Vision, Passion and Creativity

My Three Secrets for Creating a Successful Image

Cole Thompson is no stranger to PSA having presented his feeling on the importance of photographic vision at the 2014 PSA Conference in Albuquerque. This was followed up with his article in the August 2015 *PSA Journal*.

Cole became interested in photography at the age of fourteen having read a biography of George Eastman while living in the Rochester area. For ten years he worked in the darkroom enjoying his new found interest with the expectation of becoming a photographer. Then for the next 20 years, like many of us, Cole had to dedicate his time to career and family. In retirement, he rekindled his interest in photography now in the digital age.

Cole works exclusively in black and white. His work has been published internationally and has been published in Lens Work magazine. Cole will be one of our speakers at the Spokane Conference, presenting on September 25th.

By Larry Cowles, FPSA, GMPSA/P

By Cole Thompson

I am an artist who uses photography and my goal is to show you what I see through my Vision and not what I see with my eyes.

As seen with my eyes and captured with my iPhone

As created through my Vision

I am creating, not documenting.

For decades I had considered myself a "photographer" and felt my mission was to document what my eyes saw without interpretation. Then in 2004 my entire world changed when I threw away those limitations and was suddenly free to "manipulate" the image (a dirty word to the purist) and show you what I was seeing in my head.

I have no art training outside of Art History 101 in college, I have no photography training and I have never worked as a photographer. To some, I may not be qualified speak on the subject of art or photography. And yet I hope my journey from photographer to artist may be of value to some.

Moai Sitting for Portrait No 36

The Angel Gabriel

My Three Secrets for Creating a Great Image

Over the years I have developed a philosophy about what's required for me to create a successful image. And let me state that my definition of "successful" is to create images that I love and am proud of. Success for me has nothing to do with images that win, sell or are popular. Those accolades are temporary and fleeting, while the satisfaction of loving your creation lasts a lifetime.

For me, a successful image or project must have these three qualities: Vision, Passion and Creativity.

While each of these qualities are important, it's only when all three are present that I create my very best work.

Vision

Finding my Vision was the first challenge I faced as I made the transformation from photographer to artist. Here's the story of how I came to find mine.

For years I was an admirer of Ansel Adams and his work. Like many youth of my era, he was my photographic hero and I dreamed of one day being the next Ansel Adams. I spent my time studying his work, imitating his style and even going to Yosemite to stand where he stood to recreate his images.

In 2002 I had been invited to attend Review Santa Fe where over the course of two days my work was reviewed by gallery owners, publishers and other experts in the field. As I approached the last reviewer on the last day, I showed my work, he looked at it briefly, pushed it back brusquely and said: "It looks like you're trying to copy Ansel Adams."

I responded proudly: "I am! I love Ansel Adams!"

He then would utter words that would change my life forever, he said: *Ansel has already done Ansel, what can you do that shows your unique Vision?*

At first I was angry, then confused and then curious.

- What exactly was Vision?
- Was it something that some people had and others did not?
- Did I have a Vision?

That set me on a two year journey to learn about Vision and to discover if I had one.

What I learned was that Vision is simply the way that I see things. It's the sum total of all of my life experiences that causes me to see the world in a unique way. I also learned that *everyone* has a Vision. Because it is simply your point of view, the way you see and the way you like to create.

Because I have this Vision directing me, I have the confidence to ignore what others are doing and not care what the latest fads and trends are. My Vision allows me to ignore the "rules" of photography and not listen to common wisdom. Vision gives me the confidence to not care what others think of my work, whether that be criticism or praise.

The importance of Vision cannot be understated: uncovering my Vision was the most significant event of my photographic life and one of the most influential events of my non-photographic life.

Vision is more important than my camera, my lenses and my post processing techniques. It's the spark that makes my images, "mine." It's the quality that gives my images power and strength.

Old Car Interior

Passion

For years, whenever I had a new project idea, I would write it down on a piece of paper. I had about 50 ideas on the list but had never pursued one of them. I now realize that I never pursued them because I wasn't passionate about them.

What does Passion have to do with a project? For me, it's critical. If I'm not passionate about a project, I cannot pursue it. When I am passionate about a project, it's a joy to work on and it flows easily. When I'm not, it's a forced task.

Let me give two examples; a project that I felt passionate about and one that I didn't.

Several years ago I was visiting my son in Ukraine when my family decided to visit Krakow, Poland. I was vaguely aware that Auschwitz-Birkenau was nearby, but had no desire to see it and in fact I didn't want to see it (I avoid sad movies, stories and situations).

But my family voted to go and so off we went.

As we got off the tour bus the driver didn't want me to leave my equipment onboard and so I took it with me. However I had no intention of photographing the camp as I thought it might be irreverent or sacrilegious.

We began the tour by examining the documentation of each person they processed. They took a beautiful black and white photograph of the person and in perfect penmanship, documented the person's life, occupation, family and possessions. It was difficult to understand why such care was taken to document a "subhuman" they were soon to murder.

We next went into the room with the iconic "piles." Piles of hair, piles of shoes, piles of glasses…and suddenly the room started to close in on me and I could not breathe. I signaled to my family that I was going outside and left the tour.

Outside, I walked slowly, looking down at my feet and catching my breath. As I started to breathe easier, my mind began to swirl. Looking at my feet and the path I was walking, I began to wonder who else had walked in these same footsteps on their way to the gas chamber. Who else had walked this path to the gallows?

Then I began to wonder metaphorically, if the spirits of the dead still lingered. And then this idea suddenly hit me, I needed to photograph the ghosts of those who had lived and died there.

And so I photographed The Ghosts of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Auschwitz No. 4

Auschwitz No. 13

Auschwitz No. 14

This was a project that I was incredibly passionate about and it was a success, both personally and critically. Soon afterwards I was encouraged to apply this "formula" to other locations, everything from "The Ghosts of Little Big Horn" to "The Ghosts of Manzanar." The reasoning was that I should take advantage of my recent success by quickly following up with similar projects.

Why? Because I didn't have a passion for the project. I was trying to piggyback on the success of The Ghosts of Auschwitz-Birkenau instead of feeling inspired and passionate about the project. This project failed because it was based on a marketing strategy and not passion.

So after spending several weeks and thousands of dollars, I came away with only one image that I loved, but it was worth it because it reminds me of an important lesson learned: If you're not passionate about the project, don't do it!

Old Wardour Castle

I resisted at first because I didn't feel a passion for these other projects, but after a while I gave in and decided to try it. And so off to England I went to create The Ghosts of Great Britain. This was to be a series of ghosts at ancient castles.

But after several weeks of photographing, I scrapped the project kept only this one image.

Swimming Towards the Light

Creativity

I grew up believing that I didn't have any creative ability.

Zip. Nada. None.

I believed that you either had "it" or you didn't…and I was very certain that I didn't.

That perceived lack of creativity is part of the reason photography appealed to me. I thought that I could compensate for a lack of creative ability by excelling in technical ability. Looking back that now seems so foolish: if my images didn't tell a story, convey an idea or evoke an emotion, how could technical perfection help?

This reminds me of a quote by Ansel Adams: *There is nothing worse than a sharp image of a fuzzy concept.*

So what's the truth of it? Is creativity something that some people have and others do not? Do you have it? Surprisingly many of the photographers I meet feel just as I felt, convinced they had no creative ability.

Barbara Kerr a psychology professor says that "approximately 22 percent of the variance [in creativity between people] is due to the influence of genes." She determined this by studying the differences in identical twins.
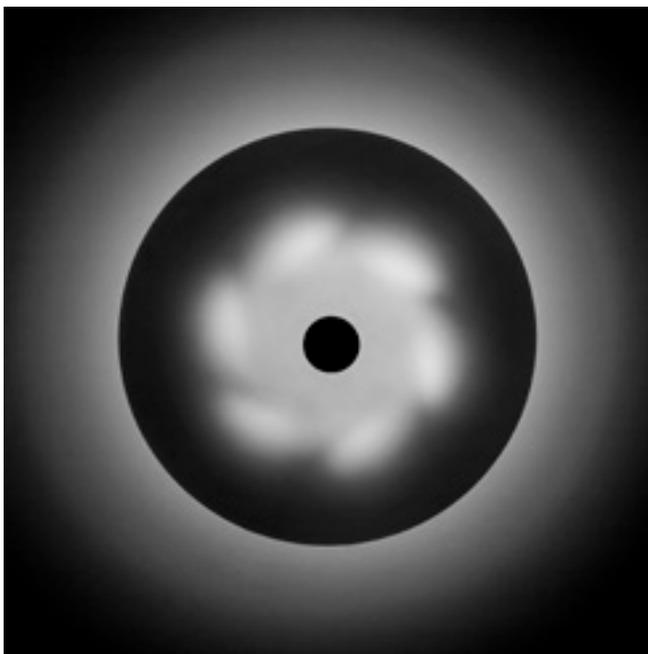
That means that 78% of our creative potential is within our control. It means that even though I grew up in a home without art or music, received no artistic training and never exhibited any artistic inclinations…I can grow creatively.

Here are some definitions of Creativity:

The use of the imagination or original ideas.

A phenomenon whereby something new and somehow valuable is formed.

The ability to transcend traditional ideas and to create meaningful new interpretations.

My goal is to create images that are original and different. Different from what others are doing but most importantly, different from what I have done in the past.

I have heard many photographers argue that there is nothing new or original to be photographed, that it's all been done. But I disagree. Certainly every "thing" has been photographed before, but not every original idea has been created. For example…

Several years ago I was waiting to check out of a hotel in Akron, Ohio. As I waited, I just happened to look up and saw a ceiling lamp that caught my imagination. I pushed the lobby table out of the way, laid on the floor and photographed this lamp.
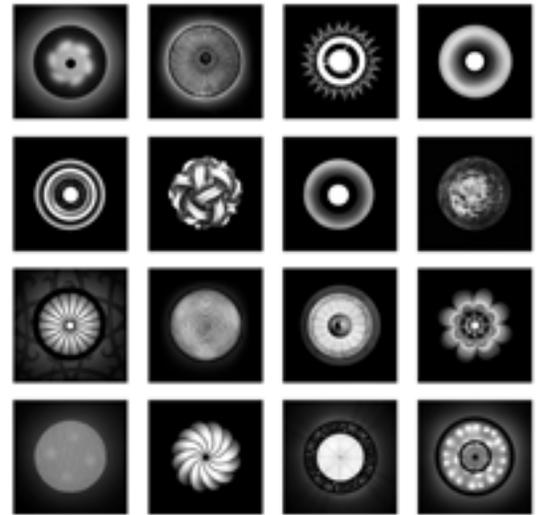
Ceiling Lamps
Cole Thompson Photography

Ceiling Lamp Poster

This was the first image in my "Ceiling Lamp" series. While others have photographed lamps before, I believe my work to be original.

Here's another example: clouds. Clouds have probably been photographed by every photographer who has ever lived, but have they shown them like this?

Ceiling Lamp, Best Western

Harbinger No. 1

Harbinger No. 13

My Harbinger series portrays clouds in an original way because that's how I saw them through my Vision. My Vision and creativity are intertwined, a good friend Stephen Levin characterized their relationship this way: "Creativity is a tool for achieving one's Vision." If you have an idea but don't execute it, then you are imaginative but not creative.

So how did I develop my creativity? I first started by believing that I had creative potential, which was difficult given that I had lived my entire life believing otherwise. Next I worked on finding my Vision. And lastly I practiced: I would try, analyze my work and then try again. It's a gut wrenching process that requires you to be completely honest with yourself.

Learning to be creative was so much harder than

Harbinger No. 22

learning something concrete such as Photoshop! But it's so much more important because it's what makes my images unique and mine.

Conclusion

Vision, Passion and Creativity are all closely linked. I can create an image with just one or two of these qualities, but it's only when all three are present do I create my very best work.

Hana