

Farewell to the Revolution

Digital Photography Enters The Mainstream



"Burnt Cameras, 1990"

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article by **Huntington Witherill**

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The acceptance of digital-based photography has now become so widespread as to have rendered its evangelistic detractors as close to speechless as they are likely to become. Notwithstanding a few lingering prejudices— which I believe to be rooted in a well-oiled myth that we'll explore herein concerning the very nature of the photographic process— the idea of using digital tools and materials as a means of producing legitimate and collectible fine art photography has now firmly affixed itself to the photographic mainstream. Save those few pockets of calcified resistance remaining among a handful of traditionalists focused primarily on the mechanics of the medium, I'm here to report...

the epic battles of the digital revolution are pretty much over, thank you very much! We can now all go back to being photographers.

Digital photography has finally come of age. And I, for one, am glad to hear this news. Frankly, I never thought the resistance made all that much sense in the first place. Once the arguments boiled down to a preference for one set of production tools over another, the logic and focus of the entire confrontation seemed to lack purpose.

Now, lest you think I gloat over a victory, I hereby disclose my somewhat less than top secret role as a double-agent during the height of the digital revolution. After having spent nearly thirty years firmly entrenched in the view camera tradition, I embraced digital tools about ten years ago. I've had my feet in both camps and don't really have an axe to grind for one side, or the other. I still use both the conventional and digital approaches, though in the interest of full disclosure I should probably also mention that I currently use predominately digital tools.

"So what?" you might ask. Well... not much, really. However, what's important about this is that my past allegiance to the aesthetic concerns demanded of any successfully accomplished photograph remain intact despite having adopted a decidedly different set of tools and materials. More to the point, I never really much cared about *how* a particular piece of art was produced. I was always far more interested in *what* was produced. I've always felt that once you progress beyond the practical implementation of your tools, art is the sole product

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of an artist's *decision making process*. The relative success or failure of a given artistic expression has little (if anything!) to do with the particular tools an artist might utilize in the production of that art. Suffice it to say, nobody has yet characterized the music of Beethoven based upon the brand of piano he played! Art is clearly a product of the mind and heart, *not* the choice of tools.

I can also state with relative assurance that digital tools and materials, just like their traditional counterparts, will each continue to be employed to produce both good and bad art into the foreseeable future. To assume that one approach might ever actually replace the other would be downright foolish. After all, some photographers are still working successfully with processes assumed long ago to be abandoned. (Remember the daguerreotype, or the tintype?)

Digital photography is here to stay, together with both conventional and “alternative process” photography. And with the welcomed assimilation of these diverse approaches we can now expect photography's capacity– for serving as a powerful means of achieving artistic self-expression– to once again grow by leaps and bounds. Cause for celebration, I say!

Yet, there remains a persistent cache of myths surrounding the very nature of the photographic process which, if allowed to persist, will only serve to fuel resistance to future developments in the art. And there will of course be *many* such future developments to come. These myths need to be explored and excised so as to sufficiently clear the path for a truly lasting peace.



"Horowitz: the early years"

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The myths I refer to in this context stem from the idea that a photograph, in and of itself, can (or does) represent or depict some form of inherent “truth” and/or “reality.” I’m not sure where this myth originated, but I suspect it was hatched up soon after the invention of the photographic process, in the early 1800’s. (How easily we mere mortals seem determined to adopt illusions as reality!)

In truth, photographs have never possessed the attribute of depicting intrinsic truth, much less that of sufficiently defining

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any reality as we know it. (That's a lovely picture of your wife, but isn't it a shame that she's only ten inches tall and, dare I say... flat?). Photographs are *stylized interpretations* of a given reality that lack the fundamental factual information with which to confirm or deny the absolute truth or reality of *anything* depicted within the frame.

Surely a photograph can *suggest* a particular truth or reality (and can admittedly do so in a uniquely compelling way!) But, beyond that mere suggestion we're talking about a decidedly individual interpretation of reality and not about actual truth,



"Marilyn Monroe, Las Vegas, NV, 1999"

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or reality. Just beyond the hint of truth within any photograph lies a minefield of politics, propaganda, social expectations, cultural traditions, learned behavior, personal prejudices, life experiences, and let's not forget occasionally poor eyesight and a progressively failing memory. And then of course, there's that notorious "M" word. Manipulation!

Many of the lingering knocks against digital-based photography seem fixed upon the idea that manipulation of a photograph is both bad, and far too easily accomplished with digital tools. This argument seems to imply that because conventional photography can not facilitate the same level of manipulation that digital affords, the conventional approach remains pure and thus, the only *real* photography. Does someone need to mention to Jerry Uelsmann that he simply *can't* be doing what he's doing? Or more to the point, do conventional photographers really believe they are somehow immune from manipulation? (Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain!)

Are you sitting down? **All** art is accomplished through the creative and imaginative use of blatant manipulation. No exceptions! With photographic art (just as with every other form of art) the act of practiced manipulation of one's tools and materials is both necessary and crucial to the implementation of the resulting artwork. From the point at which the photographer sets up a camera to isolate a particular scene—by carefully choosing which elements of that scene to covertly hide from the viewer—to the point at which the resulting dodged, burned, pushed, pulled, cropped, flashed, masked, bleached, toned, spotted, mounted, overmatted

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and titled print is presented to the world for assimilation, carefully controlled acts of outright manipulation have been judiciously employed by the artist at each and every step along the way. How much actual truth and/or reality can one fairly attribute to *any* endeavor which involves so much manipulation?

Yes, but here you might say... *conventional photography involves a more "hand-crafted" process and thus, it carries the capacity to produce a more legitimate aesthetic expression.* Photography? Hand-crafted? Who are we kidding here? This is precisely the same argument that painters attempted to foist upon photographers so many years ago in order to prove that photography could not possibly be considered as art! If the hand-crafted act of waving one's arms over an easel, and rocking a few trays in the sink represent the foundation of photography's true artistic legitimacy, I should probably saddle-up my mule and go back to coating glass plates! (Actually... I'm not quite *that* old!) I wonder if we could put this particular argument to rest if we digit-heads promise to gently rock a tray of hypo-clearing agent while we sit at the keyboard? (Something that I don't actually recommend though, due to the increased likelihood of electrocution!). Granted, digital tools are decidedly mechanical. But, are conventional tools any less so? Are not *all* tools mechanical? And, does it even matter? Brett Weston resolved the argument this way: *"The camera for an artist is just another tool. It is no more mechanical than a violin if you analyze it. Beyond the rudiments, it is up to the artist to create art, not the camera."* Again, it is the decision making process which results in art, not the tools and materials.

In a last gasp attempt to settle the matter, I've also occasionally heard the following retort: *"Well, at least with the conventional approach, the photographer must be physically present at the location where the photograph was made."* Hmm... would this be the same logic whereby we disregard all painters who do not employ the plein-aire approach? I suspect there are a number of successful artists out there who might well bristle at this news. As an aside and in all fairness, this particular argument may be well founded when applied specifically to documentary photography. However, based solely upon this argument I do not advocate the use of digital tools when it comes to documentary photography.



"Graffiti #10, NV, 1988"

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And of course, we're not talking about documentary photography in this context. This is about the photographic process being employed as a means of achieving personal and artistic self-expression. Thus, the relevant question is this: Do we really want to mandate a bunch of arbitrary rules and regulations so as to bring law and order to the free act of artistic self-expression? And if so... who wants to be the sheriff?

When it came right down to it, there were only two arguments that made any sense to me during the digital revolution. The first had to do with the issue of print longevity. Early digital prints were



"Graffiti #5, NV, 1988"

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plagued with fading problems. However, those issues have long since been thoroughly addressed and resolved to the point that a pigment ink print is fast approaching a 300-year life span. And as the hamster wheel of technology continues to revolve, that life span can only be expected to increase. The second argument has to do with subjectivity. In my view the idea of subjective preference remains the one legitimate issue that everyone can continue to effectively argue. And that's a good thing because personal preferences are the very source from which art derives its beneficial pleasure.

If you prefer conventionally produced photographs to those digitally produced, I recommend you avoid digital photographs. Keep in mind though, that given the expert use of both tool sets and absent a microscope, you might not actually be able to now discern any visible difference in the same image produced both conventionally and digitally. Also, try to bear in mind that the aesthetic potential of a digitally produced photograph remains squarely equal to that of a conventionally produced one. And due to the increased level of manipulation possible with the digital approach, a significantly increased aesthetic potential does exist.

And finally, for anyone out there who might cling to the notion that using a computer to accomplish serious photography represents nothing more than a simple, quick, or perhaps even ham-fisted undertaking, I encourage you to actually give the process a try. Achieving and subsequently maintaining mastery over the expressive nuances of a relentlessly evolving set of tools and materials— while negotiating a learning curve that is both steep and

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ongoing due to the incessant forward march of technology– this is definitely *not* an effortless nor care-free approach to photography. It's no secret that those photographers who have chosen to make the transition to digital tools have done so primarily because of the extraordinary aesthetic potential inherent to the medium. You can rest assured they did not make that transition because it was either undemanding, or expedient.

Understandably, many photographers will rightfully decline to adopt this new and decidedly different approach to photography. After all, converting from conventional to digital is no trivial task and let's face it, conventional photography remains an entirely suitable and well-established approach to achieving personal and artistic self-expression. Nonetheless, and despite any ruminations to the contrary, digital photography now ranks right up there with the conventional approach. And, if aesthetic concerns remain the predominate focus of artist expression, digital photography can only be expected to gain in strength as its vast potential is fully realized with the passage of time. And in the end, and to the everlasting salvation of both camps, subjective preferences will continue to reign supreme.

The near universal acceptance of digital photography as a means of producing legitimate art has now ushered in a new era of awareness and enthusiasm for photography's limitless potential as a truly compelling art form. And while a few holdouts will continue to grumble at the new kids on the block, I am reminded of two favorite quotes which seem remarkably well-suited for delivering this particular revolution to its final resting place...

“Art derives a considerable part of its beneficial exercise from flying in the face of presumptions.” – Henry James (1888)

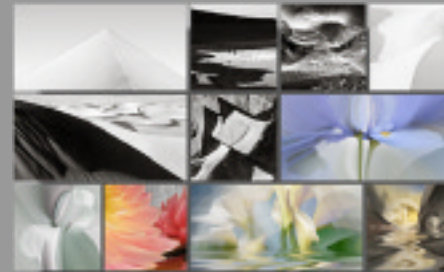
and finally...

“Only in men’s imagination does truth find an effective and undeniable existence. Imagination, not invention, is the supreme master of art as of life.” – Joseph Conrad (1912)



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