

Myth of Capturing Reality in Photography

by Photographer Raymond Klass

One of the greatest myths of photography is that an image – whether on film, or on pixels, in some way inherently represents reality. That there is a certain, inherent truth in the images captured by cameras. After all, photography grew partially from a desire by artists to capture what they saw in greater detail, and with greater realism.



Many of the early uses of photography were based upon describing current events. Roger Fenton is considered by many scholars to be the first to use photography to systematically document war – today, we've come to expect this type of covered for all types of events around the world. Photographers like Ansel Adams and William Henry Jackson used images to influence congress, and quite arguably can be credited with influencing the formation our very National Park System. The power of their images and their message relies on our belief in the truth contained in a photograph.



The power of the photograph is undeniable. They have influenced society, proven court cases, and inspired us to rethink the human condition. The only caveat is that photography is often misunderstood and misinterpreted as representing the whole of reality, when in fact it only represents a fraction of a second.

The beauty of being a photographer in this day and time is that you're not limited to representing reality – photography is very much a creative and interpretive medium with which to communicate. The idea that the photograph is not inherently a representation of reality can be unsettling to those who seek to "prove" something with their images – but it can also be equally liberating to those who acknowledge that a photograph is an artist's statement – a representation of the photographer's experience.

It may seem at first to be only a slight difference – between representing reality and representing the photographer's reality, but this concept is what pushes photography beyond the documentary. It is what liberates us as artists to bring to life our opinions, our



interpretations, and ultimately our reality. It's not that photography can't be used to document, just that in every image, there is at least a small piece of the photographer's experience tied into the image.

Though some argue the purity of the medium, the scientific and photojournalistic uses of photography, the more powerful use of the image is to communicate the photographer's experience – the essence of the moment. Many of us get too caught up in whether removing a tree limb, rearranging some element, or using software has classified the image as "manipulated", when in fact every image is manipulated – every image is inherently an interpretation. Though the very word manipulation has grown to have a negative connotation with it, truthfully the greatest thing you can do as an artist is to use all the tools available to you in creating your statement.

The very idea that the un-manipulated image is "better", "truer", or "more real" is nothing more than an ugly rumor. Every image represents a part of the photographer's personal reality – their personal beliefs and experiences at the time of capture. Regardless of what one does after capturing an image, the very act of pointing the lens and choosing the right fraction of a second to capture brings their image from a representation of reality to an interpretation of their reality.



It is this idea that I can capture and adjust the photograph with all the tools available to me, and come out with a result that represents what I felt, saw, and experienced that makes photography a truly exciting medium. The concept of being confined to capturing the documentary is nothing more than a limitation some people impose on their art. We as photographers need to embrace the idea of representing our personal reality – the idea that there's nothing to be afraid of when allowing your image to make a statement. Photography is an art, and we need to wholeheartedly support that we are in fact artists.

Though there may not be an inherent truth in photography, there is an inherent piece of our self in each and every one of our images. By embracing the very personal nature of our interpretations, and our experiences, we can lift photography beyond those who seek merely to document. Once we accept that the message of our images is both a representation of events based in reality, and of our reaction and interpretation to those events, we are truly liberated to create images that speak to who we are as artists. This for me is the most exciting part of being a photographer – the ability to share my interpretations and experiences.

