

# KILROY CAFÉ

Philosophy for the Modern Age

©2010, Glenn Campbell, PO Box 30303, Las Vegas 89173  
glenn@kilroycafe.com www.KilroyCafe.com



Issue #69  
April 1, 2010

## Truth and the Art of

# Photography

By GLENN CAMPBELL

The world is full of lousy photos. You've seen plenty of bad snapshots: pets with glowing eyes, tiny people standing stiffly in front of tourist attractions, children and spouses just sitting there, surrounded by too much empty space. These snapshots may mean something to the people who took them but not to the outside viewer.

Anyone can take better pictures. The secret is simple: "See what's in the viewfinder, not what's in your head."

Your head says, "I'm having fun, so if I take a picture now, that fun will be preserved," but photography doesn't work that way. If you take a picture now, without seeing as the camera does, your photo will probably be lifeless and capture none of the fun. It may help you retrieve the memory of the feelings you had at the time, but those feelings won't be visible in the picture itself.

Looking through the viewfinder should tell you everything you need to know. Regardless of the camera you use, certain compositions are more effective than others. If you can clear your mind of needs, it's easy to improve your photos. In most cases, all you have to do is change your position or change the moment when you take the picture.

For example, little figures in front of Mt. Rushmore are boring. Big faces with a blurry Mt. Rushmore in the background are much better. It takes no formal training to experiment with composition, timing and the settings on your camera. With digital cameras, experimentation costs nothing, so why won't people try?

Because they are trapped inside themselves! They feel something at the

time, and that feeling corrupts their vision. They expect reality to conform to their emotional needs and can't imagine how the two could be different.

More broadly, the problem is separating feelings from facts. Feelings are the fun you're having, the awe you're feeling, the vows you're making or the needs you're addressing. Facts are the images that actually appear in the viewfinder. Most people are so controlled by their feelings that they brush the facts aside. The facts, however, will win in the end, producing a dismal final product.

A good photographer—and a wise human—can detach himself from his own needs and follow the facts. It's nothing magical, just a matter of accepting the data right in front of you. The art of photography—and of life—is learning to see the world as it really appears, not as you want it to be. When you learn to see the world like a camera does, new opportunities appear all around you. It's like the blind learning to see!

But that's also when the lies begin.

You see, photography can be an avenue to truth, but only for the photographer. For the viewer, photography is usually the opposite. It is lies, distortion and deception! No medium is more false and manipulative.

What? How can this be? Photos don't lie! Aren't they just showing the physical facts as they are?

No, a competent photo is the artificial creation of the photographer, who is recording a highly selective slice of space and time. Whether this slice accurately reflects the reality is entirely at the photographer's discretion, and art usually demands that this discretion be abused.

When a politician holds a news conference, dozens of expressions will pass across his face. The supposed "photojournalist" will choose whatever moment in time suits his own needs and those of his editors. Whether the politician seems angry, resolute or deceptive depends solely on the moment chosen. A photographer can't create images that aren't there, but he usually has a wide palette of feelings to choose from.

Likewise, elements of a scene can be pressed together in ways they aren't in real life. Buildings can be pushed up against distant mountains. People can be seen to have relationships that don't exist. Any two things can be associated in the frame in ways that distort the truth.

It's amazing how well these scams work. People who would be skeptical of words will usually accept photography at face value. That's why it's such a critical element in advertizing. Absurd claims that would be illegal if spoken are swallowed easily when expressed in images. For the majority of viewers, image overpowers reality. What you see in the photo isn't what was really there at the time it was taken, but people still accept what the image tells them.

The only thing keeping the photographer honest is himself, but even with the best intentions photography is an illusion. The photographer is essentially creating reality, or at least molding it to his own aims. He captures a distorted slice of space and time, and that image, in turn, forms the basis for people's memories. Happy photos create happy memories, sad photos sad ones, etc.

The best that can be said about the photographer is that he created a good illusion serving a responsible purpose.

—G.C.

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