Step it Up!

Managing Image Overload

Zach Pezzillo is an intrepid young photographer from Haiku on Maui. At seventeen he is shooting some interesting images and successfully entered several in this year’s Faces of Hawaii competition. Whether shooting kids, animals or just this and that in the back yard; Zach uses his equipment and a good eye for detail to entertain his viewer. His love for the craft means he has plenty of pictures to choose from, and edits his work so that only his best shots are shown. Zach generously volunteered to allow me to use his images to comment on how you might improve your own photography.

Prepare yourself for a bit of hectoring. That camera in your pocket or your purse means you call yourself a photographer - or maybe not, either way, straighten up, do better, stop embarrassing yourself and boring those around you. You take pictures and those pictures reflect your character. Much as I hate to scold you so ruthlessly, you know you have it coming. We are not discussing the arcana of f-stops and the zone system, only the simplest of techniques for image management. Your time is not so valuable that you cannot put just a little effort into the images you take and show a little mercy on that poor soul, the viewer.

We are over exposed, inundated with visual information, flashing, flickering and bombarding us with stimuli that endlessly compete for our attention. Thousands of images flash before our eyes, and we are inured to their insistent presence, taking them for granted. There was a time when those who took the pictures we see, went to great lengths to produce quality images. Our technology has outstripped what was once considered basic good taste. The wonders of the modern digital camera make thousands of complex decisions for every press of the button and much of the difficulty of previous generations of photography has been reduced. What remains is the meat of the craft, and it is important and worthwhile for all of us to take our image management seriously.

Now that each of us carries the means to record even the most trivial events in front of us, learning the rudiments of the craft of photography is a matter of survival. Many of the basic rules of the road are quite simple and they begin with caring what you put out there. A little care can make the difference between you being a passable photographer or your being a schlub. It is not what you show your viewer but what you do not show. Editing is all that is required. Look at what you have done. The quality images are there, just pick them out and let the crap fall away. I know, “Fluffy looks so cute in this one and Aunt Ethyl is only a little fuzzy?” No, no, no. Just because you press the button is no reason to subject us to your whims. Edit your work. Trust yourself. If you know its crap, set it aside.

Show less. A few good images can make far more of an impression and convey your message better than hundreds of mediocre and often redundant shots. Technique still looms large, and knowledge of it can help you get good pictures. None of that will mean anything if you cannot compose and complete the shot itself. The guidelines below might help you to dispense with the minutia and concentrate on a few simple points. These suggestions can be applied to every image capturing device from the cheesiest smart-phone to an 8x10 view camera. At heart we are collecting the light reflected off our subjects. Think about what that light is doing and you will have a better chance of recording it well.

Focus (Image 1)

The autofocus camera has improved our percentages of in-focus images but it is not a guarantee. If a shot is not in focus, it does not pass. Selective focus, however, can have tremendous power. Here Zach uses focus to concentrate interest on his subject.

Composition (Image 2)

Crop till you drop. Most good photographers crop in the camera as they compose the scene. Once you have the raw image it is important that you crop again. Remove anything extraneous. If it does not directly to pertain to your message, it has to go. If you cannot crop out that bit that detracts, throw the image away. That telephone pole sticking out of Mom’s head does make a difference. Zach’s “Toes” is a great example of removing the unimportant. By cropping away everything above knees he has created a level of interest that would have been impossible if he showed more of the scene. What he shows of these toddlers gives the impression of old men engaged in deep conversation.

Follow the action (Image 3)

Something happening in your frame is almost always preferable to a static head shot. Get your subjects to do something. These little tykes plunking on their ukulele is just too cute. By setting up the action you can turn a snapshot into a keeper. It’s obvious, as well, that putting the ukes in the kids hands distracted them from the camera pointed in their face.

Shoot plenty of images (Image 4)

One of the pleasures of digital photography is that multiples are free. Shoot away, it’s not costing you anything! Take some pictures, then take a few more, then change an element and start all over again. When shooting kids, you need lots of patience and persistence. Shots like this only happen when you fire away and then edit ruthlessly. Every time you press the shutter is, at the very least, another chance at that one big winner. Now that you have scads to choose from, separate the wheat from the chaff and never show anyone the outtakes. It is impolite to expect your viewer to glean content from your work.

Get into it (Image 5)

Photography is like going fishing, sometimes you catch and sometimes not, but you should always have fun in the process. Something grabs your interest- framing and re-framing, crawling on the ground, climbing on a chair-you are making the world conform to your vision. A new perspective always offers a fresh take. But just because it looks different doesn’t make it good. Now go through what you’ve captured and look for the gold and if you find the shot that pops, you’re a genius, if not throw them back and wait for better fishing another day.

Watch the light (Image 6)

It sounds simplistic but light is all you are after. ALWAYS watch the light. With good light you will at least have a shot at a decent photograph. If you don’t have good light, find some way to change the light. For small subjects you can use a bounce panel. I always keep two full size sheets of foam core around for bounce lighting, one white, one black. Set the white up to bounce the light onto your subject or use the black as a sink to pull the light away. Wrap the foam core in aluminum foil for a different effect. For landscapes get up early. The rule of thumb says that there is rarely a good landscape taken later than two hours after sunrise or before two hours from sunset. Watch the light and it becomes obvious why this is true.

As you have seen, Zach has a good eye. He is persistent, shooting thousands of images, winnowing carefully, artfully cleaning those that pass muster, distilling his work until the chosen few are what he allows us to see. You don’t have to be Ansel Adams to entertain your viewer, you merely need to take a bit of care and pride in it, as well. Participate. Do your part. We all thank you.