

Developing Your Personal Vision

by Photographer Raymond Klass

As photographers, we spend time learning new digital techniques, editing, and in the field, but how often do we take the time to concentrate on our own development as creative artists? Perhaps it is because the learning process of a new technique, or a new piece of equipment is more black and white than nurturing your creative eye.

The simple fact is that our individual vision is the most important asset we have. After all, it is what separates us from each other, and also what binds us as members of the creative community. Our unique perspective and approach are the vital components that allow us to create works that are truly original. Without these, art would merely be imitation.

Growing as a creative and innovative photographer isn't an easy process. It's not an endeavor where becoming competent and capable is the key to success. There is no right and wrong in art; there is no "right" path to follow. This can be the most frustrating and also the most liberating aspect of being a photographer – there are no rules.

Competency in your equipment and your digital techniques is important, but beyond learning what the buttons do, they are powerless to help you develop your eye. Nurturing your unique style requires nothing short of hard work through both failure and success. It is a never-ending search to develop, create, and innovate.

While there's no guidebook or sure-fire 10 steps to becoming more creative, there are some methods that can help to jump-start the process. The important concept here, as my friend and fellow



photographer Nancy Rotenberg has often reminded me, is that it is the process which is more important, not the result. Art is just that, a process of exploring the essence of yourself through your subject. The act of creating is the art itself.

Re-defining Success

One of the keys to embracing new creative techniques is to re-define success. If being a successful photographer means being published in a prestigious magazine or winning a ribbon in competition, then your photography becomes all about pleasing some other crowd, and not necessarily about being true to your personal vision. Wanting to be published and recognized for your achievements is a healthy and exciting part of photography, but it's when this takes over as the driving force of your vision that your creativity becomes constrained.

Rather than defining success through material goals, why not associate success with simply

exploring your vision further. If you're always worried about whether judges will approve your images, your creation ceases to be your vision. The key here is to become a better you and your success will follow.

Revisiting Locations

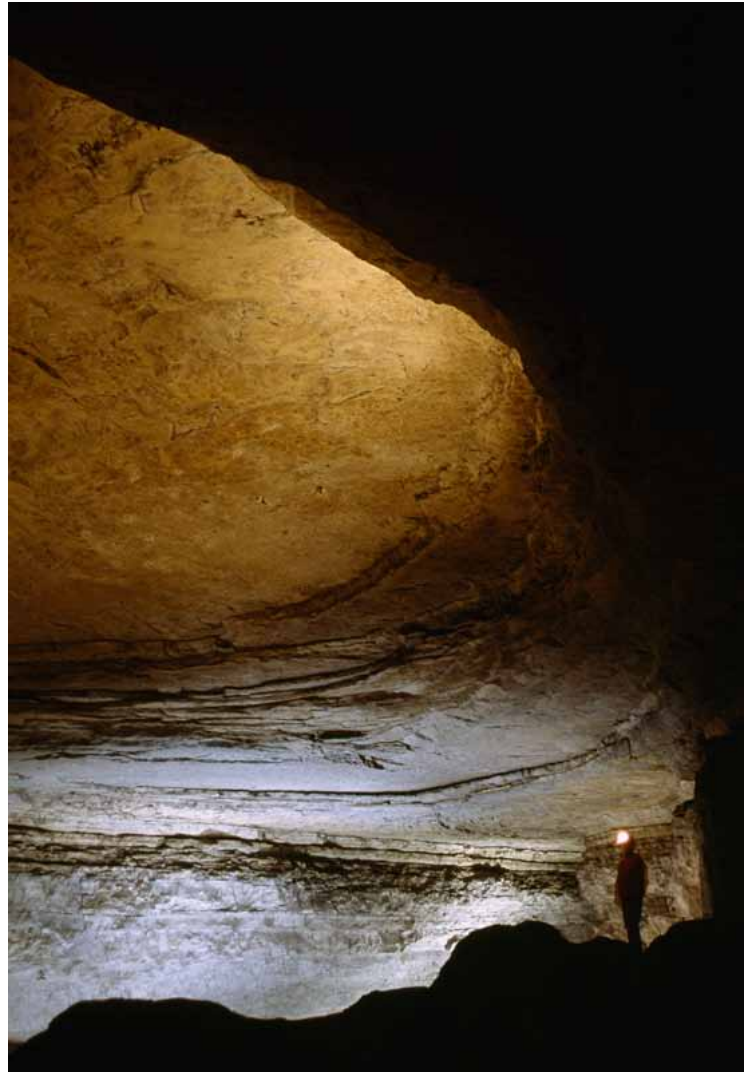
In my growth as a photographer, few things have had the impact that my first Artist-in-Residence in Kentucky did. I lived at Mammoth Cave National Park for 3 months, concentrating solely on my photography. The success of the images from this adventure were really just icing on the cake – that success was minor in comparison to the growth I experienced as a creative individual.

The key to this experience was the length of time I spent at the park. For the first 2 weeks or so, everything was new, and as many people do, I fell back on compositions that had worked for me in the past. Essentially I was re-creating successful images that I had taken in other situations. By the third week, I was bored – and it took another week for me to realize that what really needed to change was not my location or the conditions, but rather my attitude. Once I began looking at re-visiting locations as an opportunity to create something new, something different, something beyond what I had already done, I felt much freer to explore and risk failure for a chance at success.

Don't be afraid to re-visit locations you've been to hundreds of times. The taste of success when you risk failure is so much sweeter. It's not easy to go out on a limb and risk coming back bored with images that are not a sure thing, but it's the only way to grow and develop as a creative individual.

Surround Yourself With Creative People

To propose that I live in a bubble and all the work I produce has no influences beyond myself





is preposterous. Through my career I've had a lot of great mentors and teachers who have inspired and taught me about the technical and creative aspects of photography. Though there are literally hundreds, I still keep in close contact with my grandfather and my uncle who started me in photography. My mother is a fantastic artist, and her unique vision has helped to shape the way I see the world. In addition, photographers Nancy Rotenberg and Michael Lustbader have been invaluable resources, whether it meant bouncing ideas off them with midnight emails, or collaborating with them in the field and in the office.

The important concept here is that art doesn't have to be a competition, and we would like nothing better than to see our fellow photographers grow and continue to push the boundaries of our medium. In that way I think it is great to surround yourself with other creative people who can help you grow into a better you and who you can help to grow as well. Working with other photographers is only successful when everyone has the goal of becoming a better individual, and it's important to emphasize that aspect of individuality. None of us are looking to become a carbon copy of each other, rather we all want to support each other's unique perspective.

Surround yourself with other motivated artists, and you just might find that everyone benefits. Art is one of the few activities where this type of mutual growth is possible - embrace it and you will find that everyone will develop their vision that much faster.

Art is a lifelong process. Though there is no clearly defined finish line, embrace your creative discoveries as success, and you will soon find that the risk of stepping outside the box can become your best motivation. For further reading on developing your creativity, read *The Creative Process* by Nancy Rotenberg.

