

The SEE of Creativity

by Ray Guilette

Creativity has always been a topic of great interest and concern to artists. Careers and even lifetimes have been spent trying to define, discover, and enhance creativity. Although it seems foreign and obscure to some, creativity is a natural phenomenon. If you are a member of the human race, you are by definition, creative.

We have all been inspired by the images of another photographer. Perhaps we felt a bit humbled, too, doubting that we could achieve that level of artistry and uniqueness. But creativity seems impossible only to those who haven't tried. Creativity starts with small and tentative steps, but can become a purposeful and fulfilling life-long journey.

The building blocks of Creativity are inspiration, time, and freedom. The inspiration part is the easiest; one only needs to be open to it. Inspiration is an emotional response that produces a desire, the desire to be creative yourself. A creative person is said to be gifted, but I think creativity is not so much a gift as an attitude. This attitude is the intent to be creative, born of desire, which results from inspiration.

The only gifts involved in creativity are the gifts you give to yourself. First is the gift of TIME. Creativity starts by taking time... time to look, time to imagine, time to dream... what if I did this... how would that look? Give yourself the gift of time. The images you dream of won't appear in a bolt of lightning, but will gradually develop as you take the time to make small, deliberate advances.

Make the most of the time you have by giving your subject all of your attention. This may mean photographing alone at times. The quiet reverie of solitude feeds your imagination and lets your creativity flow. Creative people make good company, even when they are by themselves.

Another basic gift that only you can give yourself is FREEDOM. Sharing your thoughts and feelings on film is freedom of expression. The importance of showing how you see a subject is expressed by Ansel Adams' statement, "All life and art are justified by communication."

Creativity involves giving yourself the freedom to be different, and to try something different in your images. This means you are free to make mistakes along the way. The gift of freedom allows you to care less about your results and more about the creative process, the path your thoughts and efforts took to make the final image.

Don't forget, the viewer starts with the image that you, the maker, sees as final, and interprets it according to their own experience and emotion, not yours. The artist's reward is in creating that final image, in expressing how he or she feels. "Getting there" isn't half the fun, it's all the fun. Once the image is finished there is nothing to do but "give it away" and start again.

There have been many attempts to explain creativity, but I think Carl Jung, the psychologist, said it best: “The creative mind plays with the object it loves.” So if you are inspired and give yourself time and freedom, creativity is as simple as “playing around” with your subject.

Visual artists often use abstract images to convey their message. Picasso, the best known abstract artist tells us that “Art is a lie that enables us to realize the truth.” I think of an abstract image as one in which color and form are emphasized, rather than a realistic interpretation of the subject.

An abstract image captures the essence of the subject by using different techniques such as soft or selective focus, by allowing a long shutter speed to blur a part of the image, or by using extreme magnification. The subject matter is thus reduced to its basic elements: color, form, shape, and texture.

The image may be easily recognizable, or there may be no familiar elements at all. An abstract photographic image can be very provocative. People want to know what they are looking at, and will automatically assign identity to a subject if it isn’t visually obvious.

Abstract can also mean a new way of looking at things. A common object may be seen in an unusual or unrealistic way; such as a montage with one exposure in focus and the other out of focus, a fluorescent subject shot under black light, or by using a reflection of the subject to add interest and impact. A new way of looking can also be found by panning or following a moving subject during the exposure, by using a grainy film with a soft flower, or by limiting the colors used and making a monochromatic image, thus allowing the viewer to concentrate on form and content. Georgia O’Keefe’s flower portraits are considered abstract because she magnified a small part of the flower, forcing her viewers to see the details instead of the whole blossom.

The Rules

Sooner or later, all who wish to advance in photography are exposed to rules of composition, exposure, and lighting. Some regard rules as sacred word even go so far as saying that a good image is one which follows the rules. Others disdain them as enemies of creativity and barriers to self-expression and artistic growth. While it is true that many creative artists break or ignore the rules, those who do so effectively know them and intentionally break them for a definite reason, to communicate an idea.

Think of rules as guidelines or road maps, not boundaries. They teach ways of approaching a subject that have served visual artists well in the past. They help you predict your results and avoid surprises. Rules also give you a group of options you can use to express ideas visually. Rules such as don’t place your subject in the center of the frame, or, don’t divide the image in half with the horizon line really mean: don’t make a static image. Static is just another word for boring.

But, don’t be a slave to rules. Learn them and forget them. Let them become part of the fund of knowledge that you draw from instinctively while photographing, not a framework to which your images must conform.

Seeing a Good Image

For photographers, the most important precursor to creative seeing is a complete knowledge of their equipment. Learn to use all your camera’s features instinctively, so you are not distracted

by technical matters while photographing. Learn to operate your camera while looking through the viewfinder. Know the location of the aperture ring and shutter dial, so you don't have to look for them, and you can concentrate on your subject.

Take time to look through the viewfinder and see your subject as the camera does with different lenses and filters, and with the depth-of-field preview button. This helps you to pre-visualize how the subject will look on film. Don't be satisfied with one composition. Take time to look at your subject from different points of view and in different light. Take time to wait for the best light.

Find an easily accessible subject or location and return there at different times of day, in different weather, and at different seasons to see how the changes affect your subject, and also your images. Make notes on the film, exposures, and filters used. Then, analyze your results and let the next set of images build on the knowledge you have earned. When your pre-visualizations and your final images are identical, you are truly creative.

Style

We are all different, all individuals, and how we express ourselves should be unique too. But the road to our own distinct style first passes by the images of other creative artists, not only for inspiration, but also for information.

A wealth of images are available from which to learn. Look at all visual media, at the masters from all ages of art. Look in museums, books, magazines, movies, posters, and, most importantly, look in nature. If you have an idol like Ansel Adams or Georgia O'Keefe, read about how their style developed. Imitating the style of someone who inspires you can be a learning tool, a step in the right direction toward your own style.

Creativity can become a habit if you see everything in your world as a potential image. Ask yourself basic questions: why do you like this image or this subject, what would you like others to see in your images, what's your message? Before long you are able to avoid preconceptions and see the potential, not just the actual.

Style is determined not only by personal preference, but also by the subjects and equipment you have to work with, and by the time and freedom you give yourself. Given these ingredients, style "happens" to all serious photographers.

The poet Mary Oliver writes this about style: "Emotional freedom, the integrity and special quality of one's own work - these are not first things, but final things. Only the patient and diligent, as well as the inspired, get there."

Here are some ideas for different types of images which might help to start you down the creative road.

Fluorescent paint drops in mineral oil can be photographed with ultraviolet (black) light for brightly colored images of "planets in space" or abstract shapes of paint. The camera is on a copy stand or tripod, loaded with 50-100 speed daylight film, and fitted with a macro lens, UV filter, and a cable release. Place two 15-watt fluorescent BLB bulbs on either side of a clear plastic petri dish (Both items are available from the Edmund Scientific catalog, 1-800-728-6999). Use heavy mineral oil and fluorescent water-based poster paint, both available at most drugstores. Put several drops of paint in the oil-filled petri dish, which is placed on black paper.

Different effects depend on how much paint you use and how much you stir. Several drops can be placed together and carefully mixed to produce a multi-colored abstract shape.

Flowers reflected on Mylar can be photographed with a simple window-light setup. Mylar foil, 18" x 24" can be found at art supply or school supply stores. The background, which makes or breaks these images, is made from a sheet of colored acetate or gel which is taped onto an empty picture frame (Roscolux Gel Filters, 20" x 24", can be found at professional photography stores, \$5.75 each). The framed gel is set up on a table in front of a west window in the afternoon, with the Mylar placed just in front of it. The flowers are placed on the Mylar. By using a low camera position, the reflection of the gel in the Mylar surrounds the flowers, becoming both the foreground and background. One or two small foil reflectors are placed in front and to the side of the flowers. These are the "main lights" for the flowers, but don't affect the color of the reflected background. Soft focus or diffusion filters and a wide aperture (f4-5.6) are quite flattering to the flowers in this setup.

In-and-out-of-focus montages produce deeply colored and ethereal, dream-like images. With the camera on a tripod, fitted with a zoom lens, (35-70mm, f4), two exposures are made of the same subject, one in focus, and the next out of focus. Each frame is exposed at one stop over the usual setting. When the two images are montaged, color and texture is exaggerated, and grass and foliage look soft and diffused. The first image is made in focus, with the camera on a tripod, using whatever depth-of-field the subject calls for (f8-11 for most scenics). Use the aperture-priority exposure mode and the exposure compensation dial to arrive at one stop over the proper exposure. 50-100 speed film is best. If a filter is used, such as a polarizer or a warming filter, use it on both exposures. Bracketing the overexposure by thirds is a good idea.

Look through the viewfinder as you un-focus the lens as much as possible. As focus fades, the image in the viewfinder enlarges, including more of the scene. Now zoom forward to return the image back to the size it was in the focused frame. An object placed just outside the frame can act as a reference and is seen only in the out of focus image. By zooming forward until this reference is just out of the frame, the two images are properly registered for the montage. Be sure to expose the second (out of focus) image with the lens wide open (f4), and overexpose it also by one stop. The montage is then made in a glass mount.

Discovery montage – use Cokin Super-Speed filter, each slide one stop overexposed.

Mirror and Flip montage – 2 identical images, each one stop overexposed, reverse one.

These techniques are only starting points for your own creative ideas. Your desire, time, and freedom will produce unique images which are yours alone. I can't think of a better goal in photography, or one that is more fun to pursue.