

Are Competitions Scores Meaningless?

In Focus, September 2007 Issue
Westchester Photographic Society Newsletter

I don't know when the first camera club competition was held. The Cleveland Photographic Society had juried exhibits if not competitions in 1887. Most camera clubs were formed by amateur photographers, who met to discuss equipment, techniques and show samples of their work. I imagine it was inevitable that some egotist bragged once too often about his photographs and a judge was hired to give an independent opinion. Thus starting the curse of camera club competitions.

Competitions are the big draw at camera clubs. We average 65-75 people on competition nights but fewer than 45 people for outside speakers and 25-30 for inside speaker or technique nights. We spend a lot of the club's human and financial resources setting the rules, hiring judges, organizing and running the competitions, scorekeeping, publishing scores, ordering, distributing awards and organizing the award's dinner. Factor in the travel, equipment, Photoshop costs and time of the members to find, capture and/or create award winning images and you get a sense of just how important competitions are to many of our members.

Are our camera club competitions meaningful? Are they still photography competitions or have they become Photoshop competitions? Do they measure your skill in using your camera or your skill in using Photoshop or your skill in using creative Photoshop plugins?

Throughout history, camera club competitions have gone through several eras. Initially competitions were black & white prints. The prints were highly manipulated during processing in the darkroom and usually retouched. The prints may have showed the photographer's vision of the scene but rarely reflected the image that the negative captured. With the introduction of color printing, the photographer had less control of the printing process so more manipulations were made in the camera (types of film, filters, selective focus, reflectors and flash). The shift to color slides forced even more manipulations towards the camera (graduated ND filters, enhancing filters, creative zooming, multi-exposures). The advent of film scanners allowed the photographer to once again take control of image manipulations during post processing. Today, our competition images may bare no resemblance to the out of the camera image. With a little investment in time and equipment, we can now created any image that we envision in our minds.

In my mind our images are no longer photographs. They are now graphic arts or even fine art images. I celebrate this change. I no longer have to be in the field at 5 am to photograph the sun rising behind a buck in a meadow. I can now shoot the deer at 5 pm and add the sunrise from an old image with Photoshop or better yet, I can just envision the sunrise in my mind and create it in Photoshop.

However, if our photography has become graphic art or fine art, how can we expect our judges to rate and score art when their expertise is judging photography? If diVinci's Last Supper or Mona Lisa, van Gough's Starry Night or Sunflowers, Warhol's Old Fashion Vegetable Soup or Picasso's Guernica showed up together in our competition, which one would get the 70 and who gets the 95. Hiring someone to judge which piece of art is better than the next piece of art is ridiculous. There are no universal standards for art. It is truly in the eye of the beholder and any score is meaningless.

Camera club competitions are traditional, they draw an excited crowd, they boost our egos, they force us to go shooting., to attend awards dinners, to learn Photoshop, Painter and color management. But are the scores meaningless?

Dick Budnik