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Photographing Ansel Adams

I take six shots of the subject when I'm just taking one shot of the subject! [lol!]

Mike

Seriously, to me "spray and pray" means when people set the frame rate to the highest frequency, point the camera, and hold the button down. You do realize there are people who come back from half-day shoots with several THOUSAND exposures, right?

Posted by: Mike Johnston | Friday, 29 October 2010 at 12:21 PM

Mani,
Note that some cognitive biases are indicators of mental health.

Mike

Posted by: Mike Johnston | Friday, 29 October 2010 at 12:17 PM

Have you tried the one where you attach the camera to a piece of string and whirl it round your head? I believe there might even be a Flickr group...

Posted by: Richard | Friday, 29 October 2010 at 09:19 PM

Lightning? Somebody mentioned lightning?

Here's a lightning photography story:

A few years ago, my sweetie and I were driving home through a lightning storm. The lightning was so intense we pulled over to try to get a photo of it, each with our terrible phone cameras. (My phone, a Motorola v710, is notorious for having the worst camera in the history of phones.)

Anyway, we beat the odds and got some photos. Better yet, we each got a shot of the same lightning bolt!

These were both hand-held, from inside the car, mine on the left, hers on the right.

Posted by: ed hanson | Friday, 29 October 2010 at 09:41 PM

Dear Dennis,

So you're saying that if the photograph cannot be fully previsualized, it shouldn't be made?

If that's not what you're saying, then propose an alternate, deliberate way, that I could have made these two photographs.

Personally, if someone gets photographs as good as these by running a movie camera all day and selecting frames, I say more power to them!

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Dear Jeff,

Find me a chimpanzee who can select an interesting subject, compose an interesting overall composition around that subject, and make the technical and equipment choices to interestingly record that subject and I'll rent them!

Otherwise, they're just pushing a button. Not worth even a banana to me.

I've been "chimping" since day one, and I simply do not understand the attitude of folks who think it's improper technique. Whydahell shouldn't I confirm I got a good photograph on the spot, if I can? I don't plan to EVER stop doing that.

But, as for free snaps, I've written in previous columns that they're anything but free for me. Excessive photography eats up time and money I'd rather spend on the good ones. Sometimes, though, there's no better alternative.

DDR and I are amused by fancy words. Calling it what we did was not an act of pretension but one of humor.

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Dear Mike,

Well, ummm, YEAH! Seeing as usually one photo is all I need and want.

Understand that my 40 years of film photography fits into about 1.5 cubic feet of space... and that includes the individual mylar sleeves for every strip of film.

There are situation when I will make dozens, even hundreds of photographs of a 'subject' -- photographing a musical performance, for example. But that's because each and every photograph is very different.

pax / Chrin
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Posted by: chrin | Friday, 29 October 2010 at 10:22 PM

"If that's not what you're saying, then propose an alternate, deliberate way, that I could have made these two photographs."

Gosh Chrin, I'm not sure what to say. I think a high shutter speed and a zoomed frame of a waterfall can easily be predicted. In much the same way a slow shutter speed will give a silky smooth result.
The alternate method I would propose is to be deliberate.

Posted by: Dennis | Saturday, 30 October 2010 at 01:14 AM

For those doubting the validity of "stochastic photography" the answer is provided in Chrin's own words - "photographs as good as these"

Posted by: richard | Saturday, 30 October 2010 at 07:04 AM

Dear Dennis,

Wrong.

I cannot imagine you've ever tried this.

Alternately, you've done it so many tens of thousands of times that you already intuitively know what the structure of the water will look like on a submillisecond scale.

In which case you'd have predicted exactly the patterns that showed up in figures 1 and 3 and how they would be positioned in the scene and developed the ultra-fast shutter-finger reflexes to record said structures when they reached exactly the right position in the frame to make a successful composition.

Sure, if you say so.

pax / Chrin

Posted by: chrin | Saturday, 30 October 2010 at 11:41 AM

P.S. technical aside for the general readership-- Dennis is pulling my leg a bit, and I'm doing the same in return.

In fact, water breaking up like this is a chaotic process. A supercomputer model would be able to predict that this waterfall, figure 3, would break into a lacework pattern over this particular flow -- most don't -- but it's physically impossible to predict exactly what the breakup will look like more than fraction of a second in advance. Same way it's impossible to predict right now the exact weather conditions for New Year's Day.

The lacework pattern was, of course, invisible to the naked eye; it moved too fast to be seen. But even if I'd known it was there, it wouldn't be possible to predict just what it would look like by the time the nerve impulses got from my brain to my finger.

pax / computationally-intense Chrin

Posted by: chrin | Saturday, 30 October 2010 at 11:56 AM

I don't understand negative responses to the method. It seems to me that the only valid judgment of art is the work of art itself. It's not as if HCB used only one frame of film on the photoshoot where he captured the guy jumping over the puddle. He shot (was it 12? I think it was 12) several frames of different people jumping the puddle. He had a concept in mind and set up as much of the shoot as he could, and then shot a variety of people until he had a frame that captured the decisive moment he had hoped for. How is that different than setting up the camera on the tripod, framing the stretch of water that looks best to the artist's eye, calculating and inputting the desired exposure values with the desired DOF, and then shooting multiple shots to get the most idealized decisive moment?

Would a gallery turn away a Jeff Wall piece because they had some secret knowledge that he shot 5 frames in quick succession and then selected the one where the subject's facial expression was ideal for his vision? No. At the end of the day they will accept or reject his work based on the work itself and not on their knowledge or assumptions about his process.

A process is a tool. A student - one who is studying the craft of their preferred artistic medium - should learn about their tools and while they are doing so their teacher has a right (and an obligation) to critique their use of tools. But once the student has moved out of formal education and into the field of creating art using the tools they have learned, it doesn't make sense to tell them "Your chosen tools are bad tools." That's gibberish. The tools are irrelevant and the creation is everything.

We're all students (I hope!) even as we work on our own to create our arts. We try new tools sometimes (a different way of holding the paintbrush, or a new paint medium, or what have you) and we assess the potential value to our future artwork as we become familiar with a new (to us) tool. If we do not change on occasion, if we do not grow, then I think that's a sad reality.

I just don't understand criticizing a method, or any tool as being without value.

Posted by: Christian | Saturday, 30 October 2010 at 12:02 PM

For portraits, I've found it helpful to take several of each sitting and lighting. Sometimes, they are all OK, in which case it was a waste. Often, some are bad -- bad expression or a blink -- in which case it was good to have alternatives. Sometimes, one of the frames is exceptional.

While you can find hidden treasures in perfectly chosen moments of moving water, the hidden moments in facial expressions usually look unnatural.

It's interesting that two seemingly opposite types of subjects benefit from multiple takes.

Posted by: Kurt Shoens | Saturday, 30 October 2010 at 04:48 PM

I think the lower two are beautiful - Hiroshige and Hokusai come to mind.

Posted by: David Bennett | Saturday, 30 October 2010 at 07:40 PM

Christian says, "He (HCB)had a concept in mind and set up as much of the shoot as he could..."

Isn't that the point, he had a concept in mind. Is it random and spray shooting? Hardly. It's not the method (many shots of any area or subject) I take issue with or the resulting "art" but rather the idea that one should point and spray without some semblance of an idea and then pixel peep afterwards. All this has context and meaning even if we are not aware of it at any given time and is hardly "pray and spray" except within a very narrow meaning. Like shooting rapids.

Will I try it? Been doing it for quite some time, always with a concept in mind. And one leads to another, just as Christian says.

If this is what is meant by spray shooting, then I guess I missed the original point, and we are in agreement and it is all semantics.

Posted by: JDR | Sunday, 31 October 2010 at 09:21 AM

@ David: yep, definitely Hokusai's wave. The way the wave crest spreads against a strong wind. Very japanese ink drawing pattern.

Posted by: Max | Sunday, 31 October 2010 at 10:26 AM

Dear JMR,

You have focused on one single word in a second-hand, throwaway quote, as if it were the point and purpose of my article.

Please observe the forest, not the single tree.

pax / Chrin

Posted by: chrin | Sunday, 31 October 2010 at 12:44 PM

Chrin: *truly an exercise in contemplating visual minutiae. Not happy-making times.*

I beg to suggest that there is actually a learning process to be had here. Several times this past few months I've done this 'stochastic' thing; you might say it's results-priority mode with bracketing. Those minutiae can be eye-openers in discovering not only the "best" photograph, but the very criteria by which it might be the "best". Raindrops fall in a puddle; the ripples expand; some photos will show just one set of ripple rings, others multiple in varying stages of overlap. That overlap becomes a criterion for measuring the photo, for that particular scene, which you might go on to use elsewhere too.

I'd go as far as to say there's stochastic method behind your previous deliberate approach, it's just that you didn't see it because you pack up and go after the one frame. There are limits of predictability; if you have two separate shutter exposures whose images have the same MDS-sum at a presentable resolution... take the lens-cap off. ;)

Posted by: Jim | Monday, 01 November 2010 at 05:05 PM

Dear Tim,

You could very well be right. One of the things I'm having to learn is how to "let go" at some point. When I have, say, a half dozen of these photographs, and they're all technically okay, I can usually throw out two, maybe three of them immediately because the compositions obviously don't work as well as the other ones do.

At that point I can start to make myself crazy trying to figure out which one is the very best. If I haven't made up my mind after a minute or so, I'm starting to decide that it probably doesn't matter! Just pick one of them arbitrarily and go with it. Either trust my instinct knows which one is the best one, or that there truly aren't any differences that matter.

That's what I wound up doing with Figure 1.

pax \ Chrin
[Please excuse any word-salad. MacSpeech in training!]
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Posted by: chrin | Monday, 01 November 2010 at 04:09 PM

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