

Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography: A Narrative Inquiry and
Exhibition

Ian Watts

Thesis Submitted for the Masters of Arts in Education (Lifelong Learning)

Mount Saint Vincent University

Dr. Donovan Plumb

April 2011

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	ii
CHAPTERS	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. THE EXPLORATION.....	4
3. CASE STUDY READING OF IMAGE #2.....	28
4. FINDINGS.....	32
REFERENCES CITED.....	34
APPENDICES	
A. CASE STUDY READING OF IMAGE #9.....	37
B. CASE STUDY READING OF IMAGE #3.....	39
C. IMAGES.....	41

Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography

ABSTRACT

As a teacher of introductory media arts and a newcomer to photography, I felt a shared frustration with my students when trying to express myself effectively in the pictures I was taking. The purpose of this thesis is to explore ways of developing effective expression through digital photography. Through narrative inquiry, I examine theories of aesthetics, my perception of the environment around me, and the meaning making process in photography. I also analyse the contemplative photography practise of Miksang, and engage in a case study of photographs that I have taken during this inquiry. In doing so, I advocate for the use of contemplative photography as a means of finding an individual artistic style and voice, and for a practice of photography which seeks to enlighten us about ourselves, rather than communicating pre-determined ideas. My inquiry is presented in the form of an academic essay and a photography exhibition.

“The real goal is not to mass-produce art for other people. The real goal is to enlighten yourself about yourself”

Roger Ballen

INTRODUCTION

As a relative newcomer to the world of photography, I found myself in the unusual position of teaching a course in basic photography to a group of students on a creative media arts program. Whilst the problems of such a situation are self-evident, I also found a strange comfort in what proved to be a rewarding shared learning experience. The hurdles provided by technical knowledge of aperture, shutter speed, composition and depth of field were negotiated together with patience and practice. Before too long we were producing images which, according to the instructional photography textbooks, were properly exposed and well composed. However, for many of us, this achievement was not sufficient. We had sought for photography to provide us with a means to express ourselves visually and the images that we were producing did not satisfy this demand.

My students have long-since passed their courses and moved on to new areas of investigation. I, however, have continued to encounter conflict between my ever growing obsession with photography and my as-yet unsatisfied demand for self-expression within the medium. In the meantime, I have found myself living in a new and unfamiliar city

Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography

thousands of miles from home. I decided to embark upon a photography project focusing on the city of Moncton. I did so in hopes of better understanding my relationship to this new environment, and developing my craft as a photographer. More importantly, this project formed the basis of a narrative inquiry into the development of my ability to express myself effectively through the medium of photography. In this thesis I narratively explore my perception of my environment and link this to how I choose to convey these perceptions photographically. I also draw upon theories of aesthetics whilst interrogating meaning in photography. In doing so, I reach conclusions about how effectively I have been able to express myself in my images and how this ability has developed. Throughout this process I draw upon literature to help dissect my experiences and identify the processes involved in the development of my self-expression.

Throughout the narrative inquiry I use the pictures that I take on a daily basis as my field notes. I support these with short shot notes which detail basic information such as the equipment used, the location of the shots, my mood/feelings/emotions on the particular day and any particular inspiration or exercises that are informing that day's shooting. I will have kept the written information as short as possible as this inquiry focuses on expressing oneself in a visual medium. Throughout this whole process I have intended that the images carry as much meaning as possible and verbal language is used to support this. As such, this thesis essay has been used to support a rich and meaningful photographic installation. Photography carries a large weight of meaning, not only because it is the subject of this inquiry, but because this is a personal and embodied study and images recognize "the embodied nature of all knowledge" (Weber, 2008, p.8). After all, "we are not ideas, but flesh and blood beings learning through our senses. And people

Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography

to whom we show images, or whom we ask to produce images, respond with all of their senses and embodied experiences to the project” (p.8).

Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography

THE EXPLORATION

One of the initial challenges that I encountered with the development of my photography upon moving to Moncton, New Brunswick was my perception of the city itself. Upon arriving I did not see a place of beauty and wonder, with abundant photographic opportunity. Instead, I saw a dull, flat and visually uninspiring place which favoured functionality over beauty and interestingness. As Susan Sontag (1977) states in her Plato's Cave essay, "an event has come to mean, precisely, something worth photographing" (p14.). In Moncton I found no events, both literally and visually. I did not see a "privileged moment" that I could turn "into a slim object that one can keep and look at again and again" (p13.). In other cities I had been able to at least find beauty in the charm of run-down industrial landscapes, or in the textures and hardships of urban decay. After all, "an ugly or grotesque subject may be moving because it has been dignified by the attention of the photographer (p11.). In Moncton I saw nothing which captured my attention, let alone intrigued me enough to dignify it through photography. All I could see were functional square boxes placed on grey concrete, not ordered enough to create interesting recurring patterns, yet not different enough to create an interesting texture. I found an environment that, rather than inspiring photography, actively put me off.

It was against this backdrop that I was introduced to Miksang photography. Miksang is a discipline of contemplative photography that is concerned with 'uncovering the truth of pure perception' (Miksang Institute for Contemplative Photography, n.d.). Translating literally from Tibetan as 'good eye,' Miksang seeks to create a mind that is 'uncluttered, relaxed and open' creating 'a magical display of vivid perception'. Prior to

Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography

my introduction I had been viewing the world as ‘populated by objects such as people, cities, houses, cars and trees, and not differences of luminances, edges and bars’ (Pinna & Reeves, 2008). My perception of my surrounding environment was tainted by pre-conceived ideas of what kinds of things were interesting to photograph. My idea of what could constitute an interesting, valuable and visually appealing photograph had been heavily guided by “the influence of Kodak moments, travel brochures, coffee table books, National Geographic, and family albums” (Neilsen, 2003, p2.). Photo forums and websites such as flickr were also full of spectacular scenery, records of safari trips and polished shots of beautiful models. As an aspiring photographer I felt an overwhelming pressure to emulate these pictures.

Understandably, I could not see the kinds of images that fill such publications in the flat, sleepy suburbia of Moncton. Photographs that I submitted to flickr desperately seeking the approval of my peers were met with indifference. Rather than the commendation I was seeking, I received comments such as ‘it’s a bit boring,’ ‘the sunset is nice but there’s no real scenery to make your picture interesting,’ and ‘I really like your composition but it’s not a very interesting scene’ (personal communication, October 2010). Upon clicking on the profiles of these commentators, I was met with luminous representations of a bustling Times Square at sunset, the snow-tipped Rocky Mountains and attractive models in sun-soaked meadows. I was frustrated at my own inability to make interesting images out of mundane, everyday situations and saw this as a fundamental weakness in my ability to ever become a good photographer.

When I first explored a gallery of Miksang photographs it became immediately apparent that an understanding of this discipline had the potential to dispel this myth.

Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography

Items as ordinary as a pair of spectacles or a chair were turned into eye-catching images which were anything but mundane. These images spoke to me a thousand times louder than any picture of a famous beauty spot. I felt that these Miksang images, in their simplicity and attention to light, tone and composition were the work of real photographers. They represented exactly what I was looking to develop. Good eye.

To develop the 'good eye,' Miksang begins by focussing upon the initial moment of perception. "The flash of perception is a critical moment in human experience...because it's the event that creates the opportunity for insight and understanding" (Nielsen, 2003, p.4). These flashes of perception are what interrupt our seemingly automated processes and make us take notice of something. Rather than unconsciously going about our day they force us to take notice of new things. If these perceptive moments are ignored then we return to our business of everyday existence. If, however, we are alert to these flashes they can provide the catalyst to inquiry, understanding and learning.

The fundamental premise of Miksang photography is for the individual to "clarify their perception, and enter into contact with the photographic experience of the present moment in its purest state" (Francoer, 2010, p.37). The initial flashes of perception are dwelt upon and elongated so that the photographer can fully consider the effects of the light, shape, texture, hue, tones and so on that initially sparked the flash of perception. At this point the photographer is not distracted by concerns of how the final image will appear. Indeed, Miksang seeks to develop within the photographer a state of mind whereby "past knowledge neither taints nor constricts the perception of the present moment in all of its fullness" (Gross and Shapiro, 2001, p.18, cited in Nielsen, 2003, p.6).

Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography

The entire ethos of Miksang photography resonated powerfully with me. At that particular stage of my development as a photographer I was feeling a constant pressure, albeit self inflicted, to produce a certain type and quality of photograph. I wanted to impress my peers and, perhaps unrealistically I was comparing my work against that of far more experienced photographers with a great deal more resources at their disposal. Every time I made an exposure I carried with me the images from glossy magazines that I wanted to emulate, and the stinging comments of past criticisms. It is little wonder that I was not happy with my results when I was constantly telling myself ‘you’re not getting any better at this, ‘your pictures are not as good as the ones you were looking at earlier,’ and ‘nobody is going to like these shots.’ According to Miksang, these thoughts were constricting my ability to produce images true to my initial perceptions. It is logical to conclude that, as a result, I was ineffectively expressing myself in my photography.

After reading up on Miksang, I decided to try out some of the introductory exercises that were available online. I went to a park bench near the mudflats in downtown Moncton, sat down and closed my eyes, thinking only of the concept of shape. Upon opening them, I let them settle on the first thing that grabbed their attention. I then started to consider what it was that attracted me. I did not begin taking pictures but instead tried to establish a connection to the initial flash of perception. I tried not to look at the images on the camera’s LCD screen as I was taking them, instead preferring to lose myself in my surroundings and the act of taking pictures. I was happy to indulge myself in what was an extremely freeing experience and I had never before felt such a connection between myself, my camera and my subject matter. I felt relaxed and I was seeing far more opportunities for photographs than usual. This was not a complete and

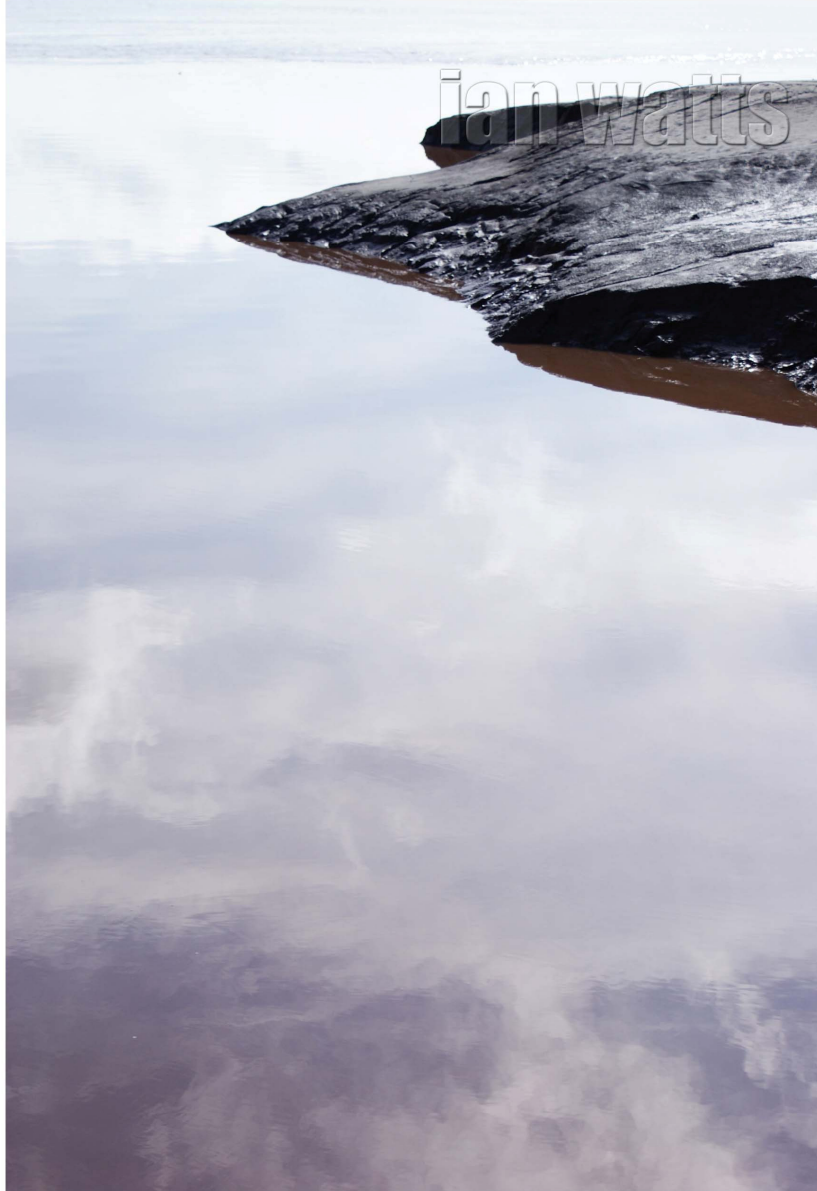
Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography

instant transformation. I was not suddenly awakened from a closed world of expectation and past experience, but I was certainly more open to new possibilities than I had been in the past.

When viewing the images at home, I was pleasantly surprised by what I found. In amongst the inevitable failed experiments were some photographs which were unlike anything that I had ever taken before. One shot in particular of a small piece of mudflat jutting out in to the Peticodiac River, itself perfectly reflecting the clouds in the sky, stood out and gave me great pleasure (*fig.1*). It was a shot that I would never have taken before and which perhaps reflected a new freedom from the “”endless discriminations” encouraged and supported by conventional thinking” (p.6). I was attracted to that subject by the shapes created by the river cutting through the muddy landscape and the Miksang exercise allowed me to make that connection and produce an image that reflected that initial flash of perception. I was able to see the river not just as a river, but as “a collection of shapes, colours and nuances” (Francoer, 2010, p.38).

The heightened state of awareness provided by Miksang’s way of being allows us to expose the textures and patterns of everyday experience. This raises some interesting points surrounding my original perception of Moncton. In his paper *On the Aesthetics of the Everyday*, Arto Haapala (2005) examines the relationship between familiarity, strangeness and place in aesthetics. He argues that “When we face something unfamiliar, we pay special attention to it. We observe the thing, we try to categorize it, we may think as what to do with the object, whether it has any use for us or not. We may are also particularly attentive to its aesthetic potentiality” (p.44). In Haapala’s view, the environments that we experience every day go by virtually unnoticed as they exist largely

Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography



(fig 1) - My first ever attempt at Miksang photography. A piece of mudflat juts out into the Peticodiac River. Taken in downtown Moncton.

Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography

in terms of our functional uses for them. In contrast, a new place will feel unfamiliar to us, inviting curiosity, intrigue and wonder.

In Moncton, however, I felt I was confronted with a city that, despite having never before visited, felt oddly familiar, and without the positive connotations that such a statement possesses. Although the city was technically new to me, its buildings, signs, parking lots and chain restaurants were not. It felt functional rather than novel. In touching upon the work of Heidegger, Haapala states that buildings or objects that are so familiar (or in this case, 'feel' so familiar) "disappear into their function". A corner store, for example, is seen not as a building with shape, colour and texture, but as simply the place where certain groceries are bought. In this instance it may even prove difficult to recall aesthetic details of the physical structure of the corner store if asked to do so from a distance. As an aspiring photographer in Moncton I was failing to see the nuances of my landscape, instead seeing objects entirely as their function dictated. There were no interesting buildings as far as I was concerned; just retail units, garages, houses, strip malls and offices.

My initial trips around the city with a camera were unfruitful. I saw very little that I felt worthy of capturing photographically and, as a result, did not feel inspired to take photographs in the city. As Haapala states, "In a familiar environment we often have to make a special effort to really see the visual features of things surrounding us" (p. 48). Moncton may not have been literally familiar, but the environment I was in most definitely did. I needed to make a "special effort" to see past the mundane functionality of the city, to see the city with fresh eyes and produce photographs that I found interesting.

Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography

When discussing the different ways an individual might experience an environment, Haapala argues that “an outsider puts emphasis on the recreational values, including aesthetic values, the local on everyday functional values” (p.44). In Haapala’s terms, I felt more of a local than an outsider due to the familiarity of the kinds of buildings and landscapes I encountered. As I have already mentioned, I placed more emphasis on the functional values of the city, perhaps after a complete rejection of its aesthetic values. Unfortunately for me as a photographer, part of the functionality of the city was to serve as both content and subject matter of my photographs. At this point in my development, I did not know how to do so in a creative and meaningful way.

In spite of the lack of visual inspiration I found in Moncton I still felt I should be able to produce interesting photographs. After all, many photographers have managed to produce stunning images of everyday scenery. As Tom Leddy (2005) points out when discussing environmental aesthetician Arnold Berleant:

Berleant implies that such things as telephone poles, power lines, commercial strips, trailer parks, suburban malls, and parking lots necessarily ‘embody negative aesthetic values’ (20). Yet, these are often the subjects of contemporary painting and photography, which provide mediation for our experiencing them in aesthetically positive terms. (p. 5)

Aesthetics is often associated with positive reactions to stimuli, but we should be careful not to omit the “feeling of displeasure that arises in connection with the sensuous/imaginative apprehension of certain things” (p. 8). Interesting works of art have

Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography

the capacity to turn such uncomfortable aesthetic stimuli into objects of wonder.

Photography has a rich history of creating works of art out of such things, whether it is Cartier-Bresson's reportage or the small-town, neon Americana of Joel Meyerowitz's *Cape Light*. Rather than using this healthy precedent of photographers using the aesthetics of everyday life in their art for encouragement, it served only to reinforce my sense of inadequacy. My view was that, if I was to be any good as a photographer, I should be able to make interesting and powerful images out of any subject matter. To me, the fact that I was struggling to do so represented failure on my part.

My initial experiments with basic Miksang exercises changed all of this. I began to see the city in a new light. It was as though I had reverted back to being, as Haapala would describe, an outsider once again. I began seeing rich opportunities for photography in Moncton and felt the potential to "be capable of transforming everyday aesthetic experience into something extraordinary" (Leddy, 2005, p.17). Though Leddy describes the relationship between everyday aesthetics and the aesthetics of art as "a persistent problem" (p.19), I was beginning to see how pieces of art could be created from fragments of everyday life. Haapala would argue that the context in which the everyday is presented to us can recreate the state of "strangeness" by "minimizing familiarity" (p.51). The placement of something that could be considered 'everyday' within the frame of a photograph instantly gives it a level of abstraction from reality. This abstraction is furthered when combined with the conventions and traditions of art and visual design. "In the context of art the everyday loses its everydayness: it becomes something extraordinary" (p. 51). I was beginning to see this with the Miksang images I was producing. I became adept at arranging the shapes and colours of industrial units, shop

Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography

signs, road markings, and houses into compositions which I felt were pleasing on the eye (*fig2*). In my mind, my photographs were no longer representative of the everyday buildings and objects that I had photographed; instead they became objects of intrigue and wonder in their own right.

I also noticed that the Miksang images I was producing had very distinct and noticeable characteristics. They tended to be particularly minimalistic and abstract in nature (*fig 3*). At first this did not trouble me. I was still seeing creative possibilities for photography in Moncton and was happy to have things to photograph. After a while this enthusiasm began to wane, and I felt myself returning to a state of frustration. Although Miksang had been initially inspiring I did not feel that the images I was producing were particularly individual. I felt that they were characteristic of Miksang photography as a whole rather than representing effective expressions of my own vision. In his instructional book *Photography and the Art of Seeing*, photographer Freeman Patterson (2004) outlines two key components to consider when expressing oneself photographically. First to consider is the subject or theme of your photograph. This is essentially what you are trying to convey in your image. Secondly, he asks us to consider the subject matter that will effectively express your theme. These are the items, objects, buildings, people, animals, and so on that you include in the frame of your photograph which help to point towards your theme. He also suggests switching the order of these two components and thinking about subject matter first of all before considering what theme that subject matter might convey (p. 103). What is perhaps interesting about these components is the implications they carry for those following an orthodox Miksang

Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography



(fig 2) - Seeing new aesthetic potential in the mundane box stores and retail units of Moncton

Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography



(fig 3) - Examples of images I have taken whilst adhering to the Miksang philosophy. Abstract, minimalistic and simple images.



Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography

approach to photography. In the Miksang approach, such premeditated thought of theme or subject is in direct conflict with the fundamental ethos of the discipline. As Julie DuBose points out, “what identifies a Miksang type image is the directness, the freshness, and [that] the subject matter takes a back seat to the primacy of the experience of perception” (cited in Neilsen, 2007, p.26). Here DuBose, whilst defending Miksang photography, seems to suggest that it is not possible to express oneself directly through a Miksang image and that to attempt to do so is to miss the point of Miksang. Whilst Patterson places the subject matter at the centre of the photographic act, DuBose ascribes the greatest importance to perception. As a result, it would seem that Miksang is incompatible with such direct means of self expression. This may explain the fact that, whilst the images I was producing as part of the Miksang exercises had a definite visual appeal, I did not feel that they said anything about me as an artist.

Another argument is that effective self-expression is possible with Miksang photography but that is “more likely that we will (have to) look closer and longer across images in any given series of images for resonance and significance” (Neilsen, 2007, p.26). In this view, it is not possible to learn anything about the image’s author from an individual Miksang image. Rather, the viewer has to look closely across a body of work for significance. Rather than providing answers, this raises another long list of questions, not least about the intentionality of the photographer and, perhaps more importantly, the nature and location of meaning within a photograph.

When photography was first introduced to the world, through the Daguerreotype in 1839, and other technologies over subsequent years, there was a widely held

Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography

assumption that a photograph was “transparent, offering direct access to the real” (Berger, 1980. p.52). Unlike previous mediums through which elements of real life could be reproduced - such as painting, sculpture and literature - a photograph featured actual objects, people, places and things as they existed in that particular space and time. As such, the camera was viewed as an objective recording instrument, rather than something as subjective as an artist’s brush. However, although photographs “have the capacity to lull us into believing that they are evidence of an impartial, uninflected sort” (Grundberg, 1988, cited in Barrett, 2000, p. 36) it is not possible for this to be the case. “Photographs *are* partial and *are* inflected” (p. 36). Just as the brush must be operated by the subjective artist in order to paint its reproductions, the camera must be placed, focussed and exposed by a photographer. As Sturken and Cartwright (2009) point out, “This combination of the subjective and the objective is a central tension in our regard of camera-generated images” (p.17).

If a photograph cannot be considered as completely objective then it is logical to suggest that some kind of meaning has been encoded into it. A photographer chooses what to point the camera at, the position and angle of the camera, an exposure, a depth of field and focus. All of these decisions add to the visual design of the image and have implications for how the image is understood. French semiotician Roland Barthes explored how cultural images express meaning, with particular reference to advertising and photography. Barthes breaks this down into two practices of signification. The first, denotation, refers to “what it [the image] shows” (Barrett, 2000, p.39). In this instance, a photograph denotes a car, house, flower, vase, meadow, model’s face and so on. The second, connotation, refers to what the photograph may suggest or imply (p.38). Whilst

Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography

an image of a model in a field may be denotative of those things, through selective lighting, composition and technical decisions the image can connote loneliness, vulnerability and fragility. Barthes continues his theory of semiotics by identifying two factors which he labels studium and punctum. The studium “suggests a passive response to a photograph’s appeal” whereas the punctum “allows for the formation of a critical reading” (Clarke, 1997, p. 32). The viewer, or interpreter, is drawn in by a particular aspect of the photograph and uses it to “begin the process of opening up that space to critical analysis. Once we have discovered our punctum we become, irredeemably, active readers of the scene” (p. 32). Such interpretations further serve to dispel the myth of photographic truth. The punctum allows us to view photography “not so much as a reflection of the ‘real’ world as an interpretation of that world” (p.33). Sturken and Cartwright (2009) argue that it is in fact a combination of the objective and subjective that bestow upon photography its unique qualities and capacity for meaning. The “paradoxical combination of affective and magical qualities and the photograph’s cultural status as cold proof” (p.18) lies at the heart of an image’s meaning.

Alan Sekula (1982) attempts to further explore this paradox. He argues that “Every photographic image is a sign, above all, of someone’s investment in sending a message” (p. 87). In this view, photography does not only fail to present us with simple truths, but it is indicative of an agent’s attempts to send a message. However, this message may not necessarily reach its recipients fully intact, read by its viewer in precisely the manner intended by the artist. As Sekula elaborates, a photograph as an independent entity “presents merely the possibility of meaning. Only by its embeddedness in a concrete discourse situation can the photograph yield a clear semantic

Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography

outcome” (p. 91). We do not experience photographs neutrally. We experience them in contexts, whether it is the pages of a newspaper, the walls of an art gallery, or an advertising billboard. These contexts can drastically alter the significance that we, as readers of the images, locate within it. For example, a particularly hard-hitting war photograph may initially be displayed on the front page of a daily newspaper. Years later, it may be displayed in a gallery exhibition celebrating the work of the photographer. In the first instance, the photograph is viewed in the context of reportage whereas, in the second scenario, the photograph is viewed as a piece of art. Sekula describes this as a “binary folklore” (p. 108) whereby there is a “‘symbolist’ folk-myth and a ‘realist’ folk-myth.” He also argues that “every photograph tends, at any given time and in any given context, towards one of these two poles of meaning” (p. 108). This view almost describes two poles at the end of a continuum, rather than two discreet categories of photography. However, it is important to note that, although an image may tend more towards the ‘realist’ end of the continuum it can never be purely and wholly representative of the real.

Returning to Barthes, what is interesting about his theory of semiotics is that it is an understanding which occurs at the level of an image’s viewer. It is a blueprint for interpreting or ‘reading’ an image and is more about how an image creates meaning than what an image means. For the photographer it can be useful to understand the denotative and connotative levels of meaning in cultural images in order to make decisions about how to photograph your subject matter. It may be that this operates on an unconscious level but it can prove useful. For example, photographers who are operating commercially, rather than artistically, and need to manipulate readers’ emotions on demand, may display a more conscious awareness of how these semiotic levels can

Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography

influence the viewer. They may need to be aware of the fact that, for example, rays of light breaking through a forest can connote hope, or that looking up at a subject from a low angle can embody power and authority in that object.

Barthes theory also points us towards the idea that significance in photography, rather than being encoded in an image by a photographer, is actually located in the viewer's interpretation of the image. As much as a photographer can employ various techniques to steer the viewer's attention in a particular direction, they can do nothing about how an image is deciphered once it is released into the world. As an example, we can look at the Roger Ballen's photograph of a set of South African twins, *Dresie and Casie*, from his *Platteland* exhibition. Exhibited in art galleries around the world, it is an image which has fascinated artists and critics alike, and yet my most recent exposition to the image was on a former student's Facebook profile, used as a figure of fun. Ballen himself is encouraging of the many interpretations of his images. Illuminatingly, in an interview with Australian Newspaper *The Age*, Ballan states that "the most important thing is I can't tell you the meaning of the picture; you have to find it yourself" (Coslovich, 2009).

It was the words of Roger Ballen that perhaps provided me with the next major breakthrough in the development of my self-expression through photography. When discussing his development as an artist during a lecture at the School of Visual Arts in New York City, Ballen delivered the quotation I have used to open this thesis. For Ballen, the challenge for an artist is "to find your own path in the forest. When you find your own path you are alone out there" (2009) and that the artist's goal must be to "enlighten yourself about yourself." I found these words to be of great comfort. As a photographer, I

Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography

felt that other people did not understand my pictures. When I sought the approval of others with my photographs, I felt that the images did not satisfy my urge to express myself. Ballen's words taught me that it was okay to be "alone in the forest."

Interestingly, there is a relationship here with the ethos of Miksang photography.

Expectations and prior influences are put to one side and the artist is encouraged to trust one's self and one's perceptions.

Although the thoughts of Ballen were very freeing for me as an artist, they did not come without warning. Although you have to follow your own path, there is "a very important issue here in art and photography that as much as you may have some ideas, you've got to find the technique, the style to encapsulate what's in you're mind". In another interview, Ballen uses the analogy of a mine-shaft to describe that "everything I need is inside...the next hard process is to bring whatever's down there up and materialise it, and that's very difficult in photography" (2009). What is interesting about both of these quotes is that Ballen seems to believe that, in the process of artistic self-expression, it is the technique which comes second. He almost seems to suggest an organic process whereby the technique or style is 'found' along the way. This is a view which is supported by a conversation I had with renowned British landscape photographer, Mark Denton. I had asked him about how he felt he had developed his own voice as a photographer. His belief was that he was 'very fortunate' in that it was all down to the equipment he had started using one day (personal communication, March 2011). Again I found this all very comforting, not in that it was equipment that had shaped his direction, but that this was something that was 'found' organically during his

Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography

journey. I saw it as further evidence that I should continue to trust my own instincts and follow my own path.

Ballen's talk of 'finding your own path' and his frequent use of ecological language to describe the artistic process brings to mind Tim Ingold's work on creativity. Ingold (2010) argues for a forward reading of creativity which identifies "an improvisatory joining in with formative processes" rather than a backwards reading which is an "an abduction from a finished object to an intention in the mind of an agent" (p. 3). Here, an artist participates in the flows of materials and matter, redirecting them or bringing them together "in anticipation of what might emerge" (p.9). As with Miksang and the words of Roger Ballen, there is an absence of intentionality of the artist. The artist is not "imposing form on matter", rather joining in with the flow of light against objects or things in anticipation of the emergent photograph. As with Miksang, primary importance is given to the process rather than the final product. As Ingold clarifies by quoting painter Paul Klee: "Form is the end, death", he wrote, "form-giving is movement, action. Form-giving is life" (Klee, 1973, p.269, cited in Ingold, 2010, p.2).

Sternberg (1985, 2001, 2006) has also attempted to explore the nature of creativity. In an overview of his 'investment theory,' he covers a number of characteristics which are crucial for the development of creativity. He separates these into the categories of intellectual abilities, knowledge, styles of thinking, personality, motivation and environment (p.88). Perhaps most relevant to my investigations so far are the areas of knowledge and motivation. Sternberg argues that "one cannot move beyond where a field is if one does not know where it is" (p.89). Although I do not agree that difference should be seen as a desirable benchmark in photography, I do agree that an

Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography

awareness and understanding of what has been produced in the field is helpful. Casting a critical eye over the work of others allows us to gain a sense of our own tastes, whilst also exposing us to new ways of doing and being which may otherwise have not occurred to us. Sternberg does seem initially to be in direct opposition to the spirit of Miksang photography but he qualifies this by admitting that this can be a hindrance. “On the other hand, knowledge about a field can result in a closed and entrenched perspective” (p.89) whereby an artist cannot see past the images, trends and opinions that prevail within the field.

Whereas knowledge is slightly ambiguous, Sternberg’s opinion of motivation is in direct support of Miksang photography. He argues that “people rarely do truly creative work in an area unless they really love what they are doing and focus on the work rather than the potential rewards”. This also relates to Ingold’s ideas of ‘joining in’ and represents a celebration of the act of form-making more than the form itself. Similarly, Miksang seeks to celebrate the moment of perception ahead of the images it produces.

Sternberg concludes his review of his investment theory by arguing that creativity is a decision. He outlines a list of smaller decisions which one can make in order to arrive at the broader decision to be creative. These include “question and analyse assumptions”, “recognise that knowledge can both help and hinder creativity”, “believe in oneself”, “find what one loves to do”, “delay gratification”, and “allow mistakes” (p. 91). The list includes many more but I have selected these as I believe that they are the most pertinent to the development of my own creative self-expression through photography. In particular, I have always found it hard to both allow for mistakes and believe in myself. Any mistakes which have arisen I have always used to reinforce the idea that I have

Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography

failed and that I ‘can’t do it’. Reading that a prominent academic believes that this is simply a decision which is hindering my creativity was a boost to my confidence. All I needed to do was to change my decision and approach photography with less fear of failure. This, in combination with Miksang’s primacy of perception and Ballen’s idea of finding your own path has led to a new-found openness in my photography.

In the meantime, I was continuing to take pictures and beginning to print my images for the first time. As an exercise to assess my progress I pinned all of my images to a wall in my home so I could see them together as a body of work, rather than individual images on a computer screen. I was pleasantly surprised at how distinctive the images looked when I viewed them together. They had far more impact as a body but, perhaps most pleasing, was that they looked and felt like ‘my images’. Individually they could potentially have been taken by any photographer, but together they were unmistakably mine. The images were characterised by a simplicity provided by the inclusion of a small number of elements, and a sense of openness provided by compositions which pay close attention to space. Bold shapes featured throughout and elements of nature, such as trees, bushes and sky, were present in almost all of my images, despite being taken in mostly urban environments.

When viewed chronologically, there was a definite progression from abstract images of small details to wider and more diverse scenes (*fig 4.*), but there was also a tangible and recognisable thread running through all of the images. The scenes I have photographed seem calm and peaceful, featuring simple elements, shapes and tones which are thoughtfully spaced throughout the images. This even held true when comparing the pictures with images taken before I began this inquiry. Pictures taken on

Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography

trips to Sunderland and Halifax (*fig 5.*) featured a small number of elements, thoughtfully composed within the frame to allow them room to breathe. Calmness and openness are, once again, words that come to mind when looking at these images.

At the conclusion of my narrative inquiry I was unsure whether I had quite arrived at where I wanted to be in terms of self-expression. In fact, I was not quite sure of where I wanted to be, or if knowing this was even the point. What I had noticed was definite progress in developing openness within the process of photography and becoming comfortable with the pictures I was taking. The following case study examines what I believe is the key image from the body of work I produced during this inquiry. In turn, this interrogation serves to unpack my thoughts on my work and how it has developed throughout the course of this process.

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(fig 4) - Broadening out from abstract images to wider scenes

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(fig 5) - Noticing a photographic style developing, even in images pre-dating this inquiry

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CASE STUDY READING OF IMAGE #2 (FIG 8)

Image #2 (*fig 8*) was taken in an industrial unit on St George's Boulevard in Moncton. It is situated around a five minute walk away from my home and is en route to Centennial Park. Interestingly, whilst the park is far more traditionally picturesque and a regular subject of my photographic attention, I have never taken a picture there that I find anywhere near as satisfying as this. It was taken around a month after my first experiments with Miksang and, although I was not deliberately trying to follow Miksang's way of being, there are elements which are undoubtedly present. During this particular photo trip, I was attempting to focus solely on shape. I was drawn in by the recurring rectangular motifs and strong lines. After a short exploration of the scene, I noticed how the lines and structures were broken up by the shape of the bushes in the surrounding gardens. I decided on a tight composure which I felt reflected this, made an exposure, and moved on.

I have found post-hoc evaluations of this image to be illuminating. It has provoked from me several different interpretations and is a continuing source of fascination. Initially, I took the image to represent the structured functionality of life in Moncton due to its recurring shapes, bold and sturdy lines, taming of nature, and the general sense of order within the frame. At the time the image was taken, my life was incredibly unstructured, and I saw this picture as a glorification of and yearning for the structure provided by everyday working life. In the context of an unfamiliar place, this search for order and routine could be seen as an attempt for me to fit in and better understand my relationship with the city.

Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography



(fig 8) Image #2

Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography

Returning to this image at the end of my narrative inquiry, I feel that it holds even greater significance. Looking back across my body of work, I feel that this is one of the first images in which I truly began to develop my voice as an artist. There are several themes which seem to recur and develop over the course of the project, and which I feel represent my individual style.

First of all, my images contain a strong sense of order. My images appear very carefully structured, and all of the elements have a very clear place. This can be seen again in image #3 (*fig 9*) which almost looks as if the houses and trees have huddled together, carefully arranged by a portrait photographer. Image #1 (*fig 7*) has very carefully divided blocks of tones, provided by the sky, ocean, and grass, whilst this is provided in image #2 by the building, the grass, and the road.

I also believe that there is a great sense of openness and space across the images. Again, whilst image #2 contains a lot of lines and shapes, there is a calmness and sense of space, provided by the empty road and the central block of green formed by the garden. In other images, such as #1, #6 (*fig 12*), #7(*fig 13*) and #8(*fig 14*), this is provided by the inclusion of big skies. I think that this is also influenced by a tendency within my pictures to focus on a small number of elements within the frame. In image #2 these elements are the building, garden and road. In image #4 (*fig 10*) it is the door and the small box against the wall. Regardless of subject matter, there is a definite simplicity which adds to the calmness and openness of the images.

Image #2 also represents a fascination with the aesthetics of the everyday. In many respects, I believe that a significant reason I keep returning to this image is that I have created a photograph from which I derive great satisfaction, from something as

Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography

seemingly mundane as an industrial unit. Through careful composition I have created something which not only reflects my initial flash of perception, but also reflects my sense of self as an artist. Two further case studies are attached as appendices.

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FINDINGS

After concluding this narrative inquiry and, in the process of doing so, completing the first draft of my photography project (*fig 7-16*), my reflections have led me to change the way I think about photography. I began this inquiry seeking to find out more about how I can intentionally imbue a sense of myself as an artist within my images. Frustrated by regular indifference to my pictures, I was hoping to uncover processes that could lead me to creating visually appealing images with deliberately encoded meanings and messages.

What I have discovered is a far more satisfying and rewarding approach to photography that focuses more on the creative act of making photographs than on the final products themselves. By paying more attention to my perceptions, not worrying about how the images compare to those of my peers, and joining in with the flows of materials and matter around me, I have produced a body of work which is unmistakably mine and of me. Rather than attempting to impart meaning within the pictures that I make I am finding out about myself when reflecting upon them. I have developed a new-found openness while taking pictures that has lead me to explore new possibilities without fear (*fig 17*). I have not wholeheartedly embraced Miksang photography as a discipline but the spectre of its ethos is undoubtedly present whenever I take pictures through a connection between mind and eye.

The most important wider implication of this research I believe is the benefits of using contemplative practices whilst learning digital photography. Through my explorations, I have found that contemplative photography contains the capacity for some

Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography

quite profound experiences of self-discovery and enlightenment. It is through such photographic practices that I feel I have developed my own voice and style. I am confident that contemplative exercises will be beneficial in helping students of photography explore their own sense of self as an artist, or even as a human being. Through Miksang-style exercise, one can develop a deeper connection between the camera, the initial flashes of perception and oneself and, through further contemplative analysis, a greater understanding of the broader significance of one's work can develop.

It is through this process of contemplative photography that I have arrived where I am today. I do not believe that I have completed my journey, perhaps I never will. What I have done is developed an attitude to photography that I am certain will help me to produce images that I find satisfying, thoughtful and revealing. I am not quite alone in the forest as Roger Ballen would say, but I feel that I have at least found my own path. I intend to mine it for all it is worth and continue to produce images that I feel hold significance for me as an artist.

Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography

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Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography

APPENDIX A – case study of Image #9 (fig 15)

Image #9 (*fig 15*) was taken during my first ever experiments with Miksang photography. The shot was taken on the banks of the Peticodiac River as it runs around the back of downtown Moncton. I had been reading about some basic Miksang exercises and decided that I would head out and shoot, focussing solely on shape. I sat on a bench at the side of the river, closed my eyes for a few moments and focussed on the first shape that grabbed my attention. This proved to be a small, sharp piece of the riverbank that jutted out into the river. I decided that most of the frame would be taken up with the river as my initial perception was of a small piece of land interjecting into the flow of the river. I took several exposures, including similar shots in a landscape orientation, but this I believe is the most significant as it represents the purest reflection of my initial flash of perception.

Also significant within the image for me is the sense of calmness and openness. This is provided both by the still waters taking up the majority of the frame and the clouds reflected within it. When looking across my body of work it appears that the sky is important. In this image, not only does it add texture to the calm waters, but it also evokes warm summer days spent in the countryside, further enhancing the calmness. Although my photographs are taken almost exclusively within urban areas, the spectre of nature is present throughout. Images of buildings are often framed or overshadowed by trees (image #3 (*fig 9*), image #5 (*fig 11*), or aspects of nature themselves become the subject of the image (image #1 (*fig 7*), image #6 (*fig 12*)). The exception in my installation is image #4 (*fig 10*), although I think that the impact of this image is heightened by

Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography

nature's absence in comparison with my other photographs. It could also be argued that nature is present through the shadow cast by what is clearly a strong sun.

The calmness in image #9 (*fig 15*) is also an embodiment of the state of being that is manifested by the discipline of Miksang photography. In a sense, this is why I afford this image such significance. It is simple, pure, uncluttered, calm, perceptive, balanced and clear. When taking it, I felt a real sense of connection between myself and the sensory experience I was undergoing. It is one of the images of which I am most proud.

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APPENDIX B - case study reading of image #3 (*fig 9*)

Image #3 (*fig 9*) is a photograph which took me a little by surprise. Although I quite liked it, it was not until I had the image printed that I fully understood its significance. The image was taken during a regular walkabout with my camera in downtown Moncton. Having learned from Miksang to fully trust and explore my initial flashes of perception, I realised I was drawn in by the pitch of the roofs in this little huddle of houses. The image, which was taken more recently than those from the preceding case studies, was taken quite quickly, which is indicative of the progress I have made. The image was composed, exposed and taken within around ten seconds and was the only attempt I made at capturing this perception. In addition to my progress, this is also indicative of the confidence that I have developed throughout this process.

The image itself, as with others I have discussed, is very structured. I have taken an unruly scene of houses, trees and power lines, and imposed order. It is almost as though the elements that comprise this picture have huddled around, under the direction of the photographer, for a group portrait. Once again, the presence of nature is felt, both through the tree branches and the sky. The recurring, man-made triangles are off-set by the more natural tree branches and the power lines provide a subtle sense of movement or direction.

What is also interesting is that, throughout my images, there is a tendency to tackle my subjects head-on. This leads to bold geometric shapes, and allows for the structures, textures and bold tones of my subjects to take centre stage. At first, I saw this as a weakness. I felt it was indicative of a lack of imagination, and led to a lack of depth

Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography

within my images. However, through disciplines of contemplative photography, I have come to accept this as part of my current artistic style and voice. I have found my own path and I intend to follow it and mine it as much as I can.

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APPENDIX C – Images



(fig 6) - A small sample of images taken throughout the inquiry process

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(fig 7) - Somewhere Unfamiliar? Photographs from an outsider
Image #1

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(fig 9) Image #3

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(fig 10) Image #4

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(fig 11) Image #5

Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography



(fig 12) Image #6

Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography



(fig 13) Image #7

Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography



(fig 14) Image #8

Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography



(fig 15) Image #9

Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography



(fig 16) Image #10

Developing Effective Expression Through Digital Photography



(fig 17) - My new-found confidence has allowed me to try out new ideas, such as my first ever attempt at a self-portrait. The future is now filled with countless possibilities.