

Interview with David Fokos



“Art is the communication of an idea, thought, or emotion through craft.” - David Fokos

Bleek Magazine: What is art for you? How do you define art photography?
When did you realize that the thing you’re doing is art?

David Fokos: My personal definition of art is that Art is the communication of an idea, thought, or emotion through craft.



I find that many people feel that “art” is somehow superior to “craft”. I disagree. I think that they are both equal but different, with the distinction being that art is made with the intention of communication.

In my case, my craft is photography. What moves my craft into the category of art is my intention to communicate a specific message to the viewer with my images.

I would not define art photography any differently than I would define any other art. Art is art, regardless of the medium.

While I was in college in the early 80s I studied engineering and art history, Japanese art history in particular. I feel that it was at that time, as I began trying to communicate specific emotions with my work, that I really became aware of the distinction between art and craft and realized that I was interested in more than just making pretty pictures.

BM: What do you think about artist vision in photography/art? In your case was it something you’ve got from the very beginning or you got it after you’ve started practicing photography?

DF: It depends upon what you mean when you say vision. I think that people have an innate sense for composition. You can fine-tune that sense through training, but in general, your compositional abilities will manifest themselves from the start. Even now, looking back at the first roll of film I ever shot when I was 11 years old, I was already showing an affinity for the landscape and a certain type of composition — taking pictures of looming church spires, zoomy perspectives along building facades, and the patterns found in cobblestone streets.

However, in terms of artistic vision, which is more cerebral and less instinctual, I came to that a little later. At first, I was taking pictures with no agenda – just for my personal pleasure – but in the process I was developing my skills, and

coming to understand the capabilities and limitations of my medium. During my teenage years I became skilled at making pretty pictures. There was no intellectual depth to the images I was making at that time because I had not yet thought to use my medium for the purpose of communication. I was just happy making beautiful things, and there was nothing wrong with that. It was perfect for what it was. But then later, when I was in college, I began to consider using photography as an artistic tool for communication.

BM: What (which) part does mind take in the process of making art on your opinion? Do you always realize straight away what you are going to do right now or is there still some place for your own reflection?

DF: Since art is about communication, the artist needs to have something to say. I believe that having a premeditated intention is essential to making successful art. I've known people who just take lots of photos and then select a few and proclaim that they are "art". Or they go to a flea market and buy up someone's old photos, put them in a frame and proclaim that those are now art. I don't agree with that point of view. They are not art; they are decoration. They may be wonderful decoration, but still decoration. However, that doesn't mean that one couldn't use some of those photographs in the process of making new art - as raw material to be part of a larger project with a specific premeditated concept.

When I trip the shutter I generally have a very strong idea of the image I want to make and why. Then once I have the negative, I often work 100 hours or more to finish the image - shaping it to fulfill the vision I had at the time of exposure.

BM: What do you think about "soul" in photography?

DF: I think photographs are like a little window into the soul of the photographer, offering a glimpse into heart and mind of their creator. What is it about a certain subject that captured the attention of the photographer?

Why did they choose to frame it the way they did? Everyone sees the world a little differently and no two photographers will approach a subject in exactly the same way.

BM: What do you think about technics in photography?

DF: As with any art medium, I believe that mastering the technical aspect of one's craft is extremely important when it comes to being able to translate the vision in our heads to the print on the wall. You can be the greatest artistic visionary of all time, but if you can't express yourself through your medium, then you have nothing.

But conversely, if you become so obsessed with trying to make the "perfect print" that you forget that your ultimate goal was to use that print to express your artistic vision, then you also have nothing. A good artist needs both - artistic vision and a command of his/her medium.

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BM: Light is the base for creating a photo, how do you work with light, does luminance influence your work a lot?

DF: Our eyes are always drawn to the light. I take advantage of this primitive instinct by sculpting the light and dark areas of my prints to guide the eye of the viewer. For example, you may have noticed (though hopefully you didn't) that many of my images have a burn at the top and the bottom. I have purposely darkened those areas to

keep the viewer focused on specific areas. In addition to the light and dark areas of a print, I am always cognizant of the way in which prints interact with light - daylight, fluorescent, halogen, and so on. I have crafted my prints to look their best when viewed under halogen light in which they have a slightly warm tone. My favorite way of displaying my work is to "face-mount" the print to the backside of a piece of anti-reflective Plexiglas (this is similar to

the Diasec process developed in Germany.) With this configuration the Plexiglas has virtually no reflection and the print is just 3mm away from the surface making for a very immediate experience. Then, when the halogen light strikes the print, the lighter areas appear to glow from within.

BM: Why did you choose black & white photography? Do you think that choosing black & white when colour is already available is some kind of artist message or is it a question of techniques and aesthetics only?

DF: I believe that the choice of black & white or color is an artistic decision based on the intention of the artist. A photograph will always be most successful in either b&w or color but not both. Artists should choose whichever presentation works best to convey their message.

Color is such a powerful element that I feel a color image really needs to either be about color, or use color to provide a sense of realism. With my images, the emotions I am trying to evoke are not rooted in color but rather in line, light, and form, so I think that color would only be a distraction.

BM: What do you think about beauty in photography? Should it be always the aim for an artist? Did the art of photography changed the attitude of people to beauty in visual arts and how? What is beautiful photograph for you?

DF: I feel there has been a trend among some contemporary photographic artists, especially art students, to make “shocking” images. They feel that the only way to connect with viewers, who have been desensitized from having seen millions of images, is to rise above the noise with jarring imagery.

I think there is a place for shocking images, if creating a shocking image is important to the communication of the artist’s message. However, to make shocking images for the sole purpose of being noticed is not a good reason. Likewise, there is nothing wrong with “beautiful” images. No one ever said

there was too much beauty in the world. The main point is to know why you are making your photographs. The photograph needs to communicate the artist's message in whatever way is most effective — in some cases that might call for a “beautiful” image and at other times for an “ugly” one.

For me, personally, I find “quiet elegance” to be especially beautiful. As I mentioned, when I was in school I studied Japanese art history. I also studied Japanese film and haiku poetry. Haiku poems, for example, often exhibit a quiet, peaceful, melancholy mood that I love. Traditional Japanese aesthetics have had a profound influence on my work. Concepts such as seijaku (tranquility), sabi (patina and an appreciation of the ephemeral nature of things), yūgen (an unobvious, subtle, profound grace), shizen (without pretense), and wabi (rustic simplicity, freshness, quietness, an appreciation of imperfection) all resonate with me. Of course, everyone has their own unique idea of what is beautiful.

BM: How important is a «moment» in photography? How would you describe inner feeling of right moment? Is this feeling always promising a good shot for you?

DF: Unlike other mediums, photography begins with the collection of light, so it is more about “the moment” than any of the other visual arts. The places where I find myself making images are those to which I have a strong, positive, emotional reaction. More often than not, these are places that, through their stillness, expansiveness, stark simplicity, or the juxtaposition of man-made objects with nature, evoke within me a sense of quiet contemplation. Sometimes, these are places that I just happened to stumble upon, and sometimes they are places that I may have scouted for years waiting for just the right conditions. Either way, if I am inspired by a place there is certainly the potential to make a good image, though it is far from guaranteed. To craft an image that evokes the same emotion I feel requires a fairly narrow set of conditions. I have, on occasion, responded very strongly



to a place, but due to various elements within the scene I was not able to make a successful image. In such cases, the best thing to do is to stop trying to capture the moment and just experience it.

BM: Does subject which you've chosen for the photo influences on how do you work with it, or is the opposite for you — your wish to try something exactly and it makes you to choose the right subject?

DF: All of my images are first inspired by the location, so I have to work with what I find. In other words, I don't think to myself, "I want to create an image of loneliness, so I need to find some railroad tracks to photograph in the middle of the night." Instead, I would find myself by some railroad tracks in the middle of the night, feeling lonely, and I'd think, "This is incredible. I want to capture this."