

My Take on the 12 Elements of Print Competition

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In light of the recent PPA print competition, I've had a few requests for me to post my article written for and published in the GPPA, SEPPA and the PPA magazines, on my take of the 12 elements of print competition.

My Take on the 12 Elements

When I was asked about doing an article on print competition, I was a little worried as there is no real recipe for a merit image except for a few guidelines which I'll outline a little later below. I then decided that the best thing for me to do is just to share my thoughts on the process.

I've been asked if I "shoot for competition" and the answer is no. I photograph what I love. If I see something that turns my head or I think is interesting...out comes the camera. With that being said, I do however give myself assignments occasionally, but they are more for trying new things, learning and keeping the creativity flowing rather than thinking "this will be a good competition image".

Print competition for me is the journey, not the destination. Yes, I know that phrase is way overused but it's true. The recognition when prints do well along with the ribbons and awards are nice, but they mean nothing without all the education gained in the process. Print competition will make you better, period. I know it's hard to believe sometimes, but the "rules" of print competition were not invented by your state, regional or national associations and judges just to make your life miserable. All the elements that make up good art have been around and utilized for centuries. It all has to do with the human brain and how we process visual information. I saw a post recently on a photographic forum about the poster's view of print competition. I love it and I will quote it here (with permission of course)

"Get better. Try new things. Enter print competition and get your work trashed and decimated in a public forum, take notes and enter again. Bring to a boil, don't reduce to a simmer, burn the pot and grab a bigger one."

Most judges don't "trash" or decimate prints, but this quote says a lot about the learning process and how we feel when we hear the judges say things we really don't want to hear, but need to hear to get better. The quote speaks to the fact that print competition should be a constant learning tool, pushing ourselves and raising the bar for ourselves with each competition. We need to be able to take criticism to learn and grow. If a judge offers a criticism, don't be offended and don't be so

emotionally attached to your image that you can't listen to advice. I suggest going to see a state, regional or national print competition to see what it's all about.

The 12 Elements of a Merit Image is what the judges use to score our prints and I've added my thoughts on each.

1) IMPACT - Impact is the initial response when the print comes around on the turn table. This is the "wow" factor. Does the print cause your heart to skip a beat, does it invoke an immediate emotional response? Your print title is also part of the initial impact. Does it make sense? Does it help tell the story or could it be confusing? A good title can go a long way in helping your score, but by the same token a bad one, or one that doesn't make sense, could hurt your score.

2) CREATIVITY – Is your image, subject or treatment unique? Is it different than anything the judges have seen before? Does your print have a new twist or a different view? Creativity is going beyond traditional ideas, coming up with new ideas and new interpretations.

3) STYLE – Style is kind of a signature. It is a way of expressing your thoughts in print in the way you use the 12 elements. There are always artists that we can recognize their work because we know their style. While we shouldn't copy someone's style exactly, we can be inspired and borrow style elements from different artists, creating a hybrid of styles, making them our own.

4) COMPOSITION - Composition is the arrangement of elements within the image. Our use of composition by where we place the elements in the image will create feeling, motion and rhythm. Composition is a powerful thing. We can use it to create a feeling of peace or tension just by moving our subject, camera or crop around. For example, say we have a portrait of a high school senior cropped for a traditional portrait. The result is a pleasing comfortable portrait. Take that same senior, tilt the image and place subject way off to the edge and crop a little into the head and our traditional comfortable portrait just became edgy and filled with tension.

5) PRESENTATION – Presentation is how you present your image to the judges. It can include cropping, the use of backgrounds (under matts), borders and special effects applied to the image. Make sure if you use backgrounds or borders that it compliments the image and doesn't distract from it. When it comes to special effects such as Lucis or other digital filters, make sure it is appropriate for the image. For example, a harsh, grungy, contrasty texture overlay probably won't work well with a soft portrait of a newborn. Just because we have all these cool filters to use, doesn't always mean we should.

6) COLOR BALANCE – Color balance is the use of color in your image and how they work together, or against each other. Is there harmony between the colors? Do the colors work with the subject or do they overpower and compete for your attention? Using colors within the same half of the color wheel (adjacent colors) will create harmony and a comfortable feeling, while colors opposite the

color wheel from each other (complimentary colors) create excitement and drama. Make sure the dramatic use of colors works with your subject matter.

7) CENTER OF INTEREST – The use of certain elements such as composition, presentation, and lighting can draw the viewer's eye and keep it on your intended center of interest. The use of things like leading lines and arrangements of elements should take the viewer on a journey around your image, but with the attention ultimately resting back on the center of interest. The center of interest should be clear.

8) LIGHTING – Lighting goes a long way to create a mood and message, therefore the lighting we choose to use should be appropriate for the subject and the story we want to tell. Lighting is part of the story and using a lighting technique inappropriately will cause visual tension and confuse the viewer. For example, you wouldn't want to use a more flat light where high drama is desired or by the same token, use a really high ratio when we want to convey a soft feeling.

9) SUBJECT MATTER – Does the subject matter make sense? Does the subject fit into its surroundings? For example, a very traditionally posed Grandma typically would not work in a grungy back street alley setting, but a biker guy with tattoos and a leather jacket would.

10) PRINT QUALITY – How does your image look when printed? Do you have good density with good details in the highlights and shadows? If you are using a lab, make sure they know your print is for competition. When under the lights for judging, prints printed normally will be too light and washed out. If you print yourself, a trick I use is to take a test print outside in the sun. If it looks good there, not too light or washed out, you've got it. Avoid matte finishes. Matte finishes are flat because the ingredients in the lacquer or laminate disperse the reflections of light bouncing off of the print. Prints with vibrant colors and rich blacks finished with a matte finish go flat under the lights. Gloss or luster finishes are better for print competition. They let the color and tonal values come through unhindered.

11) TECHNIQUE – Technique is the use of a skill or skills to achieve the final print. To me, it's pretty much a combination of all the elements.

12) STORY TELLING – Your image should tell a story. It can be obvious or a thought provoking abstract. Here again your title can play a big part in the telling of your story.

So...If you don't already enter print competition, I encourage you to do so. I want to thank Robert Symms for encouraging me years ago to enter my first competition back in the days before digital and I retouched negatives and prints with brushes, dyes and airbrushes. I don't think I'd be where I am today without that encouragement and the learning process along the way.