

How to Critique Photographs Constructively

By Alain Briot

1 - Introduction

Finding and expressing our vision involves having our work critiqued in order to know where we are at and how others respond to our images.

For me critiquing photographs is synonymous with reviewing a selection of prints. Of course, the subject can be extended to critiquing any photographs, including those seen in an exhibition or a publication for example. However, for the purpose of this essay I am purposefully limiting the scope of my remarks to what is commonly referred to as 'a print review.'

A print review, or print critique, can take place in a variety of contexts including a photography workshop, a photo club meeting, an informal gathering of photographers or other.

A print critique is an important event in the life of a photographer. The purpose of this essay is to offer guidance to make this event constructive rather than destructive.

2 - Critiquing is not criticizing

Personally, I see a difference between critiquing and criticizing a photograph, or any work of art for that matter. For me critiquing means looking at the work for the purpose of finding out the strong and weak points of the work. On the other hand criticizing means taking a critical look at the work for the purpose of expressing a personal opinion. While there is a gray area between the two, I view the former as constructive and the latter as destructive.

3 - Address the different aspects of photography

A good critique is one that addresses all the issues involved in creating world class fine art photographs. These include the technical aspects, artistic aspects, image processing, printing, composition, field work, etc. Most importantly, a good review covers both hard skills and soft skills.

4 - Critique technical and artistic aspects separately

Technical aspects include focus, sharpness, exposure, processing, optimizing, cropping, collaging, HDR, printing and other technical aspects.

Artistic aspects includes composition, light quality, color palette, facture, presence or absence of a recognizable personal style across a collection of images, creativity, motivation and other artistic aspects.

5 - Arrange critique by subject matter

You cannot critique different types of photography in the same manner. While good photographs share common characteristics, each genre has specific characteristics. For that reason it is important that the reviewer has expertise in the type of photography being reviewed. For example it is best to have a portrait photographer review portraits, a landscape photographer review landscapes and so on. This is because you cannot review portraits, landscapes and other genres the same way.

6 - Good lighting is essential

The physical conditions of the review are just as important as the qualifications and the approach used by the reviewer. Among those one of the most important is lighting. Having good lighting, consistent from review to review, is essential. Photographs depend on lighting to be seen properly. Overly dark or bright lighting conditions will affect the print viewing experience negatively, leading to commentaries about the print being too bright or too dark. Similarly, lighting should be calibrated for daylight if the review is done indoors. If the review is done outdoors, midday light in a shaded area is best.

7 - Print versus screen

I prefer to review prints because this is what I exhibit and sell. However, I am not opposed to reviewing images on screen as long as the viewing device is calibrated. However, when doing a screen review I do mention that I cannot vouch on the print quality because there is nothing automatic in going from a screen image to a printed image. How the image prints out is fully dependent on the photographer's printing skills.

8 - Be factual, not opinionated

The reviewer's behavior is just as important as the reviewers' knowledge. As the old adage says, no one cares about how much you know until they know how much you care.

Make your critique factual, not opinionated. An example of a fact-based critique is: 'this print is blurry because the camera was used handheld and the shutter speed was too slow.' Sharpness is a verifiable fact and if the photographer wanted to create a sharp image there is something wrong with the resulting photograph.

An example of an opinion-based critique is: 'I don't like blue so I suggest you change the color of the image to a warm tone.' Color choice is matter of personal taste and if the photographer chose that color intentionally there is nothing wrong with this decision.

9 - Keep your opinions about art to yourself

You don't have to like a specific photograph in order to make meaningful comments about it. You may not want to hang this photograph in your living room, however that doesn't mean it is devoid of qualities. Point to what works and what does not work in the photograph in regards to artistic and technical aspects and keep your personal taste in art private.

10 - Adjust your critique to the skill and achievement level of the photographer

There is no point critiquing the work for having a lack of vision if the photographer does not know how to set his tripod correctly! For this to work you have to set a hierarchy of importance. This is the purpose of the skills evaluation pyramid (below).

You can't evaluate and critique the work of a beginner the same way that you evaluate and critique the work of a photographer with 40 years of experience. Doing so is not only unfair, it is simply absurd.

Therefore you have to adjust your evaluation according to the skill, knowledge and experience level of each student. While the ultimate goal remains learning how to create world class images, the goal of a print review is to assess where the student is at and point to specific things this student can do in order to reach the next step.

11 - Explain what you find to be the number one problem

Do so in a clear and concise manner. It is not possible to fix everything at once. A photo may have several problems, but usually one stands out as the most important. That's the one that needs to be addressed first. For example, if a photo is not very sharp and taken in poor light (at noon for example), the thing that needs fixing first is learning to take photos in good light. Who cares if the photo is not sharp if it is not interesting. Light quality is much more important than sharpness. Nobody cares for a sharp photo of a boring subject.

12 - Point to both the good and the not so good aspects of the work

Don't just point to what is wrong with the work. Point also to what is good. Often the best way to get your point across is to dull the pain of the critique by offering kind words about what works in the image. In other words, don't just tear it apart! The 'boot camp' approach to criticism is rarely effective because while it is easy to tear apart a photograph, it is challenging to rebuild the self esteem of the photographer afterwards. Often it is simply impossible and you run the risk of discouraging the artist altogether. The best approach is to start by pointing out what works in the photograph and its inherent qualities, and then continue by pointing out what does not work and explain how these issues can be corrected by doing specific things.

13 - Critique constructively

Offer constructive criticism. If you find something wrong, provided this is a fact and not an opinion, give suggestions about fixing the problem. Don't just say that something is 'bad.' Explain how it can be improved.

Negative comments are more powerful than positive comments and will be remembered and dwelled on longer and harder than positive comments.

The best way to offset the consequences of negative events is to give directions and advice by pointing to resources, both technical and artistic, that will allow the student to improve their work and remedy to the problems in a manner satisfying to them.