

## Practicing Photography

Why do most photographers believe they need no practice?

I'm told that Pablo Casals warmed up every morning by playing all six Bach Cello Suites (Eugene Friesen, Grammy-Award winning cellist and good friend, blanched at that and said, "One a day is a meat grinder."). If he played all six, he did so in about two hours. After that, I expect he practiced scales for about an hour. Scales? Casals? Yup. That's what the best do. He used scales to further refine and practice his technique. After scales, he probably practiced music for two to three hours. Often, he would practice only a few measures at a time, over and over, until he got it right. Then he'd move on to the next measures. At some point, as a luxury, he would play through a whole movement. Closer to a performance, he would have worked out the phrasing and intonation, and so would probably play through several movements as part of his practice routine. Casals, and other top musicians, might regularly practice six to nine hours a day. Then they perform.

Artists carry sketchbooks. They draw. And draw. And draw. They do studies over and over again until they have developed what they want for a specific painting. They paint color studies to learn hues, values, intensities, and color schemes. They practice until they get it right.

Monet made a series of paintings of the front of a cathedral at different times of day. He wanted to know how the light differed between morning, noon, and late afternoon. In sun and in cloud. He set up his canvas across the street at a café and hung out. Monet made another series of paintings of haystacks in different light. He wanted to know what different light looked like on, let's face it, a pretty plain subject. Ultimately, I see these two series of paintings as practicing. Nevertheless, they're among my favorites of his works.

Picasso sketched incessantly, and he never intended the public to see them. He was practicing.

My wife, a fiber artist, weaves color studies, and pattern studies. She experiments with dyes and color. She knits things and then tears them apart. She practices.

We go out and make photographs. We expect to make great art every snap of the shutter. We do little or nothing to practice photography. We are seriously deluded.

But what is our equivalent of practice? What should we photographers do to practice our art and craft?

I've struggled with that idea. I think a lot of it has to do with our attitude and consciousness of what we are doing. For photographers, practicing involves either working with equipment to become more familiar and comfortable handling it (the mechanics), or making photographs in a studied, conscious, intentional way (the creativity). I have developed exercises that get at developing distinct pieces of craft, and others that develop, I hope, deeper pathways towards art. They are structured, may appear stilted and stiff, but underneath them I intend to work toward a routine of practice.

It is highly beneficial to practice the mechanical aspects of photography – setting up and taking down the camera, adjusting movements, shuffling sheet film in trays, loading and unloading film holders. Or handling our smaller cameras, knowing where everything is, pre-setting aperture and shutter speed, focusing fast, and so forth. But once you feel entirely comfortable, and can do these skills quickly without rushing, there's little need to do more practicing, except to "tune up" now and

then. I'm undertaking a project using my 8x10 camera to make portraits. I have not made 8x10 portraits before, so I will spend a lot of time working with my camera and shutter to make sure I look smooth and expert, because I know that it matters to the subject. If I'm a bumbling fool, there's no chance I'll get good portraits. Good mechanics pay off.

Printing? Make prints, and try variations. How much difference is made by one second more or less enlarger exposure? Half a contrast grade? One can be methodical here, and learn a lot. If I make the prints and see them, I know. Composition? Best practiced by making lots and lots of pictures. I often try things with composition consciously – leave half that rock on the edge of the frame? Or move and include all of it? Or none of it? Make all three, I say, and then see which one works the best. I cannot imagine how they'll look; I've got to do it. So practicing the creative aspect involves, well, doing it, but with conscious experimentation and intent.

My wife, Victoria, says that she finds practice liberating. It is a time when she permits herself to make mistakes. It prepares her for performance, which she finds nerve-wracking. She notes, however, that it can be comfortable to always practice, never perform, and never complete any work. Good point, but for photographers there's an out. When we "practice" making pictures we should, in fact, make them, and in fact make conscious mistakes in our exploration of subject matter, mood, or whatever our area of concentration in a particular practice session. Later, when we review images on the computer screen or as proofs, we can decide whether any happy accidents happened. The act of practice should be separate from that of evaluation. It could be that we win, even while practicing.

Ted Orland and David Bayles, in their highly-recommended book *Art and Fear* say that creativity and artistic excellence come more from doing art than from native talent. The more you do, the better you get. Better to work hard than be gifted. Well, if we're here because we love photography, making more pictures ought to come easily. Why doesn't it? I don't photograph nearly as much as I should.

However, we'll really only improve if we spend time examining "practice picture" proofs, and deciding why they succeed or fail. I look at each and every exposure, because I made each one with a different intent, a different element of practice that worked to a greater or lesser extent. If I find that I have images worthy of more practice, I can practice printing them! Practice mounting and matting them! Taking work to completion is also valuable to practice. I note that we're perilously close to merging practice with performance. So? Practice may morph into performance, but mostly, I think, at the back end, where I choose to take practice pictures to completion. After all, it would be silly to toss good work because it was "only practice."

Years ago my Waldorf school class was learning to play violins. Their teacher told them to "say hello, at least, to your violin every day." He didn't beat on them to practice, he asked them only to at least touch the instrument every day. He built a habit of practice, but gently.

There's a wonderful story of David Hurn, the Magnum photographer, coming to stay for a year with Bill Jay in Arizona. Hurn and Jay walked into a camera store and asked if they had a certain film. The guy turned, picked a roll off the shelf, and laid it on the counter.

"Thank you," said Hurn, "I'll buy 1,000." He did.

He used all of them, and more, over the next year. 36,000 exposures.

Few of us can muster the time to click 100 careful exposures a day. On the other hand, I firmly believe that the “One a Day” exercise is a wonderful way to practice. Simply, set aside time each day to make one, and only one, exposure. Take your time and make it the best that you can make. Do it at different times of the day, in different places. Begin to explore subject matter, formal elements, moods, feelings. Be disciplined and keep at it. With only one exposure, there’s performance pressure to get all the mechanics right, but a deeper pressure to get it creatively worthwhile. Friend Richard Ritter hung a very impressive gallery show of one-a-days, so they aren’t just throw-aways, if done seriously. It creates a habit of at least saying hello to a camera every day. By making a picture the eye develops and keeps sharper than otherwise (I know, at least in my own case, that I get stale if I don’t photograph, and it takes me several days to sharpen my eye). And even one photograph each day, carefully considered, will improve anyone’s photography. And by the way, it is in addition to, not instead of, any other photography undertaken. Think of the one-a-day as its own meditation.

Richard Ritter and I use a wonderful gold lame top hat in our workshops. Cards in it each have a word, such as “happy,” “sad,” “line,” “shape,” “motion,” and so forth, naming feelings or compositional elements (we used a Thesaurus). We have students “Pic from a Hat,” and go make photographs that express what is on the card. I’ll “pic” from the hat and dedicate a morning to making practice pictures of whatever I picked. It’s interesting: after a little while I form a search image, and will see the target everywhere, which tells me that the exercise works. I started seeing bird head shapes once, and couldn’t stop. I decided I needed to make as good a photograph as I could of each bird head shape that I saw as practice. I ultimately made a “bird head” series – not my best work, but good enough to spend time doing. Did you know that there’s a bird head in Ansel Adams’ “Moonrise”?

Another great exercise, especially those with access to digital, is Brooks Jensen’s “Three-for-One” exercise, which we have blatantly stolen for our workshops, and which I find myself using in the field. Brooks says to make the best composition that you can, make an exposure (Polaroid, in his case, but for those digital mavens, their format is also ideal), study it, improve it, make another Polaroid, study it, improve it, and make a “keeper” negative or digital exposure. This exercise is really fun, and incredibly educational. And capturing with digital, it’s cheap. I have two sequences of “Three-for-One” where, in the field, I didn’t have Polaroid, and so just made 35mm exposures. Now, I can’t decide which I like the best, and use all three in sequences! Educational, if not completely selective.

If Casals, Monet, Picasso, and Hurn aren’t afraid of practice, we shouldn’t be, either. Especially since the best practice involves doing what we love.

On a trip to Maine last October, I structured my mornings to be extended practice sessions: one lens, one format at a time, so that I could learn to see that lens in that format. I’d work through a dozen 8x10 holders and a dozen 5x7 holders before lunch. Next day, I’d work with a different lens. I can only make contact prints of these two formats, so an additional layer of practice was to look for images that would express themselves well in that size. I found the “restrictions” quite liberating, and overall I think my ratio of keepers-to-also-rans was higher than my more willy-nilly approach in the past. I learned an incredible amount, and had the time of my life.

Not bad for merely practicing.