

Club Pictorial Competitions—Things to Think About

By Jeff Dunn

PURPOSE. How do you want others to experience your image? By entering your image into a competition, you wish it to be viewed publicly. Therefore, the first thing you should consider is possible viewer reactions and whether you want to provide any guidance. You may consider that your image stands on its own and that people should take it or leave it. Or, you may want to suggest that viewers concentrate on a particular aspect of your image rather than notice its most obvious properties. Remember, viewers will look at most projected images for a minute or so at most. Prints get a little more time, but only at a viewer's whim. In the case of prints, you can prod a viewer into spending more time with your image, and in the case of projected images, you can provide helpful information or suggest emotive aspects of your conception. How? With concise yet provocative *titles* (see below).

When judges view your images, they will, in the case of pictorial images, be looking foremost for the success of four aspects of your work:

1. INTEREST. Interest is about intrigue. How much time, if an image were hanging in a gallery, would a viewer spend exploring and experiencing aspects of your image? Interest is generated by things like *technique* and *composition*, but most importantly by the *meaning* attached to a viewer to your image based on his or her preferences and experience.

2. IMPACT. Impact is the short-term, first impression aspects of an image that may strike the viewer for various reasons and *lead* to further explorations of interest. An image that *only* has Impact may be unforgettable, but the image doesn't call for detailed exploration. An image that *only* has Interest may not have enough Impact to even get viewers *started* into the act of potential discovery that may be contained in an image. Impact is a more emotional reaction to an image than Interest: the two qualities are not exactly the same.

3. COMPOSITION. The structure of an image is a key ingredient to its art, and its subjectivity. There are a number of conventions in what makes "good" composition, such as the rule of threes, use of the diagonal, arrangement of color and textural attributes and so on. To appreciate Composition, one must analyze an image's elements ("decomposition," in effect). Analysis is a seemingly objective process supporting subjective conclusions. One must ask oneself, "*Why* am I impressed and interested in this image (or not)?" and tease out the elements, inherent and psychological, that lead to its effects.

4. TECHNIQUE. Automation has solved so many of the basic issues of photography, it's hard to take "bad" photos any more. Nevertheless one must make sure the purpose of creating an image is served by the basics with regard to exposure, depth of field, cropping, etc. In the case of cropping, for instance, folks often stick with the aspect ratio of their camera rather than experiment with finding just the right cropping that contains, and *only* contains, the elements relating to an image's purpose. Finally, there is the myriad of hardware and software special techniques now available that can add greatly to image impact and interest.

TITLES. Titles may or may not be important to a photographer, but at some point in a career, a photographer should consider titles as a possible tool. To do so delves into the heart of the photographer's purposes in the art: What do I hope for from my images? An image is not finished when it is done. It continues to have a life of its own until it is destroyed, and even then it may continue to live in memories. This is because most photographers mean to have their images viewed by others, and therefore generate an experience in art for others. Photographers, at some point, should get out of their egos and think about the *viewer* of their images: What will that experience be like? The Australian photographer Maris Ruis hit on the importance of taking viewers into account.

For folks actually intent on the photograph, the partial explanation offered in the title hints to them what mental machinery to invoke to make sense of what they see.

If it matters to you what your viewers see—at least initially—you should consider whether or not you want to provide some directional guidance with your title. Here are some things to think about when composing a title—an act that can be as significant as choosing what scene in reality to capture in your lens.

1. What feeling do you want to generate in your viewers? Will your title help do that?
2. What is the first thing (impact) that your viewers will notice? Is that what you *want* them to notice? If so, *it doesn't need to be in the title*; they'll notice it anyway. If the first thing they'll probably notice isn't as important as something *else* you want them to notice, suggest what you *do* want them to notice in your title.
3. After the first thing you want your viewers to notice (impact), what *else* do you want them to notice (interest)? Will they need guidance from your title? Do they need to know where the image was taken?
4. Is there something *not strictly contained in the image* that you want your viewers to be aware of? Consider alluding to such in your title. Examples include:
 - a. Similarity to another, more famous image
 - b. Symbolic or cultural significance of something in or suggested by the image
 - c. Something you want viewers to know about the circumstances of the creation of the image.
 - d. Humorous aspects of an image that may not be readily apparent
5. Is there some more esoteric aspect of your image that most viewers would be unaware of? Shouldn't you inform them of it somehow?
6. Finally, once you've determined the content of your title, rework it as necessary:
 - a. Does it suggest the main purposes of your image?
 - b. Is it expressed succinctly?
 - c. In the case of an emotive image, should it be expressed poetically?