

Photographic Integrity

and when do you apply this?



The Cathedral, Mt. Buffalo

This could be a hot topic and hopefully make a few people shift uncomfortably in their seats. First of all is it an issue with you and if so what do you think about it yourself? Should a photograph have integrity or should only the photographer? What do I mean by all of this? I'll try and explain as well as integrate the photograph into the story as well. Stay with me folks this could get interesting. I would welcome any mail you may wish to move in my direction.

The image I have presented for you this month, The Cathedral, Mount Buffalo, was taken in August 2000 at Mt Buffalo National Park. I was making yet another trip to this fabulous place and noticed that there were interesting climatic conditions around the Cathedral. I parked my car, set up my camera and within minutes made this photograph. The way the clouds were moving I figured I was going to get something better, so I waited and watched as small fluffy clouds drifted quite quickly across the sky, but never passing over the Cathedral. I figured it was only a matter of time as there were really interesting formations off to either side. Several threatened to be fantastic, but either dissipated before they got there or drifted off to one side. I waited and waited and finally gave up as there were other images to capture and I was cold and frustrated.

Now what I could have done was to photograph several of the cloud formations using a similar composition and then "drop them in" via the computer and kept my mouth shut. Would this be OK or would it be cheating? Cheating in the sense that it would be presented as a photograph of the natural environment when in fact all the elements didn't happen as a single unit. So this is where photographic integrity comes into play.

First of all what is photographic integrity? Mr. Collins and Mr. Oxford say this:

Photograph(y) : Picture made by chemical action of light on sensitive film.

Integrity : Honesty. Quality of being sound or whole.

If we start with the first word from each we get “ Honest Picture ”.

When we decide to release a photograph for show, those who view it assume (lots of emphasis here so as to make a point) it is an image that has been seen by the photographer and captured on film, then printed out for viewing. They (the viewer) in most cases believe the photograph to be real. They would give credit for the photographers patience, ability and dedication in obtaining such a striking image.

So with this naive belief that we seem to possess when we look at photographs, the photographer, I believe, needs to present his images with truth and integrity. If a photograph has been tampered with in the sense of adding this and subtracting that, then I think this should be disclosed so as it is clear to the viewer. I am referring mainly to images of the natural and human environment other than advertising shots that, are so often doctored that it almost goes without saying that they are not “real”. Photographs in books, magazines, galleries all need to be honest images or have the changes listed.

An example could be if you buy a picture book, of say Australian Landscapes, then there is an assumption that they are images that have been seen and captured by the photographer because of his ability to see differently than most.

Another example could be, I know a photographer, who a few years ago spent a great deal of time in one year “cleaning up his images” on the computer. Cleaning up to the tune of adding this, removing that, straightening this. A bird in here. a full moon there and so on and then presented these images to the outside world without so much as a word. I use to have respect for this photographer, but now I don’t believe any one of his photographs when I see them. Those of us looking at these pictures believe them to be real, but the truth is they are not. Well now, again, is this right or doesn’t it matter a hoot?

Photographs in some cases are now disallowed as evidence in court. They (the court) know they can be fixed or doctored. Should we as viewers blankly accept everything we see as still being the truth or is it now time to question the integrity of an image and in so doing question the photographer?

I don’t have a problem how an image is captured or whether it is darkroom printed or computer printed. I just can’t stand when things get “fixed”, like heads rotated, feet turned, waterfalls straightened, moons or animals added to a picture and then they are presented as though that’s how it was and wasn’t I clever to get this. I see very little photographic art in this kind of work and consider it to be almost fraudulent when presented as truth. When I asked a certain photographer if they would declare the “additions and distortions of truth in their photographs” their response was, “hell no, it wouldn’t sell then”.

So is this the way photography is changing and if so what will happen to the “real” image? It happened in the music industry by tweaking knobs, fading this, taking that out, ad this and that. Some musicians in the pop world wont and can’t perform live because they don’t have the ability to play and sing properly. Apparently they are afraid of being found out. Perhaps there is a strong parallel here with so called real photographic works.

Back to the image. Let me again describe the scene to you so as you will understand why I did what I did in the darkroom to return the image to what I thought it was like when I saw it. There will of course be some who will think I am as guilty as the computer man. So be it. My darkroom work was not only necessary, but justified because of the limitations of photographic paper.

I should reiterate from a few issues ago that a negative is capable of recording to each extreme about 15 or 16 zones or stops. Rarely do we have this tonal range in an exposed negative. Usually a well exposed

negative will run about 8 zones/stops from say Zone 2 to Zone 10. You may not have exposed it for that latitude, but consider the unimportant shadow area that you didn't consider which fell on Zone 2 to that little highlight either in the bright cloud or off the glistening water. Do you get my drift?

When we make a straight print, photographic paper will record about 7 to 8 zones. Some papers will vary, but this is a good guide. It is important to state that the density or contrast of the image on the paper may not be what you want and so in order to bring the picture in line with how our eye saw it we need to give extra exposure to that part of the negative, that requires it, in order for us to see detail and perhaps to give the photograph balance. This is using what is already ON the negative, NOT adding something that wasn't there.

So when I printed this negative my exposure was based on the tonal range running through the middle of the print. The sky was too light in relation to the rest of the photograph so I had to burn it in (give extra exposure) for about 20% extra. I also did the same to the bottom 1/4 of the print for the same reason, but this then presented me with a problem. After burning in, the cloud and the bare trunks had lost their luminosity. Also I had to get low enough in the sky on either side of the boulders to give equal density or equal portions of density to the sky in these areas.

So now to get some of that luminosity back. A weak solution of Potassium Ferricyanide was applied to the cloud, the branches and small areas of the boulders. This retained the "glow" that was present initially, but which was lost temporarily, as I explained.

So considering the gist of my article is this practice acceptable? Exactly the same thing can be done via a computer (no problem here), but once in front of that screen is there a temptation to "clean up" in other areas or even add something to sparkle up the image! Like maybe place an eagle on top of one of the boulders or a polar bear or lets get silly and go for colony of giant ants!

I don't think how you output a photograph is a real issue, (although I have reservations about that as explained a bit later) or just because we have the computer to do as we could in the darkroom doesn't mean we have to embrace that practice. I feel that with this current trend or ever lasting one, there are two things at present that make me hesitate to change, I actually own my darkroom and equipment and don't have finances to buy a good scanner capable of giving me a top quality scan, an updated computer with enough gigabytes (that's the next word to be invented : it means stacks of memory) to enable me to do what I want to do and then a printer that can give me all print sizes up to 20 x 24" that will be delivered on beautiful silver rich fibre base paper capable of lasting hundreds of years. Oh yes there is one other thing that needs to be considered, **I actually like working in the darkroom** (I enlarged my darkroom earlier this year), and so do thousands of others, so should we give up this practice because a new tool comes along? If you hate the darkroom, and many do, then I understand the attraction to the computer, so go for it. I have a friend who hates the chemical side of things, but loves computers so he has embraced it emphatically and I have another friend who hates the darkroom and can't cope with computers, so he's waiting for something else to come along! I told him not to hold his breath!

Let me come back to the print for a moment. Just prior to finishing this article I went to an information and showing night on new photographic printers by one of the companies that all photographers seem to buy. Now where there colour output seemed fine, there black and white just didn't measure up. In fact the comparison to a poster print quality would be fair. It is very hard at present to match a fibre base print via one of these printers. Also I am, and so are many others, a little sceptical about the longevity claims by the inks. Remember when plastic RC black and white paper came in and all the claims that were made about how long they would last, well there seems to be enough evidence now that there are some problems with

that surface and its lasting properties. From personal experience I have had prints that are breaking down after 8 or 9 years and I have read some reports that are as little as 3 years.

The real truth will be over time and I think we just have to wait, as we have done with fibre base prints and also with Cibachromes. My experience with that colour material has been fantastic. Three years against a window, half in a phone book, half out, no appreciable difference. I did it when Cibas were Cibas and not Ilfochromes. Maybe I should do it again.

Back to the issue, you would already have seen in the BP magazine that at the recent AIPP photographic awards in Brisbane, we as a body, that is the members of the Institute, mostly recognized computer skills and graphic design rather than photographic excellence. Of course there would be the argument that the origins of the image were photographic, but the end result beard little resemblance to the original photograph. As society marches on we are "fed" duplicity by big multi nationals and governments alike. Are we now, as a photographic society, about to deceive people with photographs of nature and the realism of life?

If you are a purist of photography it is easy to pass judgment on such a process and if you don't care how the finished image is created then you would be saying " whatever it takes ". The issue here I think is that when heavy computerized skills are involved and several photographs are employed to create one, or, massive removal of unwanted bits are taken out of an image then we need to find a new name for it. It is unfair to still call it a photograph given photography's history and the general acceptance that a photograph is a capture of reality.

You the people who read this magazine, this article, must have an opinion on this new process of grabbing and presenting an image. If you would like to comment feel free to drop a line to me or the editor. This is a situation we are all coming to terms with and if you believe the media hype or the comments coming from the retailers of photographic goods then they would have you believe that film and the traditional darkroom are dead. This of course is just a marketing ploy to get all of us to buy more equipment so as to keep their businesses viable. Remember they are in the business of selling equipment, not helping us to make images. It is the age old problem that too many people want the fast road to recognition and feel that the computer and all the digital contraptions that go with it will bring it to them and the retailers are encouraging this line purely and simply to line their own pockets with little disregard to the medium that most of us hold so dearly. (No doubt Mr. Editor you will delete this last comment!)

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