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The Seeing, Not the Taking

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If you get too hung up on photographic techniques, you will totally miss the picture. The magic is in the seeing, not in the taking.

Granted, we photographers must pay attention to the usual issues whether our preference is film or digital, and no matter where our inspiration comes from. We must attend to exposure, contrast ratios, color balance, depth of field, etc., and it doesn't matter whether our inspiration is a sunset, a baby, a woman or a product. Techniques are basically systems that assure certain levels of quality and predictability to convey on film what it is that we....see. Techniques for the advanced professional will be different than for the hobbyist. The ability to **see**, however, serves us all.

Learning from other inspirations

Pay attention to the images of subjects that may not inspire your own photography. See how the colors, highlights and textures are represented or conveyed. Consume images, whether they are from National Geographic or National Enquirer, whether they are paintings by Ruben or photographs by Scavullo, whether they are Ansel Adams or Rodin. Try to see what the other visual masters have seen to expand your own sense of vision, and let their views influence your own, even if the subject matter is different. For example, a close up of a flower petal and its soft texture can provide a new influence on how you photograph the soft skin of a young baby sleeping in the early morning light. See? See!!!!

Quit looking. Start reading. Particularly, read poetry. For example, if the northern outdoors—complete with crunching snow and the solitude of open, white fields—inspires you, then try reading some of Robert Frost's poetry to envision what he describes. Then use mental images as “examples” when you next photograph snowscapes or winter or solitude or... Try Lewis and Clark's writings before your next outdoor excursion; “listen” to the pure, unadulterated **awe** they felt for what they saw. Do you “snap” images of the great outdoors, or do you allow yourself the sense of awe that can then direct your creative decisions?

For portrayals of the everyday person or for genuine nudes, try Walt Whitman's poetry *and* essays. There is a long list of poets whose tight writings are full of imagery. Let them in to influence you.

See the light

Photo-graph. By definition: light-drawing. No matter the format or the medium, we are nothing without our paint: light. Learn to see light before using it to your advantage. *Color*: warm, cool, sunrise, sunset, midday, cloudy...pause and consider how the color impacts the image. *Direction*: high, low, angular, full-on, partial....work at changing your position to your subject to change the view of the light angle, or change the light angle itself if you can. What are you trying to convey? Choose the light that conveys YOUR vision, not that of a formulaic lighting set up. Formulas are instructional beginnings to help you see particular outcomes; they are not the end-all, be-all. *Quantity*: low light or brilliant cloudless day, 40-watt incandescent or 2000 watt-seconds of studio flash...as long as there is light, there can be images. Choose what accomplishes your goals, or adjust your methods to what is available. *Quality*: harsh, soft, contrasty, muted...each affects your subject differently, and each should be part of your arsenal as a tool. Light IS at your command!

Even when not taking photographs, look at the light. What is the feel in your child's room with just the night light on while they rest in bed? Is it one of safety or is that the environment in which their fears of monsters are born? What will you do with that feeling for future images? The bright morning light bursts into the bedroom and pushes its way into the darkened hall through a door that is ajar: What can you do with a slash of light like that? As you look at a flower through the viewfinder, a cloud moves in front of the sun. The quality of the light softens, the color of the light cools, the image changes. Remember lessons such as these for your next photographs of flowers, buildings, people, wildlife, landscape, etc.

See differently

By constantly looking and reading as described above, your vision will become enhanced and your awareness of creative options will heighten. Learning from the masters and from nature is important. Learn from the young, too.

Recall the scene in the movie "Dead Poet Society" in which the teacher (Robin Williams) tells his young students to stand on a desk to change perspective? As photographers, we must change our perspective literally and figuratively. Stand on high, lay flat on the ground, look straight up, view the flower from behind it, look straight down, and so on. Want to

see how that world looks? Take the time to truly notice the vision of (very) young photographers, either that of family or friends, or school contests. Untainted by “example,” they view their world in their own way. We need to allow ourselves the same.

Techniques are now at your full disposal to assist your work, not direct it. Remember, it’s not the taking, it’s the seeing.

Check Dion’s [site](#) for other tips for photographers and other creative/expressive folks, as well as the calendar of his presentations around the community.