced dynamic range, often with greatly reduced saturation, sometimes with reduced sharpness, occasionally with vignetting and material process artifacts (scratching and staining), printed on matte surfaces at small scales classically connotes historic photographic processes.*

on spinning wire racks and paintings in frames hung isolated on well lit walls.

Not every great photograph is successful on every one of these fronts. Small deviations are often accommodated, particularly if the message is strong and if a majority of the elements are well executed. Major deviations draw a great deal of attention to themselves and may overshadow the primary content of an image for no reason. If none of the elements display good craft, work is often considered unprofessional.

Deviations from norms are often used to enhance expression or impart a mood. As you reduce detail and depart from convention you move images away from the descriptive and literal to the suggestive or symbolic.

Exceptions may prove the rules. You can break the rules for effect – successfully. Doing this may help give your images a unique look. Many others have done so successfully. Edward Steichen and Keith Carter employ highly selective focus accentuating emotional and nostalgic responses to their images. Michael Kenna and Sheila Metzner have both employed pronounced noise in their images to impart

unique expressive qualities to their prints that enhances them rather than detracting from them. Josef Koudelka and Matt Mahurin deliberately eliminate detail in shadows to create an evocative mood in their images. Sally Mann’s recent work employs collusion for its surprising and often uncontrollable, unevenly stained appearance, while Joel Peter Witkin deliberately distresses his negatives before printing to impart an expressionistic antique finish. For these breaches in protocol to be successful there has to be a compelling reason (an external or internal logic) to depart from tradition. Your choices communicate your intention.

Today, in the twenty-first century, using digital technology, we have an unprecedented degree of control over all of the criteria used to assess print quality. So much so, that it begs the question whether our inherited preferences are still as valid today as they were yesterday. Our aesthetics may need to evolve along with technology. (Our language certainly does.) Reconsideration, individually and by society as a whole, is useful. Despite the difficulties of disseminating rapidly changing information and addressing reactionary tendencies, the burgeoning diversity and inclusiveness of today’s contemporary art market is both encouraging and exciting.

Ansel Adams remarked, “There’s nothing worse than a sharp picture of a fuzzy concept.” If you only correctly execute technique you may only produce images that are well crafted but not necessarily artful. When evaluating works of art consider three essential components – content, form, and feeling. A work of art may be considered exceptional because of results in one or more of these criteria.

Ultimately what makes a photograph great is the depth you invest in it. The quality and kind of depth you invest in your work can vary from intellectual to emotional to visceral and beyond. You’re an individual! Celebrate that! Show us the world as you truly see it. Craft and aesthetics are useful vehicles that enable you to communicate with others. If you master them, you can enhance your voice with more power, complexity, subtlety, and versatility. Put them to use appropriately in the service of delivering your message effectively.