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ON TEACHING PHOTOGRAPHY

By Michael A. Smith

I find that there are two distinct approaches to the teaching of Photography as a Fine Art today. One approach is the traditionalist approach; the masters are revered, even placed on pedestals, and the students are all too often encouraged to emulate their style. Judging by their work, students taught by this approach seem to be led down a path pre-ordained in scope. The other approach is the non-traditionalist approach; the masters are either not respected, or they are respected only in a far off distant sort of way, and students are led to an opposite direction. There is an, “If it has been done before, I don’t want to see it” kind of attitude. The students are asked, commanded even, to “do their own thing.”

This division into traditionalist and non-traditionalist approaches is intended only to indicate predominating attitudes. Most teachers, of course, combine elements of both approaches in their teaching, and I do not mean to imply that teachers can be classified as belonging purely to either category. But while these approaches can primarily be seen as expressions of attitudes in the Photography teachers, for the students these approaches serve as a foundation for their work, and frequently even determine the limits for their work. Curiously, I have found that it is usually the attitude of the first teacher which is the decisive influence. Those students whose first teacher has a strong non-traditionalist approach rarely develop interest in straight photography. Conversely, those students whose first teacher has a strong traditionalist approach rarely experiment with or do any manipulative or conceptual work.

Neither of these approaches is adequate, because neither truly encourages nor enables the students to have a full range of experience. Both approaches tend to choose paths for the students rather than allow them the freedom to make their own choices. Because I believe that this freedom is of crucial importance for a student’s growth, I would like to present a few of my ideas about a direction for Photographic Education which would encourage this freedom of choice.

Before I can do this however, it is necessary to first ask, and the answer, two not unimportant and basic questions—“What can one teach in an Art class?” and, “What is Art all about anyway?” I shall answer the second question with the simple, but not undisputed, I am sure, answer, that Art is about Life, and the producing, doing, or act of Art is a deep expression of an individual’s response to Life, contained within a form of some sort. There are, of course, many other answers to the question of what Art is, but I don’t want to get bogged down with that business here.

Now for the question—“What can one teach in an Art class?”. Surely, one doesn’t teach “Life”, for Life is something that one learns about through living. One doesn’t have to try to learn about life, just by living one is constantly learning. And one cannot teach others how to respond in a deep way to the world. I believe it is this that is meant when it is said that “Art cannot be taught.” But what one can do by teaching is to help elicit the expression of an already existing deep response, and one can certainly teach about the form within which the expression is contained.

Helping bring forth expression of student's deep responses is one of the most important functions of a teacher. This requires a deep sensitivity to one's students as well as a thorough knowledge of oneself. This aspect of teaching I shall not deal with in this article.

The "form within which expression is contained," as I said, can be taught. This "form," though not part of the force behind expression, is part of expression. It consists of combinations of materials and processes which are used in a manner dictated by aesthetic judgments. When we teach about the form within which expression is contained, then, we teach about materials and processes and about attitudes governing their use.

Teaching about materials and processes primarily involves teaching about technical matters. All too often technical matters are taught as if they are totally separate from expression and involve only the mechanical manipulation of materials. Technique, however, is much more than that. For not only does it give form to expression, it also helps to shape and modify that expression.

I believe that students should have a knowledge not only of the technical material directly related to their own work of the moment, but they should also have a knowledge of the technical material based on other concerns than their own. Further, they should have a knowledge of techniques used in previous years by other workers. In this way, by the time students have graduated, they would have the broadest possible base from which to continue their own explorations. I find that many students are familiar only with that technical material they need for their own work of the moment. This lack of knowledge and awareness of the technical side of the medium is appalling, especially when encountered in graduate students, who, one would think, would know more.

Students should also have a thorough knowledge of the history of photography, for this knowledge provides for a richer experience in the use of materials and in the making of aesthetic judgments. By understanding the past, we can more fully explore in the present. I have found that many advanced and graduate students have a wholly inadequate knowledge of the medium's history. They have certainly heard the names of most of the photographers, but for the most part, lack any in-depth feeling for and real knowledge of their work. With many students it is almost impossible to carry on a conversation about photography in which one refers to examples of past work. Their knowledge is limited to the few examples of work shown in their history of photography survey courses. Expecting students to have a greater familiarity with historical work is looked on as strange.

Now, let us consider that aesthetic judgments are formed by four components—personal, historical, technical, and cultural. As I have suggested, the personal component essentially cannot be taught. It can only be elicited. In contrast, the historical and technical components can be taught. In fact, they must be consciously learned, because they do not come from daily living. The cultural component, on the other hand, does not have to be learned, because it develops naturally as a function of one's daily life and social interaction.

As I viewed student work with these considerations in mind, I realized that much of the work lacked technical and historical inputs—precisely those inputs which can best be learned in school. Consequently, such work, though often clever, was rarely very deep or moving. This work, composed primarily of personal and cultural components, was rationalized by the students with the attitude that they were "doing their own thing". This attitude was frequently encouraged by the teachers, especially by those who had a non-traditionalist approach. I'd like to add here, so as not to appear unduly biased, that I find much of the student work which is dull and uninteresting comes from a strictly traditionalist approach, and contains only technical and historical inputs. But because the non-traditionalist approach, which is partly based on "doing your own thing", has an unusually strong influence today, I shall give it some further comment.

Now I certainly have no objection to anyone and everyone doing their own thing. But where does one's own thing come from? It comes from living one's own life. The more we live, the more we understand, even if that understanding sometimes consists in knowing how very little we really know. And of course, the more we understand, the more we can put into our own work— our own photographs. The point is that we shouldn't have to try to do our own thing, we should be able to do it naturally, as a function of living. Making one's own statement as an artist is not a goal to strive toward, but is something which overtakes one in the course of living and working fully.

Along these lines, let us consider the idea of a period of early or imitative work versus the idea of "doing your own thing." In the history of the visual arts there have not been many young masters, as there have been in other fields such as literature and music. Historically, a majority of visual artists produced their lasting work after they had been working for many years. The first ten years of so of production is frequently looked on as immature "early work." We photography teachers tend to forget this. With the exception of beginning photography courses, we do not allow our students their period of early work, nor do we allow a period of imitative work.

"How can we deal with this photograph after Harry Callahan?", one photography teacher recently said while looking at a student photograph of high contrast weeds in snow. The implication of this comment was clearly that this was a type of photograph that had been done before and which shouldn't be attempted now, and that making photographs like this was a type of experience which was no longer valid. How unlike the attitude found in many painting classes, where students are encouraged to go to museums to copy the work of the masters. In these painting classes, the emphasis is obviously on learning the craft of art, rather than on "doing your own thing." It is interesting to note that this attitude on the part of photography teachers and students toward historical work and "doing one's own thing," seems to apply only when students work in a manner similar to that of the classical masters, such as Callahan, Siskind, Weston, etc. Work done in the manner of more recent masters, whether traditionalist or non-traditionalist, such as Arbus, Friedlander, Uelsmann, etc., is not considered to be an imitation of anything, but is considered to be "one's own thing."

This alone indicates that "doing your own thing" does not always mean what it says. I believe it is often just an excuse for not learning the technical and historical components of making aesthetic judgments. I also believe it is rationalization for an approach to Photography which is to a great extent, based upon a reaction against classical values and traditions. Because it lacks a solid foundation and is largely based on a 'reaction against' rather than on an 'expression for', all too often this student work "burns out."

While I was sitting in a photography department office at one of the major universities writing the first draft of this paper, a student approached me with some basic questions about the use of his camera. He had just enrolled in beginning photography and had not even exposed one roll of film yet. As he was leaving, I said, "Hope you get some good ones." He answered, "Oh, my pictures will probably look like one's made fifty years ago, but I'll get through that quick enough I hope." At more advanced student levels this superficial feeling for individuality is even more prevalent. What is the hurry? Everyone is unique. With a broad foundation in the medium and with continued work over a period of time, one's uniqueness will emerge. Of course, there will always be those whose uniqueness will emerge whether they have a broad foundation in the medium or not, but they are the exceptions.

Though I have stressed the teaching of the "form within which expression is contained" and the technical and historical components of making aesthetic judgments, I realize that the making of any fine photograph involves much more than this. But we do a disservice if we only encourage our students to "do their own thing." We should instead, provide them with the broadest possible

foundation for their work. This would help give them the freedom to make their own statements as artists.