

Photography as Art



Dream Street photography by Doug McCulloh

Photography as art—vs. mere documentation—has been debated since 1839 when the daguerreotype was unveiled as the first efficient method to create lasting still pictures. The camera's ability to mechanically record what it aimed at gave it instant value for reportage in a manner far more powerful than the painter's tools. The popular perception was that the photograph does not lie, that it recorded reality. This gave the photograph unparalleled power.

When photography was introduced in 1839, it forced painters out of their comfort zones. As a response, many painters began working in the more fanciful "impressionism" and later in "abstraction" - in part reacting to the camera's perceived ability to create more truthful looking images. As painting changed, so did art photography. One hundred ten years ago, photographers also created impressionistic images. Some scratched negatives and un-focused lenses to create prints with dissolving aspects, similar to paintings by Monet and Cezanne. Later, they manipulated images in the darkroom, creating works sometimes perceived as paintings - even as abstract paintings.

When photography was first presented to the world, many artists viewed the camera as a soulless, mechanical device, rather than as a legitimate artist's tool. But the camera has always been a very powerful tool in the right hands. In fact, it forced the rest of the art world to move over and move on, to their benefit in the long run. Photographers have always known that on either side of the frame, or behind it, or at a different

moment, the story could be totally different. It is the eye, hand, heart, and timing of the artist that give the photographic artwork meaning. And as we move further into the digital age, photography has secured its role as a viable art form on its own.

The impact on the careers of illustrators and painters from 1839 on was dramatic. The livelihood of many artists was jeopardized by the camera, which they often viewed as a mechanical device or passing fancy, rather than as an artist's tool. The public debate on whether images were photography as art or mere documentation began back then, often centering on the camera, rather than on the talents and intent of the photographer.

The mission to promote photography as art was taken up by Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946) in the early 20th century. His passion for this medium as an art form drove him to join forces with photographic artists with similar fervor. In 1902, he created the photography group, "Photo-Secession." Soon after, with the help of this group and with Edward Steichen (1864-1946) (later MoMA Photography Department Director), he published the journal, *Camera Work*, presenting photography as equal to other art forms. In spite of Stieglitz's crusading efforts, photographic art was still not acknowledged by the larger art community.

Artist Lionel Feininger (1871-1956), known for his cubist inspired expressionism, explored photography as art while in Germany before and during World War II. A Getty Museum 2012 exhibition of his photographic work showed how he explored night imagery, reflection, the effects of light and shadow and off-kilter angles. Using a Voigtländer Bergheil camera, he shot the exteriors of German Bauhaus buildings in Weimar, the nearby Dessau railway station and his own canvases in progress in his studio, the room's tall windows looking out over an urban landscape. Between 1932 and 1933, he photographed several Dessau shop windows displaying mannequins. In "Drunk with Beauty," four glamorous mannequin busts, superimposed by window reflections of buildings across the street, echo the growing disorientation from the Nazis' advance.

Interpretive Picture Taking

Photographers have always known that picture taking is interpretive and more about what they perceive than about what is in front of them. They control what the viewer sees just as painters do.

Photographer Doug McCulloh did just that in his exhibition, "Dream Street." He lived near a proposed housing development when he entered a contest to name a street there. His winning entry, "Dream Street," inspired his odyssey photographing the rough-hewn residents of the former farming community, the poorly paid workers, the construction in progress, and the nearly finished almost identical houses. Doug shot sequential black and white images from odd, askew angles, with obscured lighting, resulting in artworks with surreal aspects. His photography as art images show how the camera and light are basically artists' tools - just as brushes and paints are.

Looking back over the last half century, the art community has embraced photography as art. Michael Govan, Director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, agrees. He wrote in the 2014 book, "See the Light," "Twenty-first-century encyclopedic museums such as LACMA must maintain a substantial commitment to photography and media if we hope to narrate the many histories of art over the past two centuries..."

War Photography

As fine art photography developed steadily, documentary photography was more visible to the public - as with Civil War images. Today war images are often considered artful, as in the popular PBS film, "The Civil War" by Ken Burns and with the photo, "Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima," from World War II. Philip Jones Griffiths, a renowned photojournalist, shot numerous scenes from Vietnam and other wars. He said, "Am I a news photographer? A press photographer? A photojournalist? An artist? I deplore the latter moniker because the word is so misused. For me, art is the melding of form and content, and as that is what I strive to do, then perhaps 'artist' is correct."