

Pagham Photographers

LOOKING IS NOT SEEING

Practice Techniques to Develop Photographic Observation

The greatest skill of a talented photographer is not how accurate he or she can be with exposure; it's not being spot on with all of the technical details or putting out thousands of images a week. The greatest skill any photographer can hope to possess is that of observation.

Observation will define your work. It will give life and breathe to the stories you capture and the beauty you create. Observation will be the difference between an average photo and a captivating photo; between an image that is a visual picture, and one that speaks to its' audience in the most audible ways.

Developing observation - specifically in your photography - takes deliberate and practical efforts. It takes time and effort and an unwillingness to take what is at face value.

Practice with some of the following techniques which have been adapted specifically for photographers:

1. Analyse

Take an object and place it on a table in front of you. Look at it for five minutes and take note of everything you notice about it. If it is an apple, notice the shape; is it round, is it bumpy, does it have many grooves? Notice the size; is it large, small, medium – and in comparison to what? Notice texture, colour, shine and polish. Does it look old? Why? Does it look freshly picked? Why? Is it mouth watering? Then what makes it so? Ask every question you can about your object until you can think of absolutely nothing else. What kind of stories were you making up in your head about this object? Why?

2. Exhaust Perspective

Take this object and set it in a window. Take your camera and with one lens, take as many pictures with as many different perspectives and focal distances as you can over 15 minutes. What are you trying to communicate? What makes different angles express different moods or feelings? Use the light in as many ways possible. Does the overall look and feeling of your communication change based on the way you use your techniques and combine your options? This stretching exercise will challenge your capacity and cause you to begin looking outside your box for perspectives you have never seen before.

3. Evaluate your Locations

When you go on a shoot, take a few minutes prior to evaluate the location. Before you start, look around and familiarize yourself with your environment, don't just photograph the first thing you see (unless it is moving). Ask yourself which aspect of the location communicates different feelings and emotions. Then, ask yourself why. Is the lighting streaming through the trees above, creating soft and diffused sun rays that give warmth and drama. Is the placement of the flowers asymmetrical, creating a feeling of artistic dynamic? Don't take anything you see at face value.

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4. Shadows

Always look at the shadows. Shadows are often ignored. When you look at a scene, you see the bigger picture but let's turn that around and look at the detail. Take a lawn, you often see the shadows falling on the lawn but do you see the shadows cast by each blade of grass that form the lawn? Look at a plank of wood that is not exactly smooth, perhaps planed and weathered, cast a light across it at a low angle and observe the shadows cast by the grain.

The first few months of dedicated photography often cause individuals to "see" frames everywhere - even when there is no camera in hand. The joy and wonder of photography causes a heightened sense of observation. Force yourself to create images in your mind before they happen; notice the pieces of images all around you and develop your mental sharpness for visual elements.

If you employ the skills of observation, this will enable you to combine all elements that are at your disposal and arrange them to reinforce the storytelling strength of your image and that is a powerful thing.