

Cogan on Judging

John Cogan reflects on photography world judging following Harry Hall's and Ian Stafford's masterful assessments of the 2012 2nd Progress Print competition entries

"A Daniel come to judgement! (well, a Harry!)"

Please let it be understood that this article is entirely my own thoughts and should in no way constitute the opinions of the "Elders" of the DPS. There are other opinions available, as the BBC say.

No doubt there are some of us exercising our minds over the mysteries of judging. I know from experience that whether we like or don't like a particular photograph is very much a matter of subjectivity. Some organisations, especially the likes of the RPS, use what is the nearest to a Cruft's "Breed Standard" as possible. But these august bodies also field a judging panel of five or more highly qualified members and their agreement is required before an award can be made. In many local competitions this is not the case. Yet, generally, a miracle occurs and a decision is arrived at that is both just and popular, and everyone goes home satisfied. I can only assume that there is some organic process, a system of osmosis perhaps, whereby the gods of photography (providing wisdom and guidance) share their experience with an already experienced judge. Regrettably, the public element of the judging process often diminishes the process. It is depressing to hear stories of judges who dismiss a picture because they don't like the black mount. Granted, such comments are rare yet we have all heard examples like it.

And this is the nub of matter, the heart of darkness for want of another phrase: the open process when judge and judged come together.

When Abraham Lincoln was still a jobbing lawyer in what was then virtually frontier America he was asked to judge a pie competition. The trouble was, and of this he was warned, there were two ferocious women entering pies who were bitter enemies and to select one over the other would exacerbate the enmity. Faced with a full belly from sampling the vast number of fruit pies he came to the final two. Woman A had entered an apple pie while woman B's was plum. Both were superb. Lincoln ate a bite from pie A. "Exquisite," he said. Woman A smiled while woman B glowered, but both waited. Biting into pie B Lincoln muttered under his breath that it was like eating nectar from the gods. Pausing, he decided to eat more from Pie A, then pie B, and so it went on until both pies were fully consumed. No prize was ever awarded as Lincoln confessed to being unable to make his mind up, but Lincoln's engagement with both pies and how they were gluttonously consumed did more than anything else to satisfy both women who may have gone home secretly convinced that theirs was the best.

The photographs we entrust to the vagaries of the judging system are “Ours” and we are rightly proud and possessive of them. Yes, we are well aware that there may be a hundred or more submitted and only a few will be honoured but that is irrelevant. We need to feel a sense of validation that our work is valued. There is no greater destroyer of a fragile soul than to come to believe we are useless. We need encouragement as well as advice to continue and help us to strive to be the best we can. So, a kind word and a comment that highlights a particular aspect of our work is not only a positive stroke BUT it emphasises the fact that the judge has considered our work carefully. Anyone who has witnessed the Royal Academy’s selection committee for the summer exhibition will know the soul-destroying process whereby a painter is fortunate to have his/her work considered for anything longer than a second. One understands that there are probably hundreds of submissions and that time is short but there is an inbuilt arrogance in allowing a few supposed experts to evaluate merely by the twitch of a finger.

Now, don’t get me wrong, we’re all grown up and mature enough to accept that the judging process is subjective and, at times, unfair. This is life after all. Yet, what happened last Thursday night restored my faith in the system. Both Harry and Ian had obviously taken care to spend time with each photograph beforehand. Their comments were positive and encouraging and analytical. At times they were almost forensic. Though I had no images submitted I was included in the dialogue these two judges developed over the evening. It became a workshop, a master class even (as Harry said at one stage).

As the chairs were being stacked and the hall cleared Harry admitted that there was no way he could tell anyone in the DPS how to take a picture: “They already know all that!” His comments on each picture were recognition of the skills of each author. This shows a level of mutual respect which engendered a confidence in the process and allowed both Harry and Ian to do their judging effectively and with professionalism. Some may class us as amateurs or mere enthusiastic tyros BUT we have an attitude as professional as anyone earning a living through the lens; and a talent base as deep and as all-encompassing.

After a string of judges who seemed not (in my opinion) to educate or to treat the entrants with respect it was a joy to experience the evening and to listen to Harry and Ian’s comments. For Ian to tackle his first outing as a judge in front of his “Home Crowd” took a great deal of “bottle” and I admire him for that. As for the rest of us; in the immortal words of Pete and Dud: do we have the “Latin for the judgin’?”.

John Cogan