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Wednesday, 25 July 2012

Memories Are Made of These

By **Ctein**

Last column, I talked about my experiments pushing the limits of available light photography down to the level of starlight. Emboldened by the impressive results, I decided to try some candid photography. When Rachel was at the scope, I'd open the shutter for as long as she seemed to be standing (more or less) still and see what I got. After several tries, I got this...

...a 14-second exposure at $f/2$, ISO 6400. OK, not perfectly sharp. But still, starlight!? Wow.

I e-mailed the photograph to several friends with the remark to the effect of how amazing it all was and Oren Grad commented back, "Subtract the color, and I agree." (Oren added a smiley.)

I had already tried that, resulting in this:

You know something? Artistically, I agreed with Oren. It'd never be a great photo, wasn't supposed to be, but it had a mood about it in B&W. If someone else had shown it to me, I'd likely make the same recommendation—subtract the color and it's a better photograph.

But, as a memory photo, a snapshot, that *I* made, it was a serious fail in B&W. It looked phony and artificial and disconnected from reality. Same as if it were a Lomo photo or run through one of those silly artsy-fartsy camera filters. It became a derivative (in the IP sense) work that was distanced from the original photograph and experience.

I don't remember stuff in B&W. Even in a situation like this, where I can only barely see what I'm photographing (starlight, remember) it's still in color in my brain. There are perceptual cues, like the yellow-green fireflies flickering in the brush, the occasional car headlight barely visible miles away through the trees, the very dim red glows of the LED flashlight and the astronomy app on the iPad. The stars themselves have colors. These all remind my brain that it's a color world, even though I can't see any in the starlit landscape. Black-and-white photography does *not* reproduce the experience of viewing the world at night.

So, in color, funky as it is, this photograph is a simulacrum of reality for me, which is what I want from a memory photo. In B&W, it becomes an aesthetic artifact, with considerably more redeeming social merit but much less of a personal connection.

Interesting.

Even more interesting: when I was a youn'un and color was beyond my reach and budget, I didn't feel that way. Snapshots made in B&W with the family camera or my Polaroid felt entirely real. And those older photos do still work as memory photos. Differing expectations and experiences have changed what's an acceptably faithful reference to reality in my brain.

I wonder if this is in any way related to the newish custom that has arisen of recording short video clips instead of making a still photograph? Not because the folks doing this have any urge to be videographers or want to watch hour upon hour of "home movies" but because a moving picture (with sound, yet) is a closer simulacrum than a silent, still one, just as a color photo is closer to life than a B&W.

It ain't about the art. Most photography isn't about the art. It's about the memories.

Ctein

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Featured Comment by **John Krumm:** "Interesting observations about color and memories. So I wonder what your take is on Hipstamatic iPhone filters and the like? Myself, I shoot probably 90 percent family memory shots, though I spend a fair amount of time making them look decent in Lightroom. But I try to be a little careful when deleting the bad ones too. I know I'm grateful for every old family photo I have now, looking for interesting detail in even the worst photos, so perhaps (maybe in 20 or 30 years) I will enjoy going over my digital family-shot rejects just to see what I missed, and miss."

Featured Comment by **Steve Jacob:** "What a fascinating post.

"Colour vision is such a marvelous, incredible and seemingly arbitrary gift (such a tiny spectrum of wavelengths) yet it conveys immense meaning and significance in its own right. The semiotics of colour and its effect on mood and preconception is immense, and changeable (cultural).

"The colour of a photograph is the most sure way to date a picture —fashion in the '60s, shop fronts, branded signs, buses, cabs, fishing boats, rows of cottages. It's so evocative I can almost smell lavender in a photo of Provence but it's the colour that triggers the memory.

"I spent much of my youth in Malta. Buses there were colour coded by destination. As a result the central bus station in Valletta was a riot of colour. Mdina, Rabat, Sliema. Looking back through old photos of it brings all the names back to me in a way a monochrome print simply cannot.

"Black and white *can* work, but in my view desaturating a colour digital photograph is not a default way to be more 'artistic' any more than one of those cheesy Instagram retro effects. It only works when it's appropriate, which frankly is not nearly as often as it's used."

Posted on Wednesday, 25 July 2012 at 12:04 PM in Ctein | Permalink

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Comments

Reading this column somehow brought back to memory the movement to colorize old movies, a few years back. Sure felt sacrilegious...

Methinks this *Color vs. B&W* thing, as far as it pertains to memories, is a manifestation of the fact that memories *need to fit into* a given social timeframe and context to seem genuine, to be "acceptable" as memories.

Casablanca in full colors would just seem out of place, an obvious cheat.

Posted by: Bert | Wednesday, 25 July 2012 at 12:30 PM

Fascinating, not from the portrait of a black cat in a coal cellar point of view but as opinion derivative from your "I don't remember stuff in B&W". Here we diverge.

I also see and think in color, but for me, B&W photos are usually much more attention getting and memorable purely because a color shot looks ordinary and 'every day'. The kind of stuff everyone shoots. More so of people of course than for a photo of a flower or panorama where color is a significant part of the message. I sometimes look at an image and ask 'what did color ADD to this photo?'

Posted by: paul in AZ | Wednesday, 25 July 2012 at 12:55 PM

Luminous Landscape has an article on "Landscape Astrophotography" up today which would be a good supplement to this.

Posted by: John Camp | Wednesday, 25 July 2012 at 12:58 PM

[i]Most photography isn't about the art. It's about the memories[/i]

So true. And that's in the core of the increasing popularity of small mirrorless cameras among photographers: we also shoot for memories and leaving to fetch the heavy artillery may ruin it all.

Posted by: Rodolfo Canet | Wednesday, 25 July 2012 at 01:10 PM

Due to texts like this we can't forget daily reading T.O.P.
Thank you, Ctein and Mike.

Helcio
Bauru - Brazil

Posted by: Helcio J. Tagliolatto | Wednesday, 25 July 2012 at 01:18 PM

The color is the winner for me, too, Ctein.

I love dark, moody b&w imagery that takes a moment to decode and that was apparently captured impulsively. But the licks of tint in the top image really participate in the whole presentation in a way that the b&w misses. They tell me how the deep night smelled and sounded on that porch in a way that the b&w does not.

And while the image might never make it to MoMA or Gagosian it is actually something of an excellent example of composition choices. No, its not "pretty" in the symmetrical way that calms the simple viewer. Rather, every part of its composition contains enriching information. The distant tree line, the turn of the porch railing, the wall and window of the house... you've used the whole frame to load the viewer with hints, even though they may not consciously realize it.

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I sometimes try to explain to hapless folks, young and old, that "composition" in photography (and painting, drawing..) is *not* principally the decorative proposition that so many "Learn Photographic Composition" books and tutorials sell it to be with their Rules of Thirds, Golden Sections and Infield Fly Rules. Composition is, at its core, about constructing a message. That's often mistakenly conveyed as "telling a story", a notion that's a bit of bovine byproduct; a single image cannot tell a story. Rather, in objective imagery such as yours here, the mission is to provide viewers with a clue-set designed to *suggest* the story or situation that your frame cannot possibly contain.

Sorry to wander away from the main road, but I saw a chance and took it!

Nicely done, Ctein!

Posted by: Kenneth Tanaka | Wednesday, 25 July 2012 at 02:11 PM

This xkcd *seems* appropriate here. It is pretty cool anyway: http://xkcd.com/1080/

Posted by: KeithB | Wednesday, 25 July 2012 at 02:18 PM

"I wonder if this is in any way related to the newish custom that has arisen of recording short video clips instead of making a still photograph?"

Is there a common name for this? "Video snapshot" seems to have been taken to mean a still frame captured from a video.

I have several of these, short, generally with fixed camera position, with motion (and sound, if any) from the action of wind and/or water. An example is an ephemeral waterfall on the side of El Capitan in Yosemite being blown into moving veils by wind in afternoon sunlight.

There are many natural subjects for which the form is ideal. A still shot of a spider web may be nice, but conveys nothing of the beautiful motion in a soft breeze. Even just a few seconds is wonderfully evocative in a way a still can never be.

I wonder if there is a venue for showing them, like a category on a video site.

Moose

Posted by: Moose | Wednesday, 25 July 2012 at 03:53 PM

I'm about as big a B&W fan as there is , but in this case getting rid of the color pretty much sucks the life out of the picture. In color you get a sense of space from how the different sources of illumination define the surfaces. In color there is a shiny telescope tube reflecting the skylight, the blurred face and hair, the eyepiece , and that lighter triangle in the background are clearly different objects. The red illumination source in the astronomer's lap picks out the hair and the eyepiece. There seems to be another red light source off to the right of the field of view at a level below the wooden deck that is picking out the window frame and the railing post and shows that the the deck is well above ground. There is a diffuse blueish cyan light behind the camera but the glare of civilization and (sodium?) streetlights just over the horizon. There is also some sort of artificial illumination off to the distant right that is different , a mercury lamp (maybe one of those rural PG&E rent a streetlight?) or a sign from the looks of it.

The B&W photo just has light from nowhere in particular, I don't think I would be able to even pick out the scope (Dobsonian ?) or the hair. For me the B&W photo flattens out to a mystery shape with a hand in the center.

Early morning Venus and Jupiter viewing ? Here in Brooklyn they are so bright I thought they were off course airliners for a moment.

Posted by: hugh crawford | Wednesday, 25 July 2012 at 03:53 PM

I have this issue, even with color correction - just because you CAN get white light out of sodium vapor street lights, doesn't mean that you SHOULD. I have some scenes that I initially 'see' in b/w, and nothing else looks right. Others, color. But I also dream in various film and video formats(ever have a nightmare in PAL?) One thing I love about digital - it lets me reconsider years after the fact, or placate the family when what I saw was b/w but what my wife wants is HER memory.

Posted by: Rob L | Wednesday, 25 July 2012 at 03:57 PM

Seems I once read a book " Post Exposure" that explained why in very low light levels you can only see in Black and White. I took this to be the reason I always preferred photos such as this in Black and White.

Posted by: Dan Berry | Wednesday, 25 July 2012 at 04:58 PM

This is my favorite picture of yours, Ctein. Bravissimo.

Posted by: Simon Griffee | Wednesday, 25 July 2012 at 05:03 PM

PS. I much prefer the colour print (above) noise notwithstanding.

Posted by: Steve Jacob | Wednesday, 25 July 2012 at 05:48 PM

Sort of weird to see this post on TOP. Just before reading it I was bouncing around youtube listening to music and had wound up on Joan Baez singing "Diamonds and Rust". "Most photography isn't about the art. It's about the memories." Are art and memories really distinct in the way Ctein implied? It's been ages and ages since I read it, but isn't this more or less where Barthes winds up in *Camera Lucida*? With the picture of his mother?

Posted by: Andrew Burday | Wednesday, 25 July 2012 at 08:28 PM

Ctein! This is a softer side of you: It ain't about the art. Most photography isn't about the art. It's about the memories.

Not that you come across as a particularly hard-edged guy. I guess I like what you said, because it gives me more of an insight into your personal emotions than say, a treatise on the technical merits of Nikon D-800.

This whole series of paragraphs was thoughtful, eminently readable, and illuminating. Simply said, just great writing.

Posted by: Laurence | Wednesday, 25 July 2012 at 09:46 PM

Sorry for the 'double-comments', but I didn't want to include this comment in the previous one, as it is completely different than the other one.

I just wanted to remind everyone that the MSL Mars Curiosity Rover will attempt to land on Mars on August 5th at 10:30 PDT. I've been following this since almost its inception, and it is one of those most complex missions ever. This stuff is wildly interesting to me, and I'll be on pins and needles on August 5th. The utter PRECISION that must be accomplished is mind numbing. Here is a video animation overview of the mission, and it is well worth watching. Don't mind that they have put sounds into the video, even though they are in space. It's just for a little emphasis.

http://www.jpl.nasa.gov/video/index.cfm?id=1001

Posted by: Laurence | Wednesday, 25 July 2012 at 09:56 PM

I disagree, and I agree.

Black and white doesn't exactly match what's in our memories, since we see, and remember, and even dream, in color. But I find that sometimes it's more accurate than memory for the reasons many prefer it to color as a medium of expression: it distills things to their essences, shapes, relations. As a "memory photo," sometimes that's what you want, and sometimes it isn't.

Where it fails (for me): Memories of places, or unfamiliar people in places. There's a little alley, called "Graffiti Alley," near a place in Cambridge (Mass.) that I frequent. The idea is that people can go paint the walls of the alley without having police chase them down for vandalism, and often the creations are visually arresting. One recent afternoon I found a few guys spray-painting various sections of the wall and, with their permission, took a few pictures of them in action. I had black and white film in the camera (Plus-X; sigh), but I figured that was all right because the guys were painting interesting shapes. When I looked at the results, it was clear something was off; it turns out that the vibrant spray-painted colors were integral to the scene. Memory lost. Well, no - I still have the memory, but in this case the photo is missing an important part of the memory.

Where it succeeds (for me): Mostly for portraits, or pictures of familiar people in places. Skin color and clothing change color - did the person have a sun burn at the moment of the photo? has the shirt been worn and washed, since the picture was made, until it faded? - but the shape of the face and the oh-that's-so-you expression don't change (much). What I remember about people is the latter, and I believe monochrome captures that more clearly, without the distraction of the day's color.

The question of video clips is an interesting one. Although I tend not to like blurry or grainy video, I find myself using the video mode of my (er, my wife's) point-n-shoot frequently for just this purpose. I think, subject to resolution of storage/retrieval and playback/codec issues, video clips could well replace snapshots as the medium for capturing memories.

Posted by: Q | Wednesday, 25 July 2012 at 10:56 PM

Coming from a movie background my theory is that most color images don't have 'color control' - similar to what an art director does on a movie set.

Black and white hides 'color mistakes' - and the photo has a more unifying feel to it. If I ended up with a photograph shot in color but better looking in black and white - I'm not going to pat myself on the back.

I'll be thinking: Now how can I get the same mood and tones working in color?

Posted by: Sareesh S | Wednesday, 25 July 2012 at 11:01 PM

Yep, gotta agree. Photography for most of us is mostly about the memories. Artful memories would be nice, but it's most about recording a moment in time as it slips through your hands.

Time is so fleeting; blink and, what do you know, it's already the second half of 2012. I have a couple of hundred portraits of the kids taken in the last six years that I cherish. And they're pretty arty too -- if is say so myself.

But I had a look at a couple of short video clips taken with mobile phones and compact cameras, and the memories they evoke -- the sights and sounds already lost to some inaccessible recess of the mind -- are something else. I wished we had taken more of them darned vids. They may be crude, but to me they're priceless.

Posted by: thor | Wednesday, 25 July 2012 at 11:28 PM

I don't care much for art-photography, but I do like memories photographed in a way that make them interesting even for people that don't share those memories. Some of the best end up in our collective memories... Memories aside, the one thing the pic has going for it are those subtle colors. Can't imagine anyone preferring it in Black & Very Dark Grey.
Best, Nick

Posted by: Nick | Wednesday, 25 July 2012 at 11:29 PM

If my wife were to make a list of 10 annoying questions I ask her the most often, "Which version do you like better, black and white or color?" would definitely make the cut.

I ask her this question very often, generally after postprocessing a family snapshot both ways and putting up the A/B comparison for her opinion. She finds this question particularly annoying because I should know by now that she *always* prefers the color. I don't think there has been a single exception. The issue is that I've got myself convinced I'm doing something artistic, and my wife is keeping it real with me. She knows it ain't about the art. It's about the memories.

Posted by: Amin Sabet | Wednesday, 25 July 2012 at 11:43 PM

Excellent post. I have corollary from my own experience that flips your concept on its head.

As a child growing up in the 80s, I genuinely believed that (per the documentation that I could get my hands on) the past had occurred in B+W.

I learned otherwise when I was 4 or 5 and clearly remember feeling let down that the color of the past was no different that of our present.

Posted by: Vadim Gordin | Thursday, 26 July 2012 at 05:21 AM

For me, the dimly present colour emphasises a shot taken at the limits of visbiity, the darkness is as much the subject as the person. Removing the colour just turns it into an under-exposed, not very interesting, B&W picture.

Posted by: eD | Thursday, 26 July 2012 at 06:23 AM

Just realised that in the world of Harry Potter there are no still photos - they're all 'video clips'. I'm not aware of J.K.Rowling having any particular interest in photography, so in the context of Ctein's article it is perhaps interesting that she chose this in a magical world where anything is possible.

Posted by: Colin Work | Thursday, 26 July 2012 at 06:32 AM

Color in a photograph is information, and sometimes that information is useful or needed, and sometimes it is not. Anyone fanatical either way is, well, being fanatical.

Posted by: Jakub | Thursday, 26 July 2012 at 08:00 AM

Discussions like this always remind me about the old theory that we dreamed in B&W. From what I remember, the theory was created in the mid-twentieth century when newspapers, photographs, television, and movies were all in B&W. So really, B&W isn't better at representing "reality" than color is or vice versa, it just depends on what we've grown accustomed to.

Digital (with only a handful of exceptions) has always been about color. Making it B&W may feel less real, because deep down you know something had to be striped from that digital image.

Also, I like the B&W example shot better. I love digital, but I hate noise even more. B&W has always had grain in low light so the above B&W image wears the noise well.

Posted by: Robert Fernandez | Thursday, 26 July 2012 at 09:40 AM

"It ain't about the art. Most photography isn't about the art. It's about the memories."

Ctein, maybe that says more about the dearth of true artists taking pictures than it does about the medium itself?

Accepting this premise, I think it's pretty cool that art doesn't arise from the scene, or the type of equipment used, but from the person behind the camera. If so, it follows that memories don't really have to be banal.

Posted by: Player | Thursday, 26 July 2012 at 10:07 AM

Is it not true that - for example - witnesses to things like accidents generally cannot remember the colour of the vehicle, but can remember things like the shade, or general form?

Posted by: Richard Tugwell | Thursday, 26 July 2012 at 12:46 PM

You can keep your DeLorean Marty McFly, I'm happy with my OMD time machine!

Posted by: Avi Joshi | Thursday, 26 July 2012 at 12:53 PM

Dear Vadim,

Apparently, Bill Watterson mined your childhood:

https://www.gocomics.com/calvinandhobbes/2014/11/09

He also had this observation about photography:

http://www.gocomics.com/calvinandhobbes/1989/07/02

My all-time favorite, though, is this one. It's been taped to my office door ever since it appeared 22 years ago:

https://www.gocomics.com/calvinandhobbes/1992/09/13

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Dear Player,

Well, my comment was not made as a judgment, it was simply an historical observation, which is been factually true ever since mass photography (thank you George Eastman) appeared. But since you've opened this can of worms...

Given that it has always been true, I think an argument could be made that it is inherent in the nature of the medium. And while I did not mean it to be a comment about photography, merely a reminder, upon further pondering I think it might also be a true and profound comment about photography that does speak about the nature of the medium.

pax \ Ctein
[Please excuse any word-salad. MacSpeech in training!]
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Posted by: ctein | Thursday, 26 July 2012 at 02:55 PM

What is art if it's not the skillful distillation of emotional experience?

Art is not a purely stylistic statement. Style is just a mechanism that should be applied for effect. Style for it's own sake is merely artisanship.

Posted by: Steve Jacob | Thursday, 26 July 2012 at 07:13 PM

..It ain't about the art. Most photography isn't about the art. It's about the memories.

Such an intriguing thought. It rings true. Thank you.

Posted by: Godfrey DiGiorgi | Saturday, 28 July 2012 at 11:52 AM

The comments to this entry are closed.
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