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Wednesday, 11 May 2011

# No One Cares How Hard You Worked

By **Ctein**

Take a look at the photograph below. It's one I'm really proud of, and I love it. Do you love it, too? Great!

The Apollo-Saturn 1 launch combination that comprised the U.S. part of the 1975 Apollo-Soyuz mission

Not so much? Well then you aren't my friend anymore, he said petulantly.

Just kidding. Still, the next couple of paragraphs are specifically targeted at you less-admiring folks.

Making that photograph was a significant challenge. Frankly, I couldn't have done it without medium format color negative film. Back in 1975, there was no other way to record that kind of detail and most especially that kind of subject luminance range. From density readings off the negatives, I estimate there is way over 10 stops, probably 12 stops of range from the white rocket to the most tenuous wisps of the floodlight beams at the corners of the photograph. I wanted to get it all. Well, I nailed it, just barely squeezing that range of tone and detail into what the film would accept.

Only problem was I had no idea how I was going to print it. I knew that when I made the photograph. I just figured that at least if I had it on film there was some chance that I might figure out how to print it. Keep in mind that this was before I had started making dye transfer prints; I was strictly a chromogenic printer. I hadn't even yet mastered contrast control masking, although I'd heard of it; all I really knew from was dodging and burning-in.

It took me three years and innumerable tests to figure out how to print that photograph. Eventually I learned how to make an exotic contrast control mask that pulled in the highlight and shadow range without destroying the contrast and tonal separation there, so that it would print decently. Learning dye transfer was a big help; it could portray and render a much longer tonal range than a conventional print.

So, this was a photograph I made on faith with all my technical skill with the camera, assuming I would learn enough later to be able to print it. And after dozens of months of study and work, I was there. For decades, this stood as the most difficult photograph I ever printed.

Now, here's my question for those of you who didn't like the photograph all that much: Do you like it better now? I mean as a photograph, as art, not as a lesson in technique?

Yup, that's what I thought.

When I showed this photograph to Bob Nadler, of *Camera 35* fame, the better part of 30 years ago, I started telling him everything I gone through to make that wonderful print. He cut me short, saying "Nobody cares how hard you worked."

I've never forgotten that. It's a really, really important lesson that all photographers should take to heart. If someone already likes your photograph, how hard you worked doesn't matter. If they don't, telling them how hard you worked is not going to change their mind.

*Ctein*

**Follow-up:** The free PDF of my book *Post Exposure* that I put up at my website a few weeks back (*vis* "Something Old and Something New") had some font garbage in it on the copyright page that caused a few readers grief. I've now put up a repaired version (fingers firmly crossed). Enjoy!

*Ctein's weekly column appears every Wednesday on TOP.*

Posted on Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 06:52 AM in Ctein, Printers and Printing | Permalink

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Ctein,

I guess that back in 1975 you had no matrix metering. Just making an adequate exposure would have been my primary concern, let alone how subsequently to print it. How did you go about calculating the exposure, and did you bracket for an entire roll?

I bought myself a Sekonic lightmeter a few years ago. I only needed the cheaper non-spot metering version, but I spent the extra on the spot meter. It's fun to play with, and also educational. I would have used that I think, but if that was not one of your tools, I can't think how you got the basic data on which to work out your exposure. Anyway, you obviously did get it very right indeed!

Posted by: James | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 07:12 AM

Learned this lesson myself the hard way too. Man, those forums can be brutal :)

Posted by: Nikhil Ramkarran | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 07:28 AM

Two comments:

1. Some people do care how hard you worked. They find it interesting, maybe interesting enough that they'd want to try it themselves, and maybe even buy your book. I find it interesting that a guy who ran a camera magazine *didn't* find it interesting.

2. "Nobody cares how hard you worked" applies to much of life -- most notably, the arts. I was looking at some minimalist sculpture the other day, by a famous artist, and it occurred to me that some years from now, nobody will either understand it or care about it, and it won't make any difference how elaborate his theories were, or how hard he worked; some years from now, people will simply make the judgement that what he did was time-wasting crap, no matter how sincere he was in doing it. All you can do is hope that he got paid a lot of money for it, and spent it on wine, women and song, or whatever made him feel good, because his "art" is going straight in history's dumper. Same thing with many of the famous literary writers of my day who were exploring themes of sexual repression and liberation. Guess what? Nobody cares anymore if some obscure literature professor was hung up on his sexual performance. It's boring; I don't want to hear about it. In fact, I *never* wanted to hear about it. Reading it now, it's clear that a lot of famous books are time-wasting crap. And nobody cares about how much sexual pain he went through, or whatever; it's still time-wasting crap. The good thing is, that sometimes people create pieces of art, or do pieces of work, that do hold up, and are significant, and that people can always appreciate. Just not anybody you see on TV.

Posted by: John Camp | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 07:35 AM

Love the photo and article,this advice is also the first lesson all successful golfers learn in their long journey in trying to come to grips with the game, i.e. no matter how well or badly one plays don't bore people with your stories because "nobody cares"

Posted by: Michael Roche | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 08:03 AM

Quite right, dear chap. Quite right!

Nobody cares how hard I've worked to create spherical HDR panoramas of near-impossible-to-access locations. However, if a client likes the final image enough to pay for it, then there is a personal validation for the work. Thanks to this, I won't ask myself "why the %#@&! am I doing this?" when balancing body and gear over some abyss, still knowing that hours of processing and retouching awaits me in any case. There are enough questions about my sanity as it is!

Posted by: MarkB | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 08:11 AM

If it helps, I think it is a stunning photo!

Posted by: Keith I | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 08:15 AM

Wonderful story, Ctein. Your pride of accomplishment is well deserved. And your photograph looks even better now. I can only imagine it printed large.

And you can uncross your fingers.
The griefless font garbage is gone.!

Posted by: Joe Dasbach | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 08:24 AM

The `nobody cares' view is very true, in at least 2.5 possible audiences: people who are looking to buy something, art critics, and photo-club judges who can't tell LF Provia from an eggwhisk.

I recently attempted a similar shot, with a 60D: hazy light-pollution illuminating the Commando war-memorial above Spean Bridge in the thick black of winter night. At ISO3200 I could *just* hand-hold it but my post-processing was erratic.

Posted by: Tim | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 08:25 AM


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I fell off a cliff once, trying to get to a location. If I show the resultant images without commentary, they're generally well received; if I tell the story of falling from the cliff, being rescued, insisting on continuing, and finally plunging chest deep into an icy mountain stream to get the shoots, and then show the images they're invariably a wondrous piece of photography.

Obviously some people do care how hard you worked. Thus the howls of protest when someone (usually me) says that something like modern daguerreotype is a bit pretentious, since there are easier ways to get the some image. Ditto with squatting in an African watering hole, dangling from a cliff (intentionally), or [insert needlessly difficult/dangerous photographic act here]. The context/story of the image is often times more evocative than the actual image. I think people are pre-wired to equate effort with worth, and that artists are pre-wired to demonstrate that despite the fact that they aren't busting rocks or smelting steel (or some other labor intensive pursuit)that they do in fact bust hump when creating.

And finally, there's also the fact that tour de force triumphs of technique are usually lost on all but the most educated minority of the audience. So how much work are you willing to do for the 0.5% of the people who will actually appreciate why you did it? I'd bet good money that a lot of people would look at this image and wonder what's so hard about processing an HDR image.

**Posted by:** Ray | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 08:40 AM

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Current photography fashion dictates that you must "pull up" the shadows until the sky is blue. Nobody cares what time it was - the sky must be blue!

Oh, and I like it the way it is. A lot!

**Posted by:** beuler | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 08:40 AM

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I love the photograph. I appreciate the effort too.

**Posted by:** Jim | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 08:42 AM

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Well...I thought it was a great shot before I read the article, so I guess I wasn't the intended audience. Regardless, I am impressed that you had the foresight and ambition to capture it the way you did, knowing you were unlikely to be able to render it as a print. In my opinion, that's being inspired by a scene. Photos of the space program have that same effect on me. They imply hope of gaining some new knowledge from the "Great Unknown" beyond our tiny world. So, I share and appreciate your inspiration, and wish I could get that close to the shuttle to make a similar image like that which inspires me. 6 miles away is as close as I have been so far... At that range, the atmosphere is the biggest obstacle. I've tried super-telephotos and telescopes, and still I'm looking for that one exceptional image. My own white whale I'm afraid, as my chances are rapidly dwindling with the upcoming cancellation of the shuttle program. That really is a stellar image, thanks for sharing it with us.
Jim Allen

**Posted by:** Jim Allen | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 08:54 AM

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I'm among those who like the image. It probably doesn't hurt that I was ten when Neil and Buzz landed on the moon, leaving a lasting impression, and love of anything related to the space programs.
On a family vacation in the 70's we managed to see a satalitte launch. But seeing a Saturn V launch - that must have been impressive.
More recently I've made visits to Cape Canaveral and Kennedy Space Center, photographing some of the launch complex ruins on the Cape. It is a fascinating place. I'm still mourning the cancelation of the Constellation program to the moon, and the Aries V rocket.

**Posted by:** Shaun O'Boyle | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 09:00 AM

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"Nobody cares..."

Well, yes and no. Of course, the fact that this picture was technically a challenge will leave many people cold. Myself, I was slightly stirred to understand how tough it was, but then I also dabble in colour darkroom work, and have a sliver of compassion for your pain. But that difficulty does not change much the message, the meaning.

In contrast, take a photograph like Capa's D-Day landing. The fact that he was there, that he risked his life (and that his assistant ruined his film), all contribute to the value of the photograph.

Otherwise they would have been just a couple more blurred shots of some guys dying in funny suits. If you reproduced the same shots in a studio, you will never attain the same stratospheric levels of appreciation.

The question of talent in photography is the same as that of painting: you can't fully divorce the technical achievement from the artistic ones. Try to tell me that Michelangelo was a technical slob and that "only the image counts!". Yet, that's the reflex we have when we look at photography.

Photography and the Impressionists suffered the same kind of scorn in the late 19th century: "Anybody can do that!" It's art that was not deemed "skillful" or "sufficiently difficult" to do. Today, even though we'll recognize that you can make a picture quickly than you can complete an oil painting, we do not judge one's skill in a given medium with the criteria of the other. But in those days (and still for many people today), photographic skill was read through the lens of what it takes to make a painting. Look at what most people say of Stephen Shore.

The problem lies in the fact that effort and talent matter for the value of a work of art, but it's not sheer technical difficulty. To borrow yet again from a book I can't stop recommending (http://www.uqtr.ca/AE/Vol_13/recension/Bicknell.html), the effort that is significant is the "performance in a medium."

In other words, it's not the raw amount of Joules you have spent that matters, but the amount of work *in the medium*that matters: to what extent have you employed the medium's capabilities, how much does it reinterpret or reinvent it, how hard was it to squeeze your vision into it, were you able to bend that medium in ways hitherto unknown, are you challenging people's expectations (because they are also part of your medium!), etc.

Performance in a medium combines technical and intellectual skills, but only insofar as they aim to articulate your message. There's no fixed criteria, no grid of difficulty analysis that can be done, but when we assess someone's work, we must balance between what we consider "just the image" and the actual process of making it, deciding what plays a relevant role in our appreciation of it.

(PS: I answered your question on Québec law in the other thread).

**Posted by:** Michel Hardy-Vallée | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 09:01 AM

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It seems to me that one of the dangers that we face as photographers is confusing expression and process. Mastering the technical demands of the process is necessary, but good photos are good not because the photographer worked hard, or used a state of the art camera, or achieved ultimate resolution or dynamic range. Good photos are good, I think, because of what they express. In the end, does anyone really care about the process?

**Posted by:** Edd Fuller | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 09:20 AM

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I really like your shot, Ctein. Regardless of how hard it was to print. Maybe I have more admiration for "hard to get" pictures, where you can see that a serious physical effort was made to **take** it. But that's just me :-)

A while ago, I spoke to a woman who'd seen the first of the Lord Of The Rings films without liking it much. But when she later saw a documentary on it, detailing all the painstaking work behind creating the costumes, props, locations, etc, her mind changed completely. She now considers it a really good film...

The other side of the coin is the recent project detailed here:

http://www.democratandchronicle.com/article/20110506/NEWS0
Big-Shot-lights-up-The-Strong

In this project, at **thousand** photographers with hand-held flashes participated in creating a photograph that (to my eyes) looks bland and absolutely unspectacular. Here, the primary reason for admiring the photograph is actually the effort going into creating it - not the actual result. To my eye, at least, this photograph would not get much attention without the story behind it.

**Posted by:** Soeren Engelbrecht | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 09:24 AM

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So true! Additionaly, while nobody cares how hard you work, that doesn't mean your efforts are not weighed by the viewer. Many are quick to dismiss good or even great work if it is judged as "too easy" or " lucky".

**Posted by:** David Stubbs | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 09:27 AM

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That appears to be a superb image from the Apollo program era, Ctein. I think it really must be seen printed, and much larger to be fully appreciated. A lovely record of remarkable human endeavor.

But regarding the title of your article this week...I disagree. (Hint: Whenever I see/hear the keywords "nobody", "everybody", "always", or "Never" I am confident in standing as a contrarian.)

I do grant that the overwhelming majority of an image's viewers rarely consider or care about the photographers' troubles, much less that of the printer.
This amazing iconic image of Margaret Bourke White photographing a "Changing New York" from atop a Chrysler building ornament forces the issue. Only the most thoughtful viewers will appreciate the full gravity of the image by wondering where Oscar Graubner, the actual photographer, was perched to capture the image. ("A little further, Maggie! I can't get good separation!")

But the fact is that photo geeks (or nerds, harkening to a recent topic) are photography's most devoted and inquiring audience. And they *do care*. And let's be honest; the majority of viewers of most amateur photography (not this launch pad shot) these days are...other amateur snappers!

So, frankly, today I'd feel free to share your excruciating march to victory with the world. It will entertain and inform many more people on the Internet than you might imagine.

Bob Nadler? I'd say he was way over the top as a photo geek himself! He was just jealous of your shot, Ctein.

**Posted by: Kenneth Tanaka | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 09:53 AM**

When I read "Making that photograph was a significant challenge" I was already thinking of the title. The truth is I like people to like my pictures without having any knowledge of the making of it. That's honest liking in my mind.
On the other side, it's inevitable for the photographer to have a completely different perception of the image because you smelled it, you inspected it in 3D, etc.

**Posted by: Max | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 10:18 AM**

My own observation is that in the age of Photoshop, plenty of viewers *do* care how hard someone worked to make a photograph. I routinely hear viewers voice disappointment when they learn that an impressive photo they encountered is not a single remarkable exposure for which the photographer risked life and limb but rather is a composite created from stock photos someone bought and then combined with a few clicks of a mouse.

**Posted by: MM | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 10:20 AM**

I had similar musings on nature photography just a couple of days ago:

http://guytal.com/wordpress/2011/05/dont-be-an-idiot/

Guy

**Posted by: Guy Tal | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 10:22 AM**

"Nobody cares how hard you worked."...

Works the same for any technical endeavor where the object is to mask a large amount of complexity.

Great photograph. The struggle was worth the effort.

**Posted by: Ken White | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 10:44 AM**

My wife is an oil painter. People occasionally ask her how long it took to make a particular painting. She's finally learned to give the correct answer: about 40 years. (She's 55).

**Posted by: Robert Roaldi | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 11:05 AM**

Really can't add anything more to what's been said above, but I'll blather anyway...

Yes, while YOU may know what you had to go through to get a shot, the average viewer neither knows nor cares. This is especially true in a world where there are now so many spectacular and outstanding images that "spectacular and outstanding" have become the accepted norm and ...well, rather vin ordinaire....

So, really the only people that can appreciate what it took to get a certain image are....other photographers. Having been there and done that, they know and appreciate the skill and effort involved to get that shot....

It's a bit like something I've seen with musicians. There are musicians who never made it big, but who are practically worshipped by other and much more famous musicians....

And I think that's because it's only other musicians who could appreciate the skill, talent and dedication these otherwise unknowns put into their music, even though the public wasn't interested....

**Posted by: Paul W. Luscher | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 11:06 AM**

The fact that you might or might not care because you have an interest in the medium and the technique is not actually relevant to the discussion of whether or not on average, people care.

To flip this to a line of work I know something about: people don't care how hard you worked to put out a piece of software, they only care if you happened to break their favorite little piece of workflow for some reason. And trust me, putting out a piece of software is a LOT more technical and non-technical work by a LOT more people than most people can imagine.

So, in all, I agree with the sentiment. In general, no one cares how hard you worked.

**Posted by: psu | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 12:11 PM**

IN my first "real job", one of my very prescient managers made a key point about my work and assignments: don't confuse activity with accomplishment. That echoes Mr. Nadler's comments. Knowing how difficult it was to get the image makes me appreciate the image more, but doesn't affect how much I *like* it. That, IMHO, is the point Mr. Nadler made. For me, that's a simplistic right-brain/left brain thing. Stunning photo, BTW (but I suspect you knew that).

**Posted by: Craig Beyers | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 12:12 PM**

No One Cares How Hard You Worked only tells us the kind of place we live in, full of selfish, uncultured bastards, what I call society.

Posted by: iran ramirez | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 12:48 PM

If someone tells you that they've worked at something for forty years, then shows whatever it is to you, does that make it more likely that what you see will be good, whether immediately or on reflection? The gold standard remains the artist allowing the work to stand judgment without a bolster of showmanship (although it sounds as if Ray's showmanship, above in these comments, is itself storytelling art, and hence one of many exemptions).

Posted by: Peter Morgan | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 01:23 PM

Sad but true.

Well, mostly true. True most of the time. And in particular, the slightly more nuanced version in the text of the article itself: that nobody who doesn't already like the photo will care how hard you worked.

There does seem to be some evidence for the existence of people who like a work better when it's presented in the context of a performance art piece (i.e. the artist telling stories) about the creation of the particular work.

Even if people don't care -- the fact that most other photographers can't get that photo and then can't make a print from their negative can still be a relevant commercial or even artistic fact. (Easier today by a lot, I know; well, except for the current lack of Saturn rockets.)

Posted by: David Dyer-Bennet | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 01:27 PM

I respectfully disagree with the title of this post, for many of the reasons already discussed.

A good photo is a good photo, even with no story attached. ("Yeah, I just saw the shot, raised my camera, and took it with my usual settings. Worked pretty well.") A good photo with a good story attached, however, is even more interesting. A good story puts the audience in the shoes of the photographer briefly, letting them understand the circumstances of the shot and feel a bit of what the photographer was feeling. When combined with the final photo, the result is more than the sum of its parts.

Think of it this way: Hearing the story of a photo is like a little glimpse of what it was like to be behind the camera, and the joy of that isn't lost on anyone around these parts.

Looking in the other direction, if the "hard work" put into a photo consists of Photoshopping a pile of separate elements into something that appears to be an accurate representation of a real-world scene, knowing about the "hard work" is very likely to diminish my enjoyment of the result.

I love the picture. I love it for all the normal reasons I love a great photo. I also love it for its subject matter, which is a reason outside the photo itself; a similarly beautifully-made shot of a dragster or a horse is unlikely to produce anywhere near as much response in me. Finally, I enjoyed hearing the story about how it was shot, and that adds to my appreciation as well.

Posted by: Nick | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 01:56 PM

John Camp wrote: "I find it interesting that a guy who ran a camera magazine *didn't* find it interesting."

Bob Nadler never "ran" Camera 35. That was my job as editor. Bob was technical editor, and a damn good one at that. Knowing him as I did, I doubt that he didn't find either the photograph or its underlying story "interesting." He was simply stating the obvious: no amount of verbal gymnastics will make the print you are presenting better -- or worse. In the end, works of artistic expression must simply stand on their own.

And for the record, as I remember Bob had nothing but praise for Ctein, even way back then...

Jim Hughes

Posted by: Jim Hughes | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 02:09 PM

That shot Ken Tanaka highlights of Margaret Bourke White atop the Chrysler Building... I'm torn between thinking that she's standing in a cut out box, thus less risky than it looks, and observing that the eagle appears to be made of layers of shiny metal, which presumably have a fairly high co-efficient of slipperiness that is incompatible with modern Health and Safety legislation. And that 8 x 10 is not notably secured with a safety strap. Tsk, tsk. Did anyone check the increased leverage of a mid-size lady 3 feet off-axis on the loading of the statue?

;)

Posted by: James | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 02:50 PM

Dear Craig,

I think that's an excellent summation: “appreciate” versus “like.”

~~~~~~

Dear Iran,

So does that make me and Bob selfish, uncultured bastards? [VBG]

~~~~~~

Dear Guy,

Clearly a case of great minds wallowing in the same gutter.

~~~~~~

Dear Michel (this time I double-checked the software's spelling [s]),

First, thanks for the further information on the Québec law.

As for the topic at hand, I think Craig's distinction between “appreciate” and “like” is germane. To use your specific example, I appreciate what Capa did. But I don't think most of his photographs are very good and I don't like most of them. The D-Day landing photograph is in no way a good photograph and has little value other than its historical import, in my valuation. In 500 years, when World War II is just another homicidal blip on the historical map, no one will be praising it other than as a record of the time.

Which gets to JC's point, which I'll come to in a bit.

~~~~~~

Dear Ray,

I disagree about it being the most educated minority of the audience. I can (and have, in a lecture situation) explain what I went through to make this photograph to a lay audience and they appreciate the effort.

Furthermore, you might be right about 0.5%, but when you get up to the 0.01%, like me and Bob, we no longer care. We know that technique can be taught readily, and so is neither a rare nor virtuous thing. It's what you do with that technique that matters, and that is judged by the results, not by the labor.

Not unrelated, I have often been asked how hard it is to learn to do dye transfer printing. The answer is, "Not very;" I could teach it to any of you readers in a long weekend. Getting really GOOD at it... That's a whole other story.

~~~~~~

Dear James,

Exposure was by averaging meter and experienced, educated guesswork.

This is one of the only two times in my entire life when I have done any serious bracketing because I was uncertain of exposure. I used six frames on this photograph. I could tell just from looking at the scene that it was going to push the exposure range of the film to its very limits and there would be no margin for error.

pax \ Ctein
[ Please excuse any word-salad. MacSpeech in training! ]
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-- Ctein's Online Gallery http://ctein.com
-- Digital Restorations http://photo-repair.com
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**Posted by: ctein | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 02:54 PM**

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Then again, photography seems to be part art and part craft, and some people will appreciate good craftsmanship.

**Posted by: Joe | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 02:58 PM**

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Dear JC,

If I recall correctly, Bob was only the technical editor of Camera 35... Which still makes him one of the luminaries of the time. He didn't find the technical details artistically interesting for the reason I explained to Ray (I have come to agree with him). Any schmo with a good teacher can learn technique.

Your second point, I think, goes off in a different direction, which I think is about the inherent temporality of most art. Truly, an interesting enough subject that I really should do a whole column about it... But not now. My short take:

Art may concern itself with timeless matters of human emotion and senses, but it has to express itself in the vernacular, factuality, and sensibilities of the times. otherwise it simply does not communicate. Those always change, and are always locally bound to that particular space/time. In extremely rare circumstances, art may transcend that. But it's incredibly uncommon. A scant handful of statues and paintings, a scant handful of literary works, measured over millennia.

Even Shakespeare is not immune to that reality. With the singular exception of Richard III, I find most of his historical plays tedious. To use Craig's distinction, I appreciate them, but I do not like them. That's because I am not a student a British history and have no particular interest in becoming one, so too many of the important particulars of the principles in those plays, which fill them out and give them resonance and meaning for the audience, go completely past me.

As an English major, I appreciate their technical brilliance. As a mere end-user, I shrug and say "meh."

It's kind of a temporal extension of Sturgeon's dictum. Someone once complained to Ted Sturgeon that 90% of science fiction was crap. Ted shrugged and said, 'well, 90% of everything is crap." Remove contemporary context, and it's probably safe to say that 90% of what remains will become crap.

On a closely related matter, happily, we end up forgetting the crap. Which is why so many nostalgists talk about the good old days (or even centuries or millennia) when art was so much better. They've not only forgotten the crap, they've forgotten that they've forgotten the crap.

pax \ Ctein
[ Please excuse any word-salad. MacSpeech in training! ]
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-- Ctein's Online Gallery http://ctein.com
-- Digital Restorations http://photo-repair.com
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**Posted by: ctein | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 03:14 PM**

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"I routinely hear viewers voice disappointment when they learn that an impressive photo they encountered is not a single remarkable exposure for which the photographer risked life and limb but rather is a composite created from stock photos someone bought and then combined with a few clicks of a mouse."
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I don't know which version of Photoshop you use but it must be must be the super automated ultra simple version. Good image work in Photoshop is difficult and time consuming. You have to put your time in just like working in a darkroom I'd imagine.

Gee, I wonder how many snippets it takes to create a professionally produced audio track. All those musicians must be slackers just like photoshoppers.

**Posted by:** Ken White | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 03:30 PM

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I think it is worthy to note that you made the photograph not knowing how you were going to execute the final print, or even if you were ever to be able to execute the print. There's always that quest for the subject, to capture something that is beyond what you can do now, hoping that sometime in the future you will have the technology to make the vision complete. That's worth caring about, but that's only for you to care about.

Sad, but true. Only results are rewarded.

**Posted by:** Joe Lipka | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 04:14 PM

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great image - with very nice sun stars!

**Posted by:** Freddy Schiller | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 04:24 PM

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As an engineer, artist, and craftsman who is steadily learning all three, and will be learning the rest of my life, I appreciate how much you learned in the process. And I'm sure I would appreciate an actual print even more knowing how much you had to learn.

Ken Tanaka: Yes, I appreciate the "gravity" of the Bourke-White photo. Good one, Ken.

**Posted by:** luke | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 04:35 PM

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My reactions to photographs are almost always instantaneous. Occasionally an image will "grow" on me, but usually that first impression is the one that rules.

I don't much are for the shuttle photo ;) I did see, pretty quickly, that it's technically challenging, and hearing about it in more detail was definitely very interesting, but that in no way changes the way the photo takes me at an emotional level! I'm not sure that it SHOULD, really.

**Posted by:** Andrew Molitor | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 05:54 PM

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No one cares.... reminds of a statement my photography instructor made many, many moons ago.

No one cares that you were hanging by your toes off the side of a thousand foot cliff; if the photograph is out of focus it is out of focus.

**Posted by:** Gerry Emas | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 06:30 PM

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Wonderful picture. Did Deke Slaton ever get a copy? This was his one ride to orbit was it not? Looks like only the second stage was used, not as much to lift I suppose. Everyone old enough remembers Apollo 11's landing but, except for the drama of 13 the rest were mostly forgotten and that is a shame as the goals and accomplishments grew much more interesting with the later missions.

**Posted by:** john robison | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 07:12 PM

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Posted by: Gerry Emas: *"No one cares that you were hanging by your toes off the side of a thousand foot cliff; if the photograph is out of focus it is out of focus."*

**Robert Capa**, *D-Day, Omaha Beach, Normandy*

**Posted by:** Kenneth Tanaka | Wednesday, 11 May 2011 at 10:19 PM

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My experience - tell someone how difficult it was to get the camera to the right place at the right time (in a few short sentences) and the worth of your photograph goes up. But tell someone who is not an image processing geek how much post processing went into your creation and their assesment of the image plummets. I reckon that most non-photographers like to think that cameras somehow capture 'real' magical moments by themselves, and when you tell them that you helped the reality capturing camera along a bit, or a lot, then that spoils the fantasy for them, no matter how magical that moment really was. Moral? Just shut up!

**Posted by:** Peter Barnes | Thursday, 12 May 2011 at 12:11 AM

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Ctein,

This was a great article. You're right that most people don't care how hard you've worked, and that's why Mike's blog is a great venue for the photo & article; many of us appreciate the great photo and the effort you took to print it to your standards.

The important question is, will you make this print available as one of the next offerings (as an inkjet so you don't deplete your dye transfer inventory ;-) when Mike holds his next print sale?

I hope so, it deserves a wide audience and it'll give us the opportunity to show how much we love it using our Paypal accounts.

**Posted by:** Craig Cunningham | Thursday, 12 May 2011 at 12:32 AM

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I think there are two categories of "hard".

One is mastering the technical expertise to do something. That's hardly going to impress the general viewing public, only the people who know something about the craft.

The second category is physically hard. That is impressive to most people. It's not for nothing that the popular culture abounds in muscled heroes and super heroes. But even then, it has to be obvious in the photo or you have to supply the background story.

Explain to people that you had to go 25 miles on foot, uphill both ways, and that you had to cut down trees to erect the 10-metre viewing platform that was the only way to take the rocket photo, and they will be impressed. F-stops, F-schmops. It's outside of their frame of reference and you might as well be talking about how many spaghetti noodles it takes to reach the Moon.

Posted by: erlik | Thursday, 12 May 2011 at 01:13 AM

PS. Yes, I like the photo, even without knowing the process.

Posted by: erlik | Thursday, 12 May 2011 at 01:14 AM

I do care, I do care much even. So much that I want to know how someone like Gursky pulled of a stunt like Tour de France.....I spend a whole night checking out.....when it was made, which Tour de France, wether it was a single shot or a combination of shots.....tell tale sign passage crowd midway on a coll? Probably two colls but which.....so I looked at every coll in the Alpes and Pyrenees (in Google Earth mind you).....and found out that he combined the Coll du Galibier for the top part and the Coll D'Isoard for the bottom part. I could even (more or less or better more less then more) recreate his picture using Google Earth. Now what does that tell me about Gursky?

A) He has put a lot of effort in that single shot since he followed the Tour de France for at least 2 days.....not an easy matter. He must have hiked up a hill carrying a 7 x 5 camera.....battled the crowd of enquisitive cycling fanatics, a lot of sweat must have flowed into this picture.....not just sweat behind the Paintbox.

B) Either Gursky is good in doing puzzles or he has a great talent for envisioning his finished work. Did he spot the oppurtunity beforehand? Knowing the hectics of a Tour de France, he must have. He must have travelled to the spot beforehand or he must have been part of the commercial tour in front of the tour in which he has about 30 minutes to an hour to set up shop before the tour passes (D'Isoard shot at least the Galibier shot can be taken anytime since no riders are passing there, which in itself is an indication that Andreas planned the whole shot from A.....till Z).

Now I tell this since Gursky himself is rather proud (and justifiably so) of his technique.....and has mentions in an interview that there are in fact two mountains in Tour de France (all be it that he lost a bit track of the mountains in that interview).

So now the same question. Does knowing this:

http://blogger.xs4all.nl/stomoxys/archive/2011/01/25/640395.as

makes you appreciate Gursky's picture more or less (or more or less).....personally it made me change my mind about digital interventions in a photo.....

What Bob Nadler should have said is that no one cares about how much effort you put into a shot if the picture in the end sucks big time. No work, no blood, sweat and tears (and no drop of 215 meters, are you nuts miss Bourke White) can compensate for lack of picture quality. But if the shot is great and you can see the work involved you can appreciate both the trouble and the end result.

Greetings, Ed

BTW, great shot Ctein...any good photographer can and will spot the effort it took to create a shot like that and will stand in awe at the technical skills of the photographer who took that shot....

Posted by: Ed | Thursday, 12 May 2011 at 02:29 AM

In some senses, having had to struggle doesn't add to the value of the product. Very true, and an important reality check.

Nonetheless, when we **didn't** have to struggle, when it came easy technically, that does take something away from the value - in all the same senses - in many people's perception.

Double standard?

Posted by: richardplondon | Thursday, 12 May 2011 at 03:28 AM

Even if you don't like John Singer Sargents
"Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose" you have to admire the dedication to light that it took to make that painting. It's a great lesson to painters and photographers alike. I don't like it, I love it.

From September to early November 1885, and again at the Millets's new home, Russell House, Broadway, during the summer of 1886, completing it some time in October. Sargent was able to work for only a few minutes each evening when the light was exactly right. He would place his easel and paints beforehand, and pose his models in anticipation of the few moments when he could paint the mauvish light of dusk."

http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?cgroupid=999999961&workid=13109&tabview=text&texttype=10

Posted by: Sean | Thursday, 12 May 2011 at 06:24 AM

*All you can do is hope that he got paid a lot of money for it, and spent it on wine, women and song*

I would spend half of it on wine, women and song then waste the rest.

**Posted by: Steve Smith | Thursday, 12 May 2011 at 09:46 AM**

O.T. - I'm fairly new to this site and love it, I've been reading lots old stuff here and thanks to you(writers/bloggers) I'm broke(spent hundreds in books) but happy I've found TOP. I use your links as much as I can when buying from Amazon.
Back to the subject, I hope next time I'm at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago there will be an entire wall covered by your photo(the one above).
Cheers, Iran.

**Posted by: iran ramirez | Thursday, 12 May 2011 at 12:20 PM**

Dear Richard,

I may be exceptional that way, but people are not liking a photo less on the (rare) times when I tell them it came easily to me.

This one, for example:

http://ctein.com/Palm_Conservatory.jpg

is proving to be one of people's favorites.

They're even more engaged when I tell them it just fell into my lap. The original scene exposed just about perfectly in the camera on auto. When I pulled it into ACR and then Photoshop, I made only the most minimal modifications before printing it out. It took me under 30 minutes to go from a DNG file to a finished print.

Possibly this impresses much the same way it would impress people if you found a kilogram gold nugget just laying in your back yard, instead of having to dig a mine for it. The sheer unlikeliness of the event.

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Dear Ken,

Yup, that's the photo, and it's a boring, ill-composed one no matter how hard it was to make.

People who engage with it (not me) do so because of its historical import. In 500 years, no one will care.

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Dear John,

So far as I recall, none of the astronauts own any of my photographs.

The Apollo vehicle, in this mission, was launched on a Saturn 1 instead of a Saturn V, primarily because it only needed to go to low earth orbit (it was also lighter, lacking a LEM).

pax / Ctein

**Posted by: ctein | Thursday, 12 May 2011 at 01:11 PM**

@Sean, regarding Sargent.

I admire Sargent enormously and love his work, but he is a great illustration of Ctein's point.

He studied in Paris under Carolus Duran (the influence is quite obvious) and painted in the alla prima style (paint direct to canvas, like Velasquez) and he simply chose to become a "realist" painter. He remained one throughout his life while the art world progressed through impressionists, fauvists, colorists, cubists and futurists.

Financially successful and popular with wealthy clients (including 2 US presidents) he was slated by peers, intellectuals and critics for being out of step, an anachronistic artisan and, in later life, a social elitist (his clients were generally wealthy and Jewish at a time of rising anti-semitism in Europe following the depression).

His biggest detractor was the art critic Roger Fry (of the Bloomsbury Group) who said of his work: "Wonderful indeed, but most wonderful that this wonderful performance should ever have been confused with that of an artist." Ouch.

Only in the '50s and '60s did people re-evaluate his work without the political and intellectual baggage of the '20s and '30s and he has steadily become recognised for the genius and technical master he most certainly was.

At the end of the day though, I suspect our Ctein's "burden" is that he is fatally attracted to difficult subjects because he's fiendishly clever and likes to set himself challenges. The fact that the result looks effortless is a testament to his achievement nonetheless.

Cheers, Steve

**Posted by: Steve Jacob | Thursday, 12 May 2011 at 03:57 PM**

I had an art professor once who would say that work convinced him. Not the tale of how hard it was, but in the piece itself. If the piece appeared as if the artist had worked hard to get it right, that could help to persuade him of its merit as art. Not quite the same aesthetic as the one that says art should look effortless.

**Posted by: MBS | Thursday, 12 May 2011 at 08:26 PM**

I don't mind hearing how hard someone worked to produce a print as long as it's an interesting story.

I do agree with something my father complained about a few years ago. He was getting fed up with the number of people who would show him a print then say "of course, it would have been better if I had done XXX or allowed for YYY".

His view was that if you had a print, you should either be able to show it to someone without mnaking apologies for it or pointing out its shortcomings or not show it at all.

**Posted by: Steve Smith | Friday, 13 May 2011 at 02:11 AM**

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Ctein,

Hhmm, I think he was wrong. There must been something that made me buy the photo from you. I could see it was a difficult photo to print well, and you must have worked hard to get it right. Well, I didn't buy it because of the hard work, but because you got it right.
/TC

**Posted by: tc | Friday, 13 May 2011 at 04:12 AM**

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I think there is also another point of view and that is from the photographer. When I worked in the darkroom and spent hours producing what I considered a good print there was a sense of accomplishment and flow. Now that I use a computer and can produce the same quality of print in just a fraction of the time, I have lost some of that accomplishment. To the viewer it makes no difference but it does make a difference to the photographer. It is very complicated and does make a difference if you are doing this for your living or just for your own pleasure. I just know that something has been lost and maybe some day I will return to the darkroom and film if at that time these materials still exist.

**Posted by: Larry Sumners | Friday, 13 May 2011 at 10:51 AM**

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The English Photo Technique is long gone, but I still have a copy of the January 1973 issue; it was one of the first two photo magazines I ever had. I was 14 when I got it and so it's falling to pieces from being read from cover to cover by my teenage self so many times. It was sold to Photography magazine, I think, in the early 80s.

**Posted by: Roger Bradbury | Friday, 13 May 2011 at 02:47 PM**

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*"Nobody cares how hard you worked."*

I am the nobody.

Every time I watch the expedition documentary by the BBC or NGC or the like, I very much care the position of the crew on top of that of the host.

**Posted by: Roland L | Saturday, 14 May 2011 at 01:00 PM**

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Dear Larry,

The point of this essay is that it does recognize that point of view. It then dismisses it.

You acknowledged that when you said it makes no difference to the viewer.

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Dear Roland,

And I care about how hard the ditch digger and my mail carrier work. But that isn't the context of what I wrote about, now is it?

pax / Ctein

**Posted by: ctein | Saturday, 14 May 2011 at 05:34 PM**

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Dear Ctein

*"But that isn't the context of what I wrote about, now is it?"*

Yes and no. I can't quantify, but I agree, that even when most of the viewers don't care how hard you worked, just one who does, and make himself heard, would make your beautiful work out of your hard labour doubly appreciated.

Now take it to an extreme like Capa's "slightly out of focus" shot on Omaha beach, if what's behind the story is not known and appreciated, it is just next to a piece of junk.

**Posted by: Roland L | Sunday, 15 May 2011 at 01:29 AM**

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Dear Roland,

C'mon, I know you understand that "nobody" is hyperbolic. In a world with 7 billion people and 30,000 TOP readers, there will be SOMEBODY somewhere who is an exception to almost any rule you can mention.

Arguing that it's not "nobody" but "almost nobody" is a quibble.

Similarly, looking for the photographic extrema is a quibble.

The column was not about appreciating work, per se, it was about appreciating artwork. Reading the tagline out of that context is just a variant of Mike's "logical fallacy."

A headline or off-the-cuff quip does not perfectly embody a complex idea. A half dozen words cannot express a thought perfectly, nor exclude all variant, irrelevant interpretations. If it could, my columns could be 25 words long instead of 500.

pax / Ctein

**Posted by: ctein | Sunday, 15 May 2011 at 12:09 PM**

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Dear Ctein

I admit, that I almost sound like a troll, by keep picking on how many would care for the hard work out of context, which is not the point. Far from it.

Being in the printing business for two decades, day in day out I tweak things to no end so to make most reproductions barely presentable, and then all the credits, go without saying, to the artwork creators.

Of course I understand this is the nature of my job. That's why I feel doubly rewarded when there happen to be sparse credits going back to me, the mechanical craftsman, who sweats to get things done but taken for granted.

Having read your essay, I must say, though it's only the works that are rewarded, on the hard labour behind, it takes one to know one.

Roland

**Posted by: Roland L | Sunday, 15 May 2011 at 10:03 PM**

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The comments to this entry are closed.
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