

SOME THOUGHTS ON PRINT QUALITY BY PETER REES MPAGB FRPS

Some years ago I was invited by the L&CPU to give a talk on Print Quality at their "Big Day" event. I was asked to concentrate particularly on my own personal quest for quality in printing, which led ultimately to my achieving Fellowship of the RPS in Printing.

After much thought I concluded that a quality print must demonstrate not only masterful technique, but that it should also include a personal creative input that is immediately evident to the viewer. A quality print may or may not have a full range of tones. It may or may not have perfect shadow and highlight detail. What I considered important was that sound technique should be allied with a personal vision and interpretation, which when appropriate can see beyond the "straight" image.

I suggested to the audience that a quality print is one which perfectly communicates its author's intent, its *raison d'être*, in which technique and process are seen to be the servant, not the master. That is my personal view and I thought it would be interesting to obtain a cross-section of thinking on the subject from several eminent darkroom printers. I was delighted with the enthusiasm evident in their responses and the time and thought they had given to my question. There were many areas of agreement, but also a healthy divergence of views on some issues, which meant it was impossible to arrive at one definition of "print quality". Perhaps, when all is said and done, quality, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.

Much of what they had to say was regarding the process of darkroom printing, but there were many underlying premises which are entirely relevant to digital printing today, and it is these that I am highlighting. If anyone would like to see the full text of my contributors' comments, it's available on the "Links" page of my website, www.farcountryphotography.co.uk

1. ANSEL ADAMS (From his book "The Print")

"I do not suggest that there is only one "right" print, or that all prints from one negative should be identical. All I, or any photographer, can do is print an image as I feel it should be printed at a particular time.

Print quality, then, is basically a matter of sensitivity to values. What is important for all photographers is that the values of the image suit the image itself and contribute to the intended visual effect."

2. BILL WISDEN

"Print quality is a variable thing depending on the purpose of the image. I would expect a pure record photograph to have a full range of tone, with both shadow and highlight gradation. Against this, pictorial or art based imagery requires the range of tones best suited to making the statement. The classic case is the "soot and whitewash" printing of Bill Brandt. So we have a situation that carries a contradiction; blocked up shadows in applied work is not acceptable but blocked up blacks in pictorial work is often perfectly acceptable, if that lost information is not relative to the image. Burnt out highlights are more dangerous, but again Bill Brandt did it with great effect. In a nutshell, it's horses for courses, but print quality should enhance the purpose of the image."

3. VIC ATTFIELD

"What is meant by print quality?" It's in the same bracket as "What is meant by Pictorialism?!". The simple answer to both questions is that you know it when you see it!

In "the old days" most of the pundits used to say that all good quality prints must have a full range of tones from a dead black through a range of intermediate greys to white, with no blocking out of shadow areas and- horror of horrors - no burnt out highlights. Grain was frowned on even when the print was viewed from 3 inches. I have never gone along with these views because I have always believed that the printing should reflect the mood of the subject matter. For instance, a high key portrait can be very effective by using just a tracery of near-white tones and subtle greys, whilst low key printing using grain effect and blocked in shadows can be most suitable for creating a mood.

I always feel that a good quality print "glows", irrespective of the paper surface. Someone once said that if a print talks to you on first viewing, you can bet the quality of the tonal values are as they should be to suit the image."

4. LEIGH PRESTON

"Print Quality – what a minefield! Firstly you need to have something to say – so a previsualisation of the final print is essential. I build up my exposures, that way I'm painting with the light. I look for tonal balance, sharpness, grain or fine grain to suit the subject, good blacks, some detail in shadow areas and highlights I can work on. Prints should ooze quality in lightness, in tone, in correct contrast, but also in "feeling", in personality and "style" – an individualistic approach is a must. Light surrounded by dark, or vice versa, makes a telling image. Print the emphasis, print to enhance the features in the image, re-print, re-test until it looks great. No second best!"

5. HUGH MILSOM

"Print quality is one of those terms that lacks a precise definition but can mean different things to different people. To some photographers it's about recording faithfully all the tonal values or zones, but this is merely a technical exercise. I like to ask people what they feel about an image, because this is the mood they should capture when making a print. Contd. Page 7 of 14, e-news 221. Jan 2019

One aspect of composition is unity, that is, all elements of the picture must work together. It is the wrong approach to print a dramatic subject in a delicate high key manner. That, to me, is poor print quality. The subject matter, the elements of design and the style of printing must all work together – they must have unity. Furthermore, the style of toning, paper surface and presentation must all fit in and maintain this unity.

So, in this artistic sense, print quality is all about deciding and achieving the appropriate key and having full control of the tonal values of the print – otherwise the mood of the print is "wrong". The key of the print can be high, low or intermediate and either major or minor – all give quite a different mood and feel to the print.

A print must have good contrast. We must consider the contrast in the detail of the image – the micro contrast. The paper grade is chosen to achieve good micro contrast and the overall contrast is controlled by dodging and burning. Furthermore, the print must have richness. For instance, large

areas of a single tone, particularly blacks and greys, give a "dead" feel to a print. These areas can be broken up by either dodging or burning to provide some variation in tone. The "eye travel" through the print should be considered and tonal values adjusted so that the eye is guided through the print. The foreground is generally darker and the background lighter, so it helps to emphasise this during printing.

Print finishing should be immaculate, and presentation should enhance the print. There is often a correct size for a print –some subjects look better as a small print, whilst others will print up quite large. Size and type of mount should also be considered. A small print in a large mount is often quite effective as it focuses the attention on the image- it will often stand out from a group of large prints in large mounts."

6. TONY WOROBIEC

"For me, the hallmarks of a quality print are:-

- A print which reveals full tonality.
- Print quality is a finite quality and does not, of itself, determine whether a print is good or bad. It reflects many of the issues that Ansel Adams held dear. Undoubtedly, this means that there should be a wide range of tones with perceptible shadow and highlight detail.
- One needs to be aware of the subject matter, but in photographs where the subject matter is under the control of the photographer, there is no excuse for not showing tonal detail throughout the image.
- It is important to distinguish between print quality and aesthetics. It is possible to produce a deeply moving print which lacks print quality and by the same definition produce a print which oozes print quality but reveals little else.
- A high contrast grainy print does not represent good print quality; however, there are occasions when sacrificing print quality in order to convey mood, serves the print well."

7. TIM RUDMAN

"Print quality falls into two categories – technical and aesthetic – they often overlap and merge. In a full tonal range print we need good mid-tone separation, smooth highlight differentiation (unless for effect) and clean highlights and borders.

Not all prints are intended to gleam. They may for example require compression in the mid-tones, or even throughout – bad weather, rain mist or dusk pictures being common examples. Similarly, not all images will require shadow and/or highlight detail to be apparent. When it comes to aesthetics many issues of taste and interpretation arise, and minor differences can sometimes make the apparent quality leap (or sink). Picking the right image tone for a print may sometimes be critical to its successful communication to the viewer."

8. BOB MOORE "You ask a difficult question that I think has no simple answer. What is "good quality" to one may be "too contrasty" or "too flat" to another. Over the years I have seen standards, or perhaps fashions, continually change. In the late sixties and early seventies UK international

exhibitions were overwhelmed by the contrasty and graphic images from Eastern Europe. But fashions change and that style has all but disappeared. It looked good in its day though.

My personal definition of print quality might be that the print should contain the appropriate contrast and range of tones to create the atmosphere and emotion that the photographer is trying to achieve."

8. LES McLEAN

" My first and perhaps most important consideration is that it is essential that the technical aspects of a print should relate to the photographer's interpretation of the subject. I don't subscribe to the belief that a print should have a full range of tones or be grain free. Sharpness is a similar issue; clearly most images should be sharp but there are times when deliberate blur and unsharpness work when it is part of the interpretation.

I do insist that quality prints should "glow". Print quality is most associated with the technicalities of the medium, and whilst it is essential that we pay attention to those technicalities they alone do not necessarily provide us with a quality print.

In my view, print quality is a combination of mastery and control of the technicalities, the ability to apply judgement and bring them together to produce an expressive interpretation of the subject."