

EDITOR'S COMMENTS

Finding the Project

Of all the dilemmas that face us photographers perhaps the most common is the ubiquitous question: *What should I photograph?* In some instances, the answer pops up right before us and is easy to discover. More frequently, we find ourselves wandering through the world looking for something to photograph: wondering what we should point our camera toward. Too often I've found myself scanning the surroundings for *anything* that catches my eye, frustrated that the world can be such a boring place, grasping anything with my lens that I think might make an interesting photograph, longing for luck and a touch of photographic mojo. It rarely works.

Fortunately, in my photographic career, I've noticed a more useful pattern that leads to success that's worth sharing, so here goes.

Wander around long enough and eventually you'll find some *place* that is of interest. With excitement, we pull out the cameras and get down to business. This is exactly what happened to me on a recent photographic outing. I stumbled across the Cataldo Mission, a Catholic mission in northern Idaho built by Jesuits in 1840,

now preserved as a state park. It is an impressive historic building and clearly offered photographic potential. But, what to photograph? How was this an interesting subject with which to make art? I did what I normally do: I position my tripod and start making images of the fairly obvious compositions. It seems that no matter the subject, whenever I do this I end up with boring photographs that are of a documentary nature. The

first dozen exposures or more simply record what the place looked like, often in a way that is generic and static; as creative as a Xerox copy. Over

the years, I've learned that such obvious compositions are an important part of the "loosening up" phase of my process, like limbering stiff joints after a long drive. I photograph with self-indulgent patience, but universally find these images of little use. They are too predictable. (In fact,



after I had been working away at these initial images for a while in the Cataldo Mission, another photographer came into the church and started photographing. I observed him position his tripod in the exact same locations I had and make the exact same compositions of the exact same subjects that I'd photographed an hour earlier.)

The obvious ones may be a good place to start, but it is important to get them out of the way quickly so you can let go of them. It's here where the test of making fine art photography gets interesting. Moving beyond the obvious is a creative act and one that often is both the challenge and the reward of the artist.

So, how does one do that? There are, no doubt, many ways to break beyond the obvious compositions, but for me there is one pattern that has been repeatedly successful throughout my career. I find some detail that is emotionally expressive and interesting — one that captures my imagination and allows me to examine the subject more closely. My attention migrates from the *place* — and images that merely present it to the viewer — to the *details* and the way those tidbits tell a story. To play off the old maxim, “The angel is in the details.”

In the Cataldo Mission, it was *the hands*. I suddenly became aware that everywhere

I looked — in the statues, in the paintings, in so many aspects of this 170-year-old building — there were hands; the hands of God. The phrase “The Hands of God” suddenly popped into my brain as a *title*, as the *definition*, as a delineation of detail that could, possibly, create a theme around which a photographic project could develop. Such a moment of insight is, for me, the magic of the creative process.



My work shifts from static documentary to something that invigorates me with a creative drive. Keep in mind that at that moment, I still don't have any idea if the inspiration is an interesting or valuable photographic project, but at least the work is no longer mere documentary. My purpose takes on an interpretive tone in which I can use my creative mind and photography to say something a bit more interesting than “this place exists.”

As I say, with the Cataldo Mission, it was the hands. At Fort Worden a few years ago — an old World War I artillery battery I've discussed in other articles — I started by photographing walls and doors and windows because they were *everywhere*.



When I started seeing the details in the graffiti on the walls, the project evolved from the physical structure of the battery to the calligraphic shapes painted by the park rangers to cover up the graffiti. This vision developed into my project *Wakarimasen* which, in its final form, had nothing whatsoever to do with Fort Worden. The project simply used the visual material at Fort Worden to create a completely different artistic statement. In my project *Silva Lacrimosa (Tears of the Forest)*, I started by photographing the forest — specifically, the ponderosa forest of the Okanogan after a devastating fire. But, what began as simple landscape images evolved into something more artistically interesting when I started focusing on the details of the charred trees. The project fully came into focus when I photographed a bit of sap that had run down one charred trunk creating what to me looked like the tears of the forest.

Once I became aware of this pattern — moving from documenting-

the-scene to focusing-on-the-details — I realized this was a pattern I've used in one way or another in almost every photographic project in my career. I suppose it goes without saying that once a pattern like this is recognized, it can then be specifically employed as

a *strategy* to find the project in what would otherwise be a somewhat emotionless and factual collection of images.

The trick here, I think, is not so much to just photograph details but rather to focus our attention and in them find the emotional content that we want to express in the project. To be specific, search for the “emotional hook” in the project by searching in the details of what is before you.

One of the things I like about this idea is this: There are many creative paths available in any subject because there are so many ways to see details. That I chose the hands as my area of focus in the Cataldo Mission does not mean that that was the *only* choice. There were dozens of other details that could just as easily have been the cornerstone of a project. A dozen photographers all pointing their cameras at the same church could end up with a dozen different projects by focusing on a dozen different details, each

project a personal expression, a personal collection of images that connects the photographer (and hopefully the viewer) to the creative point of view. It's not merely that close-up photographs create the project, but rather that close-up photographs may help you identify a particular theme, a particular emotion, a particular point of view that can create a more interesting artistic statement than merely, "This is what this place looks like."

Another part of the effectiveness of this strategy is quite simply that it propels us to pay closer attention and to look at the details we may otherwise miss. It's far too easy to want to make images that "take it all in," to compose the very large world into a very small photograph. Sometimes these images are necessary in the project; they're called "establishing shots" in the movie business. Once the scene is set, it's



the creative eye that sees the details overlooked by the casual observer that make the intimate artistic statement that we artists strive to create.

Find a place you would like to explore

photographically and plop yourself in the middle of it. Then, pay attention to the details. Pay particular attention to *reoccurring* elements, to your emotional responses to those details, to the visual possibilities that can be explored with your camera as you look more closely at the elements of the scene.



Even if this technique doesn't help your project to evolve into a finished point of view, it can still be a wonderful way to identify photographically interesting tidbits that you may otherwise have missed if you focus your full attention on the grand view. If my experience is any indication, don't be surprised if the grand view dissolves and disappears entirely from the project as you find the real photographic potential exists in the smaller specifics that most people would simply never see.

And isn't that the role of the true artist? To bring to the viewer a fresh way of seeing? When finding your next project, you may discover that the angel is in the details.