

What Wouldn't You Do?

A common goal for any photographer is to produce better pictures and imagery. One such way is through continued learning and development. Whether this learning is done formally through classes and instruction, or more independently through online materials, articles and community forums, there is definitely value in taking advantage of the resources that are available to better ourselves.

Recently, while listening to a podcast from one such resource, I found the speaker asking a hypothetical question: "What you wouldn't do." The author is Craig Tanner, and the podcast can be found at the Radiant Vista website: www.radiantvista.com. In context, he basically is saying that if we always work within the mental barriers that we impose on ourselves, our horizons and perspectives will always be limited, and we may miss something that presents itself unless we collapse those barriers that inhibit finding deeper truths. On the whole, the podcast was quite esoteric and theoretical in its presentation. While posed within a theoretical discussion, I felt the question to be an intriguing one thought could be applied to other perspectives as well.

As such, I felt compelled to take pen and ink (or should I say keyboard and monitor?) to respond. This write-up is the completion of that response. Basically, the counter perspective I am proposing suggests that while theoretical musings and considerations are all well and good, the working reality for most typically does not allow the time for such musings, and as such, we do not think on such levels. As we move from one time and space to another, we are not attuned to the abstract line of thinking that Craig proposes in his podcast. This is not to say that working within the here and now is a bad thing, simply that working and living in the abstract is the exception rather than the norm.

I would submit that a large percentage of photographers, both professional and enthusiast alike, really do not take the amount of time to consider theory to this degree. Instead, as we are out shooting, we are grounded in the situation as it presents itself. We look at the light, evaluate the scenes, set our f-stops and shutter speeds accordingly, and take pictures that embody our vision or accomplish our (or our clients) goals. To that end, I would also suggest that there are certain fundamental principles and concepts that "I wouldn't do". This does not mean that I am blind to deeper truths, or meanings of why I exist in a certain time and space. It simply means that my common sense from what I have learned has embedded a foundation of practices that I adhere to 99 times out of 100. While there is that one percent of the time that I "break the rules", by definition that is the exception and not the rule.

There is always a time and place to encourage others to expand their horizons and search for deeper meanings and to think on abstract and theoretical levels. Likewise, there should also be a tacit understanding of the underlying principles upon which our skills and talents are based. The problem lies in striking a balance between thinking creatively while maintaining logical thought processes.

Creativity and logic have often been considered mutually exclusive. From biological studies we know that one of these sets of thought processes occurs in the right half of our brains, and the other occurs in the left half. People often identify their strengths on the basis of how they think predominantly. Those grounded in logic often struggle with creative endeavors, while those who are able to pursue creative processes easily may find difficulties in logical and structured thinking.

However, just because the two thought processes originate from different hemispheres does not mean they are necessarily mutually exclusive. Quite the contrary, the two processes are often complementary, and there is definitely value in being able to think in both hemispheres. Basic principles are a required foundation whether we are referring to photography (f-stops, shutter speeds, and ISO settings), music (notes, scales, and chord progression), painting (colors and blending), or any other artistic endeavor. Whether you are actively thinking about these basic principles or not is one thing, but to ignore them is another entirely.

For example, classical guitar legend Andres Segovia probably got to a point in his career where he did not actively think about where to place his fingers to produce a chord or note, he just knew. This innate knowledge comes through years of practice and study. Likewise, Michelangelo probably did not actively concern himself with blending colors and checking to make sure he used a wide variety of colors in his works... he just knew what would look right.

While encouraging esoteric and theoretical thought processes as part of a creativity ritual is inherently probably a good thing, there is a danger in not acknowledging that certain fundamentals remain. During this same podcast, Craig spoke on some images he had shared through his website, and for one such image, he did acknowledge, albeit very briefly, that he could not have produced the shot without a wide angle lens, and that as a general rule, using wide angle lenses for architectural photography is a good idea to give the greater sense of scope for the lines, depth and scale. While this made sense at the time, I did not see until afterwards that he was incorporating creative processes with practical procedures. To that end, congratulations are in order for providing creative and practical information in his podcast, as more often than not, both information sets are not typically evident in venues such as this.

Typically, discourses and information about approaches and practices to employ in the field of photography tend to focus on one approach and not the other. Both approaches are rarely discussed in detail in any given setting. While limited scope of discussion can be useful, it is necessarily limited both in the audience that will hear it, and in the degree to which the material is utilized by the photographic community. What may be helpful in this regard is to consider an audience that has interests along both of these schools of thought, and to offer elements of both when sharing concepts and ideas with one another.

Having said all that, Craig's initial question: "What wouldn't you do?" does have merit in both schools of thought. (As does corollary: "What would you do?"). This brings me back to my original point. Considering such questions from both a creative standpoint and from a logical standpoint can be quite useful and valuable. From a creative standpoint, the question has value to help illustrate the context and framework that we work within and to try to extend those borders when possible. From a logical standpoint, the question has value to increase ones awareness of recommended practices and procedures. As previously mentioned, one of the things that will increase your "keeper" percentage is to use wide angle lenses when available for shooting architecture.

As we move forward from there, I am reminded of a major business and their slogan "Where do you want to go today?" This is a great idea that can be applied equally to how you approach your next outing or photographic endeavor. From the creative angle, try to conceptualize what it is that you want to capture, perhaps even considering why you are capturing a particular scene or view. Then, from a logical angle, how can you best accomplish that goal? What lens is best suited to your objective? What is the weather like and will that accommodate your goal? What is the lighting like? It is thus analogous to say that considering different perspectives is considering which road to take when traveling. If you want to go somewhere, and that road (perspective) is blocked, then it's time to return to the creative side and find a different direction. There are roads (perspectives) all around us, and asking such questions can be helpful both from a creative perspective as well as from a logical train of thought. It is important though, to not forget one while in pursuit of the other. All roads (perspectives) are built on the same asphalt (foundations).

Forgetting to let photography be a creative outlet can become frustrating or give one the feeling that they are stuck in a rut. We have all been there, and only through revisiting the creative angle can we gain new perspective and to shake the shackles that tie us down from time to time. By the same token, focusing entirely on your creative approach can cause you to lose perspective on the more concrete concepts that are needed to move any vision forward toward conclusion. A vision left unfulfilled is something to be wary of, and only by maintaining awareness of both our creative approach, and our logical practices can we move forward in the expression of our individual visions.

While never easy, it's always rewarding to take your work and your vision "to the next level". Likewise, answering such questions (from either perspective) will not always come easily, but keep asking yourself where you want to go, and what it is you want to do. Or, as the title says, "What wouldn't you do?"