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Dark Field Illumination

Fine Art

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Mark Lawrie

McGillicuddy

Sergio Muscat

Lighting Review - Gavin Stoker

NEC – Dual Monitors

Stuart Walker on Dogs

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– *Negative Space*

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Exclusive 7 Review, Tom Lee

John Baikie – *Shooting Drama on Location*

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In Praise of Illustrator

Tom Lee, Nik HDR Pro

Gallagher in The Dales

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Montizambert

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COVER PICTURE: Tom Lee
Other images courtesy of Digital Vision.

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been hand-coloured and captioned. Intended for children, it is priced at £1.99. Each image has been created using Scanning Electron Microscope (SEM) technology meaning you can zoom in to specific points of interest. They have all been individually coloured providing a bright and vibrant visual experience. The images themselves are the works of acclaimed electron microscopist Steve Gschmeissner, the Eye of Science and Power and Syred.

All the insects, bugs and other creepy crawlies can be searched for by name or via broader methods. For example, all the Mini Monsters have been categorised into carnivores, omnivores, herbivores or detritivores. Further filtering options include searching via the number of legs, the threat level (to humans) and whether they can fly or not. Users can save their favourite images in a customisable gallery before showing their friends and family with their very own slideshow.

Now many photographers would balk at letting their life's work go out at £1.99 but if it sells a million then it makes the photographer a millionaire and few would turn that down! £1.99 is the price of a half of beer (London prices!) but the app is of much higher value and certainly better for you!

We will return to the Convention for the next issue but now is the time when you should be browsing the website and deciding your itinerary (not forgetting any trade representatives and gear you might wish to look at). Some of the seminars are already booked out so saving it until the New Year is not the smart option, get onto it while there is time and before the Christmas rush starts!



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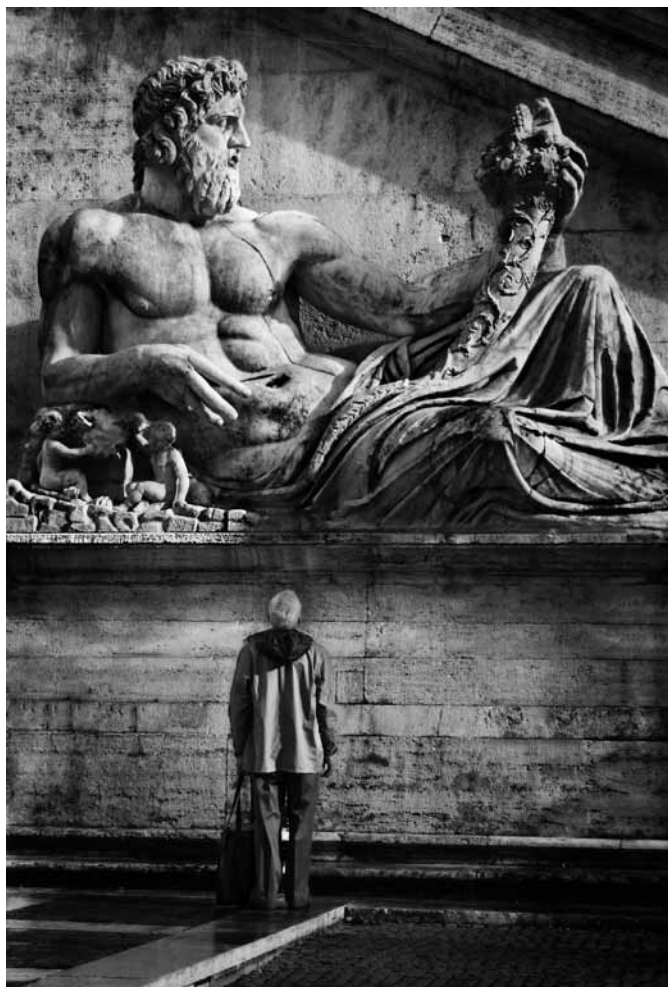
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THE MALTESE WAY To Limit or Not to Limit...

Sergio Muscat FSIICP delivers a thought-provoking essay as a continuing part of our Malta season!



This is a debate that has been raging on for a very long time. I would even dare say that at the moment it is probably hotter than the 'is photography art?' debate, which I feel has started to settle down, although we all know it will never really end.

I have noticed that over the past months, the argument of whether a photographic artist should issue work in limited editions has started flaring up again. I have personally had this dilemma from the day I printed my first photograph with the intention of selling it. A few years ago, I had a totally different view, centred around the value of a photograph being bound very strongly with its rarity, in the same way that many people prefer to purchase paintings or sculpture because of their 'uniqueness'. Most of my initial work was thus issued in editions of only three.

Today, after many years and maybe some more sense and experience, I have finally decided to put an end to this dilemma. I have made a decision moving forward, and it is to not limit my prints any further. There are many reasons which lead me to this decision, but now that I have made up my mind, it all seems so much clearer to me that I wonder what took me so long to figure it out.

THE MEDIUM

Let us start from the nature of the medium itself. The idea of limiting prints stems from printmaking, whereby the nature of the litho stone would deteriorate over time, thus the limit would guarantee that the buyer is protected from lower-quality prints. Photography is very different from that. Its nature allows for multiple prints to be created with the same quality, without deterioration of the source; so whatever limit is forced on a particular edition, it is purely artificial. To be clearer, it is purely a marketing exercise by design, enabling the photographer

"Imposing a pre-defined limit on the number of prints issued from a single photograph is just being untrue to the medium itself."

or gallery to inflate the mark-up, charging more per print and requiring fewer sales to achieve the same profit. I am not stating that this is wrong – every photographer or gallery is free to do this, and there certainly is a sizeable market for such limited prints – however, one cannot say that imposing a pre-defined limit on the number of prints issued from a single photograph is inherent or required by the medium of photography – on the contrary, it is just being untrue to the medium itself.

ABOUT LIMITING

When limiting a print, one is placing a substantial chunk of the value of that print on the fact that it is limited. This is similar to Earth's resources – the value of a resource (eg gold, silver, diamonds, etc) increases not only due to the popularity of the resource, but also inversely to its availability. For example, if a material is very useful, it will be expensive because of the demand, however, if the supply is also very limited, the price of that material will shoot up very quickly. One very good example is Rhenium, a very rare, very expensive (\$6,000 per kg +) element used in the manufacture of high temperature alloys for jet engines. It is obviously a useful element, but the insane price-tag is very much a factor of its rarity. Simply put, it is the rule of supply and demand. In an ideal state, the supply and demand creates a balance – when there is more demand, the supply increases to match that demand, thus creating a balance in price. If the supply cannot cope with the demand, then the price will increase to balance things out. When an item is naturally limited, the supply is fixed and the demand determines its price. However, when an item is artificially limited, the producer can determine the quantity depending on the perceived demand and can adjust that value to get the best price even when the demand is not very high. My point is that in the latter case, it is not only the demand which dictates the price, but the limitation of the item which is used to artificially increase the asking price per item. This is a very common practice, where producers create items in limited editions to target higher earners. The higher price is not a result of the higher quality of the item, but purely of its limited nature.

"Quality alone should be the determinant factor of the value of an artwork, and not the fact that its availability is limited to a certain number of prints."

THE FINE ART PHOTOGRAPH

Disclaimer: I firmly believe there is no such thing as a 'fine art photograph'. There are photographers and there are artists. In a recent interview with *The Telegraph*, David Bailey re-iterated what I and many others have been stressing for quite a while – "Photography is not an art. There's that old cliché that my old mate Duffy used to use: *photography and painting aren't art. It depends on whether the person doing it is an artist.*" For a photographer, the photograph is the end – there is nothing more and nothing less to it. An artist produces a body of work over a lifetime. Whether this is done through photography or other media is irrelevant. The photograph is the means, and should be seen and appreciated as part of a whole, rather than as an individual piece. Some of these will be aesthetically pleasing, and others will not, but it is the figurative depth of the work which defines the art, and not the aesthetics. Of course, some pieces will be more popular than others, and will sell better individually. By 'fine art photograph' I mean a photograph produced by an artist, not necessarily one which is of particular aesthetic pleasure, as many understand it.

The concept of supply and demand is spot on for photography (and other art forms, of course). The value of a photograph is determined both by its demand as well as by its supply. Demand is something which photographers and galleries do not have control on, and therefore, in order to increase the value, one would need to decrease the supply. I do not agree with this approach on a number of levels, one of the main ones being that through this practice, the value of the photograph is not a reflection of the demand, but also a factor of its rarity. This obviously creates a disparity across the board and one can no longer really gauge the value of a work purely on its quality.

The quality factor, in fact, is one of the many characteristics (together with concept, visualisation and focus on the end rather than the means, to mention a few) that distinguish an artist from a photographer. Quality is of course in no way limited to technical ability at the shooting stage, but also quality of the concept, the ability to translate that concept into clear visuals, and the ability to achieve a final product (ie the print) which reflects the vision of the artist. I believe that this alone should be the



determinant factor of the value of an artwork, and not the fact that its availability is limited to a certain number of prints.

POOR BUT HAPPY

One of the greatest pleasures for an artist is to see their work hanging on someone else's wall. If it did not cost me so much time and money to create each print, I would be giving out my work for free (which I do quite often anyway, to those whom I know appreciate it). So in reality, the answer to this dilemma has already been placed before me a priori. Do I want my work to be something which only the elite can afford, thus limiting the distribution of my work, or do I want to allow anyone who appreciates my work to be able to have a piece hanging on their wall? To me the answer is simple. The goal and pleasure of any artist is to share their art with the world – 'the world' being as many people as possible. I would rather get to the end of my life knowing my work is owned by many, rather than having gained more financial benefit with less distribution. There is always that sense of immortality associated with artistic creation – I am quite sure that together with the sheer need to create, this is one of the main factors which keeps artists dragging along in richness and in poverty. In the end, let's face it – money is transient, while art is forever.

"If it did not cost me so much time and money to create each print, I would be giving out my work for free."

LIMITED BY LIFE

There are a few photographers who sell a lot. Let's go back a few years – Ansel Adams was one of the greatest selling photographers ever. His *Moonlight over Hernandez* is probably the highest selling photograph in the history of photography (he didn't limit his prints). That photograph sold 'only' around 800 copies in his lifetime. My guess would be that 90% of photographs will rarely sell beyond double digit, and a good chunk of those will probably not even sell beyond single digit. There is no point defining a pre-determined limit on a work, because it will be limited anyway by the amount the photographer can produce in their lifetime. Those artists who are focused on the quality of the work will anyway not be able to produce large quantities of prints, because of the sheer time and dedication it takes to produce each print. It is true, today it is easier to create prints using digital tools; however, it is not as straightforward as many might think. Anyone can produce an average print using an inkjet printer, but it takes time, dedication and experience to learn the subtleties of digital printing. I have been at it for more than two years now, and I know I have not even scratched the surface. Whether it comes down to profiling, colour management, and even choice of paper, there is always something new to learn – not to mention the breakneck speed by which technology is advancing, continuously opening up new possibilities for improvement – which brings me to my next point.

"Anyone can produce an average print using an inkjet printer, but it takes time, dedication and experience to learn the subtleties of digital printing."

FORCED TO STOP

Whenever I am asked for a print, I make it a point to take a good look at the work before printing, and if needed, tweak and improve it to my liking. As it happens, it is very rare that I find myself going to print without changing anything. First of all, this makes each print subtly unique. Secondly, in between printing runs I will inevitably have learnt something new, or just feel that there is a need to give it a slightly different look. It is not the first time that I have totally scrapped my previous work and started over again. It is a natural process of improvement, and it will never stop as long as I'm around. It is very similar to the approach taken by a darkroom printer. It is true that in a darkroom one is forced to redo the process each time, however, in both cases, it all depends on the approach taken by the artist. Some great photographers outsourced their prints to professional, custom printers who were able to produce almost identical prints with great dexterity and incredible speed. Others preferred to do it on their own, taking more time and changing styles slightly with each print. None of these approaches is wrong – they are equally valid. Some artists prefer to concentrate on the shooting aspect, outsourcing the work to those who have more experience in the field. Others enjoy the process from start to finish, maybe because they find themselves able to define their artistic expression at each stage. I happen to fall into the latter category.

Let us consider the implications of limiting the number of prints, and let us assume that early in an artist's career, a great photograph is produced, which sells out completely. That artist will be forced to see his/her great work stuck on negative or digital file, locked in time to the last print produced, knowing how much more could be achieved with all the knowledge gained in the successive years of his/her career. Considering both the advancements in printing and post-processing techniques, it is inevitable that better ways of producing a print will emerge regularly. It would be very frustrating to be unable to create new prints using those new techniques because that would break the edition limit. I know this from first-hand experience since I have a couple of images I am very fond of from a couple of years ago, which I have almost sold out and would not bear to know that at some point I will not be able to create any more prints of these images.

Some photographers have over time opted to destroy the original of a photograph, be it the negative or digital file. I can say with absolute certainty that I will never do that. First and foremost, it is a practice which is totally unnatural to the medium. There is no reason whatsoever which justifies the destruction of the original work. If the original were to deteriorate with each subsequent print, such as with lithographs, I could understand it, but not for photography. Secondly, I know that try as I might, I would not be able to get myself to do it – it would be akin to cutting off a finger or a limb. We all know what a great tragedy the loss of Ansel Adams' negatives to a darkroom fire was. But that's an accident, which happens – doing it purposefully is totally another matter.

"Destroying the original negative or digital file would be akin to cutting off a finger or a limb."

Being forced to stop producing new prints from a photograph is not only a saddening thought for me as the author, but also to the artistic community in general, since prints would stop evolving at the point they are sold out, even when new methodologies emerge which would allow these prints to be improved upon. By keeping an edition open, I know that as long as I'm around (and possibly also after I'm gone), prints can still be produced which reflect the time in which they were produced.

A CHOICE

There are two main points (apart from marketing reasons) for limiting prints. Both are linked. The first one is that by limiting prints, the artist is fuelling the secondary market (ie auctions). Once the prints are no longer available directly from the artist, they will start selling at auction, raising the price of the print. While this is a very valid point, I do tend to see some flaws in it. First and foremost, what is the artist gaining through these sales? Nada. The practice is there to fuel speculation and earn money for collectors and auction houses. Fair enough, they need to make a living too, but it's far more important for the artist to make a living while they are alive, since that will trigger even more work from the artist, and that is what we want from artists after all. Another point is that by selling prints in the secondary market, the same artist is gathering momentum and can sell prints at higher prices. This is true, but really and truly, how many photographers actually make a prominent appearance in the secondary market in their lifetime? I would bet that even the most venerated of the lot did not get there until after their death. The only one I can think of off the top of my head is Andreas Gursky. I also believe there are other ways in which one can improve their asking price without going into the secondary market and gain full benefit out of it. I will get there shortly.

"While artists are alive and producing work, it is they who should be the main beneficiary of the sale of their work."

The second point is that unlimited prints will struggle to sell in the secondary market even after the artist's death because there are loads of them out there, therefore making it a less worthwhile investment. This is certainly untrue. A good print from a great photographer will remain in demand even if there are others around. Case in point, *Moonrise over Hernandez* raised a very respectable \$609,600 in 2006, about 20 years after the artist's death, and was then superseded by the sale of *Clearing Winter Storm, Yosemite National Park* for \$722,500 in 2010. I doubt the original purchasers paid that kind of money when they purchased them directly from Ansel Adams.

THE MALTESE WAY To Limit or Not to Limit...

Sergio Muscat FSCIP delivers a thought-provoking essay as part of our Malta season!



I believe that while artists are alive and producing work, it is they who should be the main beneficiary of the sale of their work. Galleries play an important role in the primary market and their role usually benefits the artist's cause, since they manage the aspects of the business which the artist couldn't care less about.

Art collectors purchase art for various reasons. Those who do it because they like the work will not care about immediate financial gain, while those who do it for investment usually accept the fact that it will most probably bear fruit when the artist stops producing new work, be it photography, painting, sculpture or any other kind of medium. In all this, there are, as always, exceptions. Some artists tend to benefit greatly from secondary markets during their lifetime, and collectors sometimes tend to reap gains from their investment very quickly; however, the artists who fall into this category are few and far between – and even then, I am pretty sure that only a small percentage of these are photographers.

The choice here is whether as an artist and photographer I want to put myself in a position which will focus mostly on the primary or secondary market during my lifetime. Being realistic, the likelihood of my work gracing the catalogues of Sotheby's in my lifetime is not exactly a given, so in my view it makes more sense to focus on the primary market, endorsing those who purchase my work for love over those who purchase it for investment.

“While all arguments are valid, decisions are and should be dependent on other factors – personal, artistic, intangible factors.”

THE BOTTOM LINE

I have read many essays and participated in numerous discussions about this subject. I have probably heard all possible arguments in favour, and against, limited editions. Each has got valid arguments, but in the long run it is up to each artist to decide which direction to take. This should be a personal decision, based on what makes them most comfortable with their art and themselves. We should not try to rationalise such decisions, because it would be next to impossible (not to mention incredibly frustrating) to derive a conclusion and take a decision based on these arguments. I now realise that this is why I have not been able to do so beforehand. The moment I realised I don't really care much about what others might think or what 'the market dictates', the decision came quickly. The bottom line is that while all arguments are valid, decisions are and should be dependent on other factors – personal, artistic, intangible factors. Some of these factors are temporal, and might as well change through an artist's career – in which case, decisions and attitudes might change. Every artist has the right to choose the direction to take and everyone – artists, galleries and collectors included – should respect such decisions.

MAKING IT WORTH IT

One concern faced by collectors, galleries, etc, which I fully understand and respect, is the “investment factor”. Collectors love to feel that they are spending money on something that will increase in value over time. One way in which this can be addressed in open-edition prints is to create pricing tiers. Each print starts at a base price, and as it gets sold, slowly increases in price. For example, the price might increase by 25% after every five prints sold. This method addresses numerous factors. Collectors can choose to purchase newer or less popular prints for lower prices, spending less up front and balancing the risk of a print not becoming very popular with the benefit of gaining a much higher return if it does. Alternatively they may choose to purchase prints which have already proven popular, investing more on high value prints which might still increase in price, although less likely than newer prints, but which would already have a proven market value and would most likely sell better if placed on the secondary market in the future.

I have decided to adopt this approach since I feel that it best addresses my needs and those of anyone who decides to purchase my work. Each print will be signed, with the print number and printing date at the back. A certificate of authenticity would accompany each print, containing details of the print, printing medium and any other relevant details.

In the end, different strategies will inevitably work better for some artists than for others, and it is up to each one of us to take the decision on how best to approach the situation. Whatever we do, it needs to be the best possible solution for us and for those who believe in us enough to buy our work. Anything beyond that is irrelevant.



