



*A Father's Love*

# Contemplating the Fine Art of Photography: Looking Behind Our Images



By Janice Koskey

Photos © Janice Koskey

We see with our eyes what we feel in our hearts. For years we have used our vision to capture and create our photographs. We enjoy them, enter them into contests, get feedback, and improve. Once the technical aspects of our work have been basically mastered and we approach the fine art of photography, questions may arise such as, “So what?” or “Now what?”

At this point we may need a fresh dimension for our photographic practice, another way of looking which may enliven and enhance it. Applying for artist membership in art associations, submitting pieces into a juried show, creating a portfolio, or writing an artist’s statement require of us a deeper thinking into our work. Savoring the moments before, during, and after clicking the shutter and reflecting upon the relationship of our images to our lives may engage us in the metaphor and meaning behind our experience of photography.

While a contemplative look into our most intriguing images may be appealing, some may

perceive it as a challenging pursuit. Where do we begin? One of the ways to look behind an image and discover its sometimes-hidden agenda is through writing. Julia Cameron in her classic book, *The Artist’s Way*, suggests extensive writing about our art. If we take time out to sit with a key photograph and ask ourselves questions, answers may emerge that have not yet occurred to us. Whether we write them down or hold them in our thoughts, the results will be insight into the artistic purposes that have motivated us and a greater understanding of the work we have produced.

Sharing my personal exploration into a few of my favorite photographs will help illuminate the procedure. When I contemplated the image entitled *A Father’s Love* I recalled the moment of capture on a water taxi in Puerto Vallarta where suddenly the transit resembled a roller coaster ride. A young boy on the bench in front of me was scared, and his father used his steady hand and strong arm to reassure him.

I quickly switched my camera into the “action”

setting and as the horizon tilted and the boat swayed, I snapped a continuous series of a father caring for his child. After this photograph was processed, printed and studied, I discovered that I was attracted to the fatherly protection, a story about which I had limited experience having lost my own loving father at an early age. Drawn to scenes of fathers and their children, I have since created a body of work on the subject, one that holds much connection and emotion for me, and one that also addresses the larger questions of independence and relationship in my life.

Because photography is a visual art, we can also consider gesture and mood in the search for themes and meaning in our work. An open boat slowly moving in gentle currents with no agenda of its own dominates the image *Solace*. Absorption into this image led me to reexperience being drawn regularly to that boat while going through a particularly stressful time. On this day the dinghy was close enough to shore that I could feel its subtle stirring and be soothed by its soft touch on the grasses. The title emerged as a metaphor highlighting the significance of the image, peacefulness in an often-chaotic world. The response of viewers to this image suggests that others felt the solace too.

Metaphor and meaning in our photographs can sometimes be ambiguous as is *Little Boy Blue* making his way through a foggy wood. To me this innocent boy, like the child in all of us, is striving to make sense of a bewildering world. To other viewers different questions arose. Did he simply



*Mating Dance*



*Little Boy Blue*

lose something, or does he show us the wonderful curiosity that all children display? Is he feeling sad, moving through a nursery rhyme, or might this be a photograph depicting quintessential childhood? In discussing the mood and feeling evoked by this image I found that it affected people in a variety of ways, yet its underlying universal appeal could be the element that moves it into the category of fine art. Whatever the interpretation, our ever-present inner child may at times be exposed through photography.

In contemplating these possibilities, a final question arises. Are photographs made from the inside out? If our inner life is indeed engaged when we are creating photographs, how does it translate



*Singular*

into our images? I often go to Florida to observe and photograph birds in their natural habitats. Usually these images are uplifting, colorful and dynamic, as is the breeding egret shown in *Mating Dance*. Looking behind a bright and lively image such as this, I appreciate the sheer beauty of nature and I feel and share the ever-present drive to survive.

On my excursion south after the death of a friend, however, quite another sensibility was at play. My eye was attracted to a different type of image, one that would lend itself to black and white silhouette. *Sorrow* is one such image. The low drooping of the cormorant's head, the glowing touches of light against dark, and the stark angles of branch and bird spoke to me of sadness. Allowing the creative forces of nature to reflect my inner state not only produced a provocative image but seemed to help ease my grief.

Contemplating our finest art uncovers a path to the continuance of our photographic journey. Each image holds another set of ideas, feelings, and truths. Connecting photographs to our lives not only deepens our art and suggests opportunities for creating and promoting bodies of work, but it also helps us articulate who we are as photographers. Getting together in small groups with like-minded friends who are also exploring the questions of "So What?" and "Now What?" can provide the support needed to critique our photographs at the levels of technique, content, and form and also can encourage us to delve into the next layer and discover the story, soul, and poetry behind our images.



*Solace*

## Contemplating a Photograph

Find a quiet place to focus on a photograph or body of work that you would like to reflect upon. Consider the ideas below and think about or jot notes on the impressions that come to you.

- What was your state of mind at the time of capture, and what attracted your eye?
- What feelings are evoked when you look at your photograph now?
- Does it trigger memories or have any connections to your past or present life?
- Identify the gesture or mood of the image and imagine a metaphor that could apply.
- What is its significance to you? Could it embody a universal truth?
- Why would viewers want to look at your photograph? How might they respond?

Consider how the process of finding, processing, and contemplating this image adds to your self-knowledge and insight into the themes contained in your fine art photography.

Any mention of products or services in this article or anywhere else in the *PSA Journal* does not constitute an endorsement or approval of those items.



*Sorrow*



*Halcyon Days*