Truth-To-Materials in Photography

By Rick Doble

I saw the angel in the marble
And carved until I set him free
Michelangelo

The sculptor, Brancusi, believed that his art should contain a "truth to materials" in which an artist would coax an image from within the material rather than forcing an image onto the materials.

"The sculptor was to reveal in his very means of working the material the quality and personality of that material — wood would show its grain, metal its tensile strength, stone its texture etc." http://www.chronogram.com

Also considered a dedication to directness, the modern "truth to materials" idea was to change art from being a window through which one saw a world created by the artist or an illusion, but instead a concern for the stuff that one was working with, so that paint was clearly paint and stone was obviously stone.

The modern trend is thought to be inspired in part by the work of Michelangelo who carefully quarried and selected his marble with specific figures in mind. His work made the viewer intensely aware of the beauty of the stone as well as the figures themselves.

But we digress. This discussion is about photography.

And the question is simply this (to paraphrase the old soap opera line): Can an art form, which has been committed to creating high resolution images of the real world, find happiness as a contemporary art form that includes things that photography has been avoiding up to now, such as blurriness, overexposure, underexposure, camera movement, subject movement, graininess and long exposures in which the unexpected happens?

Photo-graphy literally means "light-writing;" a photograph is the result of the action of light on light-sensitive material.

The photography we have seen for the last 160 years has been created within a very narrow spectrum of the range of imagery that a camera could create. The sharp picture capability of photography is both so powerful and useful that it has been easy to ignore the other possibilities. In general photographers have concentrated on perfectly exposed, fast shutter, well focused pictures of people and scenes in the real world. There certainly are exceptions such as the work of Man Ray, but in general a convincing illusion of the real world has been photography's goal.

Now before someone gets on my case, I am NOT against photography as we know it. However, I am for a broader definition and wider experimentation that includes not only traditional photography but also images that use the "light-writing" ability of photography to its maximum, in short a "truth to materials."

How would such an art form look and how could it be created? The fact that I can ask such a question means that there is a lot of experimenting that needs to be done and lot of techniques that need to be explored.

In a sense we (photographers) will have to learn how to be "bad" photographers, to deliberately go after blurred, unsharp, oddly exposed images -- in other words to do all those things we have learned to avoid.

These images are, at best, very difficult with traditional film. The immediate feedback of the digital camera, however, means that we can try a lot of different things and quickly see the results. Plus the material is inexpensive so we do not have to spend a fortune. Digital cameras may give us the power to set photography loose.

For myself, I have only started. For example, in the winter of 2002 I embarked on a series of images taken through the windshield of my van as I ambled down the road. Around sunset, I set the exposure to 4 or 8 seconds (the maximum on my digital camera) and I drove until after dark. The camera, instead of recording a street scene, recorded the motion of the van along the street. The natural vanishing point of the highway held the composition together.

I did this with a tripod or hand held while cruising down well lit streets and dark back alleys, highways with bright neon signs, under traffic lights, in the rain, in the fog and while I made turns and approached the brake lights of stopped cars.

Approaching brake lights in traffic on a rainy night;
8 second handheld exposure.

So the photograph can be used to record a passage though time, a movement through a space, even an emotion characterized by the movement of the camera. For example, one could walk down a path with the shutter open, walk up to a full portrait of a friend or even dance to music while taking a timed exposure.

I would like to set the caged animal loose and really see what can be done.

Let the games begin!