

Photography as Social Commentary

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Many people regard professional photographers as people who happen to have more camera equipment than the average person so they can call themselves “professional.” Many people also do not regard photography as art since they oftentimes say, “Oh, I could have taken that shot.”

I’m here to present a viewpoint of photographers that we are able to do more than set a camera on automatic and snap a button. As a photographer I see myself as bringing new viewpoints to people that they may not get by themselves. In doing so, I maintain integrity of subjects. I make art to communicate to those who would not be able to see a subject for themselves.

Photographers are present to represent the subject ... as artistic communicators.

One instrumental aspect of communicating through a camera lens is being able to use photography as not only art, but also as social commentary. A good photographer first observes and investigates and then shoots, albeit quickly because the “perfect” shot is often fleeting. Combine this with camera skills and lighting techniques and we have a lot to think about.

Photographic History

The first photograph was taken in 1826 by Nicephore Niepce. Countless others, however, improved upon the technology of photographic tools. Louis Jacques Mande Daguerre was the first to popularize photography with his Daguerreotype Process; William Henry Fox Talbot innovated negatives, which allowed countless positive prints; Frederick Scott Archer developed the solutions for the wet collodion process used today; and George Eastman invented roll-film and founded the Kodak Company.

The artistic community was initially appalled with the idea of photography, even though the general population thought it was spectacular to be able to take snapshots of real life. Artists were worried that cameras would replace paintings of realistic settings. Thereafter, many painters experimented with new ways to create their works.

The art of photography itself, however, was not recognized until the 1900s. Before this, photography was used simply to record daily life, to objectively represent a moment of reality. At the early part of the 1900s, Alfred Stieglitz, for example, inspired a new trend in photography, using the medium for political and social commentary.

Social Commentary

Photography in regard to social commentary focuses on the integration of documentary photography, research, new technologies, and concepts of social change.

People and events provide great insight into human behavior that, in turn, provide us with the opportunity to observe the impact of, for example, policies and social change on citizens. One active example is how the Hawaiian government in the 1800s exiled its citizens who contracted leprosy.

My 30-piece, limited-edition photographic exhibit honors those victims of leprosy who were persecuted and exiled. The presentation of photos exhibited in the collection depicts the serenity of Kalaupapa and reflects on more than just the exotic scenery. The photographs depict a journey of valiant people through an artful and sympathetic lens. The exhibit results from 15 missions that I made to Kalaupapa that allowed me to shoot more than 2,500 images.

By observing through the camera's lens we can see the leper patients and their community. We have the opportunity to understand how these people lived and resisted political impediments to their lives and how they, themselves, have become agents of social change. Over time, with more and more insight to the leper colony and through activists like Father Damien and local Hawaiian media, the leper patients were more humanely treated over time, albeit the evolution took one hundred years.

The photography collection, titled "Exiles in Paradise, A Photojournalistic Essay: The Social and Physical Banishment of the Lepers of Molokai," was photographed from 1981 to 1999. It reflects centuries of painful human experience juxtaposed on an island of beauty. From 1866 to 1969, over 6,000 leprosy patients from many countries throughout the world were exiled to Hawaii. The compulsory segregation forced thousands of men, women and children to the lush island of Molokai and the isolation of the Kalaupapa peninsula, which is separated from Molokai by 1,600-foot cliffs.

Belgian priest Father Damien was a great advocate for the patients and served them from 1873 until his death in 1889. Father Damien helped to tell the world about the settlement and the social and physical banishment of its people.

Today, the beautiful countryside and peninsula on the north coast of Molokai are lined with thousands of graves and are part of the National Park Service.

Victimization

In a modern day example, today's AIDS patients mirror the stigmatization and victimization of yesterday's leper colonies. Grouped with the American Indians and World War II Japanese-American internees, the sufferers of leprosy, also known as Hanson's disease, on Molokai represent a population tragically separated from society, as AIDS patients are treated today.

There have been many photo exposés created on the lives of people living and suffering with AIDS. These images have opened our eyes to the torment and isolation that they endure.

Without brave photographers most of us would never see this pain and never be jump-started to lend a hand.

There are currently approximately 600,000 new cases of leprosy uncovered every year, most of which are in underdeveloped countries filled with malnutrition and overcrowding. Even though there is a known cure, thousands suffer because they do not have access to modern drug therapy.

Concurrently, it is estimated that 45 million people will become newly infected with the HIV/AIDS virus between 2002 and 2010 if the pandemic continues on its current course. Do you see any similarities here?

Photography both records and demonstrates the importance of people, places, events, and circumstances. It enables outsiders to see problem issues or glimpses of socio-economic lifestyles that they may not have otherwise seen. Photography enables us to observe people and events and document social problems. This can be invaluable to growth for individuals as well as for humanity.

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Photography can also be a tool for scientific or historical research, a medium of expression, or simply to capture personal experiences and memories.

Art is created for many reasons, not only for personal enjoyment. Since the beginning of time, artists have been using their creative abilities to express their personal ideas while telling us about society. Just look at cave paintings and hieroglyphics.

Many photographic artists not only use their medium as social commentary, but as social protest. Diego Rivera, Gordon Parks and Ben Shahn are a few. Twentieth century Mexican artist Diego Rivera rallied injustices perpetrated upon the common man, for example.

Photography has also allowed the general population to observe social and political events around the world. For example, wide-reaching, defining messages during wartime have made riveting and enduring impact. A couple examples you may recall (depending on your age) that dominate American memories of the Vietnam war ... the naked, hysterical young girl running from a napalm attack and the Viet Cong being executed by a Vietnamese police official on a Saigon street during Tet, 1968. They provide a powerful commentary about the war to enable the public to take action: protest, enlist or even back the government's position.

Artistic creativity is a powerful medium for socio-political commentary. It can help us be an advocate for environmental responsibility as well. I believe that artists are responsible to communicate glimpses of our world. It gives us food for thought and offers an impetus for conversation ... and many times for social action. Sometimes seeing images as never before opens our eyes to overlooked beauty around and moves us to take action. We can talk about landfill, population, or pollution problems, but when we visualize the extremes, our emotions are surely stirred.

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For example take a look in our local neighborhoods at our disappearing countryside and barns. The memory of something lost can play a part in reminding us to savor what is left behind. Photographs preserve images of days gone by ... before the bulldozers and backhoes pulled into town.

Through my photography for the “Barns of McHenry County” posters and calendars, I was able to support the efforts The McHenry County Historical Barn Preservation Association. It’s one thing to say there are many old barns in our community that are being torn down for the advancement of development; but it’s another thing to display these beautiful architectural structures to stir a sense of historic wonder and enlightenment in us all.

However, as development and urban sprawl spread across our county, many of these wonderful structures are being lost to dilapidation, improper maintenance, fire or vandalism. Through photography we are trying to find ways to save rare and unique barns for future generations as well as memorialize the magnificent, historical structures. Photography can help preserve the remaining barns that continue to grace our landscape.

Techniques and Methods

Photographers play with light so not to disrupt the subject, but highlight and enhance it. The images oftentimes come out more interesting or intense due to lighting. The subject can also be clarified or even distorted.

My favorite format is black-and-white photography. It expressively creates forms and highlights the content. My photo sessions are filled with hundreds of quick snaps. That enables the subjects, if they are people, to loosen up or not be conscientious that I am shooting. The photographs portray the subjects in a spontaneous fashion. The rapid firing and multi-angle orientations allow me to explore many facets of the subjects being photographed.

Unless absolutely necessary I don't use flash. The power of flash can highlight or wash out. I much rather prefer to use natural light and nature's own drama in mist, fog, shadows of sun light, etc. I also use filters that add colors, films or blurs. This distortion can add drama.

When I shoot, I look for subjects that are engaging, then I frame the subject with a border – a tree, a side of a building, a shadow ... sometimes indefinable, sometimes recognizable.

Conclusion

When photography is used as a social document and a vehicle for change, viewers of the images may simply partake in social observation and commentary or they may be moved to action.

Sometimes artists use photography in a satirical way to poke fun at people. This tragicomedy or coarse humor can allow people to laugh at an uncomfortable situation. Extreme human situations can be communicated through photography, like the lepers in a setting of paradise. This can exaggerate the peculiarities of visual forms. But again like all art, it can inspire people to, if nothing else, talk about a situation that heretofore may not have been discussed.

I like to inspire the human spirit and open new vistas of hope and idealism that encourage people to reach for greater dimensions than those we possessed yesterday. To dwell on the sick or impoverished can be depressing, but it can certainly be educational or tweak an uneasy conscience. Bottom line, photography it is art, and it is an art that speaks to the human spirit. |

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