

# Rules or Concepts?

by Denis Glennon

**Our resident photographic philosopher ponders the roles of photography 'rules' and whether they merely get in the way of taking fine photographs.**

## The Conversation that Started it All

I was sharing a morning tea break with a small group of photographers attending a recent photographic conference in Fremantle. As it does when a few photographers dressed in black only, (shoes too!) and having fixed views about "rules" are present, the conversation quickly heated up as to whether the "rules of photography" should be adhered to and if the same rules applied to "art". During a rare pause in the conversation an experienced nature photographer (in thongs and denims encrusted in red dirt) asked me: "Denis, how do you decide when to follow the rules and when to break them and do you think your photography is art?" My quick response was, "There are no rules in my photography and I think some of my images are art," at which point, two of the guys dressed in black only, shuffled off, with attitude!

Later, while privately enjoying a bottle of fine red wine, my rather hasty, and on reflection, hollow reply, returned to stalk me. It would not leave me in peace. A kinder and more complete answer was required for my friend dressed in thongs and jeans. Here it is. I do hope she gets to read it.

## "Art!" What's that?

I do not remember consciously setting out to adhere to or break any particular rules when I captured my best images. By best I mean the images that people tell me are emotion-filled, evocative, and are the ones they most admire. These images, of which there are very few, I might add, prompt viewers to pause and take a second look. These images somehow stir in viewers something of the same emotion I experienced when I pressed the shutter. Some tell me these images are pieces of art, others don't. What makes even one of my photographs be seen as art by only some viewers?

"Art" is an oily and slippery notion at best. Over the millennia there has been little if any agreement on a definition.

Prior to the above conversation and the subsequent bottle of red wine, I thought I could consider some of my work as art. But why should I do this?

Perhaps with the hope of elevating these photographs to a higher status, to something more than a technical craft. Hold on. Who's kidding who here?

But, Australia is a free country and don't we all have the right to think at least some of our photographs are art? Possibly, but I suspect when we do so we're getting a touch hubristic. My answer was indeed too quick.

A more honest answer would have been my photography is a craft. It is a process. It is the paint and the brushes. The brushes are digital and the paint a cluster of pixels. Whatever results from these attempts at pixel painting, is, or is not, art.

But it is not for me to decide if my work is art.

It goes into cyberspace, published in magazines and hung in galleries and is seen, interpreted, loved, disliked, rejected, and misunderstood. I have no doubt some viewers are totally indifferent to it – the greatest hurt of all. Ouch! But I do not worry or care about it; it is out of my hands. Whether it is or is not art is for others to decide. It is not something on which I can make the call; it's like gravity – inevitable, immutable, out of my control. If it is deemed to be art or not is decided by each person looking at it.

Some laugh, some yawn and some mutter unprintable remarks. Whether or not I followed or broke the rules of photography is irrelevant. It isn't possible for me to convince the laughers, the yawners and the mutterers that my photography really is art; for them it simply isn't! It did not connect with their "art factor" (whatever that is). I don't really wish to know what they think of it! Maybe they, too, are dressed in black only?

If one of my photographs connects with one person's emotions or tastes, to them it has a better chance of being considered art.

I can hear the guys dressed in black, screaming, "But do you think your photography is Art?" The word is always spelt with a capital "A" by these guys!

"Did you follow the rules or not?"

"Answer the questions!"

It doesn't matter. It's beyond my control. It is so subjective! I don't care. Shuffle away.

## Ruler Breakers Create Art – Eventually

The abstract paintings of the American artist Jackson Pollock are thought (by many) to be some of the best 20th century art. During an unparalleled period of creativity in the forties and early fifties, Pollock tore up the 'rule' book, threw away the conventional tools and approaches of the painter, abandoned his brushes, artist's paint and traditional composition, and poured and flung house paint onto large canvases he nailed to the floor. Inspired by the work of earlier artists that he admired such as Pablo Picasso and Joan Miró, Pollock's painting had a colossal influence on contemporary art. It still does. He definitely wasn't following any rules and he didn't care whether he was creating art – he left that to the viewers and reviewers. *Life* magazine in 1949 posed the question, "Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?" Pollock chartered new territory and conceived new concepts for a new revelation of art.

These things called concepts are fluid, non-binding, not sacrosanct, flowing, malleable, ductile, bendy, "blue-tacky", plastic



*Sossousvlei Dune Reflections*. Canon 1DMk3, f/8, ISO 200, 1/80 sec, EF 70-200mm f/2.8 IS

and pliable. They allow us freedom and space to try them out, see how they might help us place some of ourselves into our photographs. Anyone who looks at a Pollock painting does not have to ask the name of the artist. His personality, his flesh and blood is everywhere in the painting. There is no rule book for concepts. You get the idea? Pollock certainly did!

Closer to home, Robert Juniper has established himself as one of Australia's leading painters. He is best known for his evocative paintings of the West Australian landscapes and is recognised as an "artist of poetic and spontaneous concepts" (that word again). The influences on Juniper's work range from English painters of the early 1900s, Paul Klee, Japanese work of the 19th century and Sam Fullbrook.

If you want to see the degree of irreverence Juniper and his mentors dished up to the rules of their day, have a look at their work. From such artists we photographers can gain courage, come to know the power of concepts and see the rules for what they are – vestiges of a fossilised era still rigidly proffered by petrified photographers, i.e. petrified in the prehistoric tree sense.

But I must return to my theme. By the time I had poured the second glass of wine and enjoyed viewing some of the work of Pollock, Juniper and Fullbrook I was feeling very courageous. For some there still remain a few so-called rules that somewhere in the distant past had a rationale underpinning them. Those rules broke free of their anchorages long ago but unfortunately have been floating, sort of semi-submerged, ever since. They bob to the surface in well-meaning books and articles in some photography magazines and, as I discovered, in conversations at photography conferences.

Today, there are no durable rules for any part of our technical craft. Following rules for the sake of following rules is just mind-numbing orthodoxy.

Art created in adherence to rules is art about the rules themselves. It is not about passion, hope, or beauty or any other

noble subject about which painters and photographers have made honest art over the centuries. Breaking rules for the sake of breaking rules isn't art either; it's just mayhem.

## Concepts – Are they Real ?

There are a number of concepts that help both photographic and painting craftsmanship, many of which are very useful to help us better express ourselves. I find it helpful to view these concepts as friendly cerebral explorations to help me make decisions to get to a desired destination. But disconnected from the reason they matured into concepts in the first place, they're more of a restraint than a freedom to experiment, express and have-a-go. Great artists and painters have known this for centuries.

For the first time in history, digital photography allows anyone to explore concepts that lead to a place of creative expression. A place where impossible is merely an opinion – an opinion that is held by the creator of the images, and sometimes, thankfully, not by the viewer.

I can hear the fiends dressed in black yelling that I must know the rules first and only then do I have (their?) permission to break them and play around. How can I tell them nicely that just knowing the rules is useless?

It is more important for us to understand the values of photographic expression, the reasons that concepts are considered helpful in the first place, and that we use or ignore them in the service of our expression. As with other explorations in this big world, there are a number of concepts that do not lead us closer to our desired destination but we need to walk this bit of the journey to actually find that out for ourselves. It is the process, and the fun, of sometimes taking an abortive journey that is central to our development as photographers.

Sure, I keep my horizons level. I sometimes sit my centre of interest on an imaginary line along the thirds of my frame or an



*Beauty of the Widow Bird.* Canon 1DMk3, f/5.6, ISO 320, 1/20 sec, EF 600mm f4L IS

imaginary golden mean. I use a fence or track or suchlike to pull a viewer's eye to where I want it, and once the eye is intrigued, it alone directs and shapes where it needs to go and what I think it is supposed to look at. I throw the background out of focus so that the eye of a leopard leaps out as mesmerisingly sharp. I pan to enhance the illusion of the speed of a cheetah. I make the best use of the available light, and so on. Did I hear the guys in black shuffling back? No. My glass is empty!

We should see these concepts as friends because one or more, or none, might get us closer to expressing our intent, and capture our visual poem in this one photograph, but not because they are immutable rules.

We can test out a concept if we believe it might lead us to the showing of the inner self we want in that image. If it doesn't, we can wander off in a different direction, but as a sure-footed wanderer, knowing we can try another, a different concept.

We don't need to follow these concepts – or not follow them – just because they are 'commandments' from some past era.

We can wander through them. We can

explore them. We can see where they take us. We can call a halt. Sometimes we may push further into a concept. Sometimes we might abandon it.

There is no commandment "Thou shall follow the concepts". There might be a commandment about the rules. If there is I don't want to know about it.

There is no commandment, "thou shall" at all, in art or in photography (at least not for me).

## Finding the Concepts

My friend in the thongs and denim jeans deserves to know how she might decide which concepts to follow so that she has the best chance of capturing and expressing the vision she has for her subject. For this, I mused on an analogy between photography and poetry.

Poetry has its long-established concepts like assonance, alliteration, onomatopoeia, rhythm, incantation and more. Modern day poets know about these but they do not sit down at their computers, grasp a thought floating by their left ear and punch it into the keyboard. Another thought plucked out of the air, another line. Grasp a bunch of these floating thoughts and

another stanza is done. No, it doesn't work like that. Most poets sit down without having an inkling of what they are going to write; no clue where to start or how to tackle the task. I am in this class whenever I try to write poetry.

I don't just understand the concepts of assonance or onomatopoeia so I can write poetry. I write so I can imagine, explore several such concepts and in the process pen words. The writing is not something I do just to document a concept. The writing is the craft. It is the process.

I generally have no clue what the next words will be. Usually it takes several tries, several explorations before a rhythmic line rewards my efforts. It is the actual writing itself that draws the concepts, the words, the lines and eventually the verses from somewhere within me. I know this happens but I cannot explain it. Stay with me my 'thongs and denim' friend.

It's the same with my photography. The viewfinder is my optical pencil and eraser for conceiving, imagining and exploring photographically. The frame is my friend in discovering and conveying the vision I arrive at for a particular subject; the vision I know I am free to create and craft with concepts. The shutter button is my optical keyboard. That's why it often takes several frames to get it the way I want it, why a shoot often explores several concepts until the elements that I know are within me fall into place. This 'envisioning' work in photography is no different to other art forms. The poet and the photographer have so much in common when both are free to play with their own genus of concepts.

There are no rules to carry this kind of poet or photographer.

Ask any poet, songwriter, novelist, journalist, playwright, author, or painter if this kind of work appears in frequent flashes of insight and brilliance or through hard slogging. For nearly all, it is the hard slogging.

The important lesson for my denim jeans friend, as a photographer, is not to think that she should have an immediate firm grip on a specific vision of a specific subject; that's way too hard for her (and for me). Instead concentrate on engaging in and enjoying the process of exploring the concepts.

Whilst glued to the viewfinder, ask:

What do I think about this angle? If I move in closer what will this do? That shaft of light moving across the landscape, will I wait for it? Is that head movement a signal that the eagle is about to fly? What passion is it that I am trying to capture? What is the something within me that I wish to express in this image? What is the something of me that will be revealed in the print if I press the shutter button now?

Be mindful that your digital sensor can record not only what you see in your viewfinder, but that which your mind's eye sees as well. Think of the sensor as not only the receptor of what you see with your eye, but of what you conceive with your mind as well. This marvellous other sensor can conceive of things that are sharper, closer, gentler and different than what you see with your eye. Think of it as seeing with imperceptible light. It can see in the



*Perito Moreno Glacier at El Calafate.* Canon 1DsMk3, f/7.1, ISO 100, 1/800 sec, EF 70-300mm f/4-5.6 L IS

past, present, and future. Instead of using your camera's sensor to assist you to reproduce objects only, keep using that other sensor to play with concepts. It is this other sensor's 'playing with concepts' that will make visible all the richness of your mind, heart and soul – riches that are invisible to your eye.

All good art reveals something of the artist, whether others see it or not. Our photographs get better when we wrestle with this stuff. We're writing visual poetry here. Poems are about passion. So is this kind of photography. We are practising an aesthetic craft, not following some mindless rules.

And above all else we must keep reminding ourselves that as photographers we are not an orphan in this artistic endeavour. Being the best we can possibly be, committed to our craft and putting in the hours, trying different concepts to bring us closer to mastery, is, by far, the best way to get us to where we are going as a creative person.

The big difference between the rules and the concepts is like the difference between enjoying the concepts on the journey and only using the rules to find shortcuts to the destination. You can do both but I nearly always find that the focus on the latter sabotages the former and I am the poorer photographer for it.

So to my denim jeans friend, I conclude this long answer with the following:

Believe in your own ability to make great images. Be easy on yourself, yet persevering. Chase and craft your own concepts. They will lead you to your vision.

Serendipitous concepts will reveal themselves. A few years from now you will look back and see just how far you have journeyed. You will also experience the joy of looking forward and delight in how much further there is to go – inspirational, if it is the journey you love, or daunting if all you want to do is to follow the rules to get there.

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