

Armchair Photography

by Malcolm McElvaney

Photograph - a picture made using a camera, in which an image is focused on to light-sensitive material and then made visible and permanent by chemical treatment, or stored digitally

Photograph - a picture or likeness obtained by photography

Context - As defined above the final result of the art form known as photography is a bit vague or technical but so open to interpretation, in a social landscape so a washed with photographs maybe even lost for the most part. A photograph is a crafted fragment of the entire experience of the photographer as it was first seen, composed through the cameras point of view, captured either under full control of the photographer or with aid of the camera making decisions, and post processing as well. The crafted fragment might resemble that scene more faithfully or more faithfully resemble the version in the photographers memory and this status is only one unknown among many the viewer of that photograph is never going to be aware of. In short the context of all the work going into it and story of the act of finding the scene in the first place is lost unless shared in part as well.

Before I get into the main point I would like to cover an example of an photograph in an art gallery and how it is perceived by the viewer. If it is presented as is and open to complete interpretation then it will be up to the viewers full control; however, add a title and a form of guidance is introduced to subtly direct the viewer to a more common interpretation. The photographer could further add in some detail or story and the viewer is even more likely to see it as the photographer would have. Without details we can make more assumptions and customize the narrative in our head, add more filters that direct the story and we make our eternal narrative match the one presented. The viewer can be influenced or have a bias about the photograph is my main point and the photographer has no control of it after it is released and in the world at large.

Armchair photography - It is in within that limited context the viewer is expected to judge and appreciate the photograph as presented so perhaps creating a new type of photography called armchair photography. The causal viewer may not fit into the concept of being an armchair photographer but photographers in general begin to fit here simply because there is an interest in the art form itself. The photographs produced by other photographers make us the viewer in that photographs life cycle and the lost context comes into play.

Everyone should be an armchair photographer because even if we have limited

knowledge or are just starting out we see and learn from other photographers as a source of inspiration at least and get clues to what is possible at best. The hunt into who that photographer is, what gear they used, etc is part of that decoding of a fragment shared to the public at large. Since photography is such a large and complex art form practiced in bits and pieces it isn't always possible to guess what was done but clues exist we can learn from.

From my own experience using existing light and knowing how the exposure in camera translates visually I would fair pretty decently on most photographs but studio based with all the extra gear and lights would be lost on me. Poses and arrangements used would still be valuable perhaps but would I be taking those types of photographs myself is the question. Shouldn't matter might be the answer as inspiration and how it manifest in real life can surprise us. Should I begin to add more bits and pieces to my own practice then photographs that relate would give some clues and way to see them in use.

A critique of our work by others, especially in person, can be taken in many ways but other photographers know bits and pieces of the art form we may not, therefore useful insights can be gained. In person at least those lost details can be restored and further clarification requested in exchange. Its a tool that can be of great value in an endless sea of likes for a likes sake. One armchair photographer helping the other through observations and passing some technical knowledge at its best.

In conclusion – This whole line of reasoning started when I posted an image and related a story barely related to how I composed the image, the two connected in my mind naturally but out of context was linked in an unusual way. The advice I got was unexpected in the critique I wasn't really asking for but I didn't mind it either. The linking of the what I shared is what I found most valuable out of it because it showed the words we use to present and share an image can be seen in a different way based on the context known. An armchair photographer seems as good a term as any to explain the disconnect that we experience from other photographers work so I throw it out there. Do I look at others photographers photographs much for inspiration or analyze them as I suggested, rarely would be an honest answer but maybe I should take my own advice.