

Why is the next century so far away?

Written by Pedro Meyer



If digital photography is supposed to be so great, why don't we see a lot more interesting work? Is a frequent question I hear. A good friend of mine recently sent me a note with the following commentary: "Some sage or other made the observation to the effect that it is interesting how art changes without improving. I have in my library a book of drawings by Rodin. The only thing he used was a pencil and the dirt on his hands, which was considerable since he was a sculptor. No technology can really improve on that. I also have a book of drawings by Egon Schiele about which I would say the same thing. Is a digital image by your favorite artist really better than a painting by Massacio? Does anybody out there beat Picasso, Matisse, Braque, or for that matter Weston, Sommer, Strand?"

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My response was that these comparisons, at best, were unfair. If you review the biographies of any of the artists mentioned above, you will discover that in their own time, not one of them had anything close to the prestige or recognition that time has bestowed upon their work. So why are we supposed to come up with equivalents in the digital era after only a decade of production. Compare this to painting or sculpture which has enjoyed centuries of previous historical perspectives. How can anyone compare such art forms and their artistic development with that of digital art. Just think how long it took for films just to move from being silent black and white presentations, to those of sound and full color.

The second objection I had to my friend's statement referenced earlier, was with regard to the part about "art only changing without improving". Of course the validity of new digital technologies, can not hinge solely on the fact that you can make "new" things. These "things" have yet to pass the test of time, don't they? However, I am not concerned at all that over time digital photography will pass such tests of maturation. The only question is when will that happen? And for that I am afraid there is no reasonable answer. In the meantime however one would have to make sure not to go on comparing apples and pears? If you see a great film, and then compare it with the work of Matisse for instance, what would we end up comparing anyway?

Most probably the reason that the development stage we are in is so slow in producing substantial new work has to do with the learning curve related to all that concerns new technologies. It used to be that artists would complain that the cost of equipment was their main stumbling block for not entering the digital era. In reality they had never given much thought to making the transition, because they felt, and rightly so, that they had to continue what they were doing in order to ascertain their livelihood.

The most important costs are in fact not the tools, but the time investment needed to learn how to use them. Which by the way, is turning into a never ending proposition, no sooner have you

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learned how to use one set of tools that these are rendered obsolete, and you have to continue "upgrading" everything, including obviously your own knowledge about it all. As a good friend reminded me tonight, painting and other arts have seen much less radical activity in tool design and materials evolution. For example the watercolor brushes used today are not that dissimilar to those used 100 years ago. Tempera paints are mixed today as they have been for centuries and still utilize the same pigments, and fixer has been fixer for quite a while.

There is a steep cost of transition (analog to digital), at least for the generation that was brought up in the pre-digital era skills. One has to learn and unlearn a great number of assumptions of how to work. One has to also learn about fields usually unrelated to still photography. Sound, video, animation, new printing methods, the Internet. Even drawing and writing. Future photographers, will need to be more like a Renaissance person than anyone thought possible or required!

It is no longer viable to become a professional photographer, without historical awareness related to this art form. "Clicking the shutter" is no longer the main ingredient in this evolving pie. You also have to have more sophisticated ideas of what you are doing, and in which direction you are heading both conceptually as well as technologically.

Having said that, it becomes obvious that the range of knowledge today has to be wider than at any previous time. No longer is photography just associated to the production of straight pictures, such as Weston or Strand might have produced with their 8 x 10 cameras, or Cartier-Bresson with his Leica. Even the extremes of "straight" style , pictorialist to photo secessionist, are not so extreme when compared to the range of modern style. From tools to print techniques to capture devices, the variants themselves are enough to slow evolution and confound comparative efforts.

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What has to be learned as we enter the next century is enormous, that in turn delays the entry point at which the field becomes rich with all sorts of new works from which to choose and creatively explore the varied production options. Productions that will actually take advantage of all the new expressive possibilities that can be created with the new tools that we have, and thus offer new directions for photography. Something I see already happening with cinema/video more than in still photography.

Maybe we all just have to wait for the four year olds to make their mark in the digital era.

Pedro Meyer
October 99

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