About Judging Images

By
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I. General Considerations
II. What Makes A Good Image
III. The Principles of Judging

I developed this presentation and the associated presentation on the 4Cs scoring scale for the 2009 convention of the 4Cs (aka Columbia Council of Camera Clubs), of which I was then chairman. Now I'm just a peon but the information may still be useful. Many of the original talking points are now incorporated into the slides so expect a lot of words. One major caveat: although I was chairman of the 4Cs when assembling this program, it is not officially approved or sanctioned by the 4Cs at this time.

The original version of the combined presentation included a number of images to illustrate various points. I'm not clear on the boundaries of "fair use" and have eliminated all images for which I do not have specific permission from the maker.

Please note that this PDF may not display correctly on some older operating systems, especially on the pages that mix images and text.

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Part I: General Considerations

Why judge or not judge?

What does it take to be an effective judge?

What are some different approaches to judging?

Why judge?

1. It produces *quantitative* feedback.

   Critiques are great but it's often tough to come away with a handle on exactly how good or bad your image is. They also don't generally provide any metrics to allow you to track your progress.

2. Judging develops your image evaluation skills.

Why not judge?

It can be bad news if done poorly:

1. It can turn photographers off judging, competitions, clubs, and even photography itself. Bummer!

2. It can steer photographers in the wrong direction.
(Note: I judged the Oregon State Fair Student/Youth Salon several years ago with another photographer who wrote this comment for one of the images: "Try to put your subjects more in the center.")

Why not judge?

Even if done well:

1. Competition and judging just turn off some photographers.

2. It can trigger a competitive response rather than a creative response.

3. Judging of individual images by its nature fails to recognize themes across a body of work.
(Note: William Eggleston is a great example of a photographer whose individual images don't look like much, but whose collective work made him the first color photographer to be taken seriously as an artist.)

What does it take to be a good judge?

1) An understanding of what makes a good image.

2) Experience as a photographer.

3) An understanding of the principles of judging.

4) Practice evaluating images and judging.

Practice??

If…
  Musicians improve by playing a lot of music
and…
  Photographers improve by doing a lot of photography
then…
  Judges improve by doing a lot of judging.

The Light Table Analogy

Think of judging as the process of placing slides on a light table organized by image quality.

The more images there are on the light table, the easier it is to *accurately* place a new image on it.

That is, you're less likely to say…

"Wait, that last one isn't as good as I thought it was-- this one is much better…"
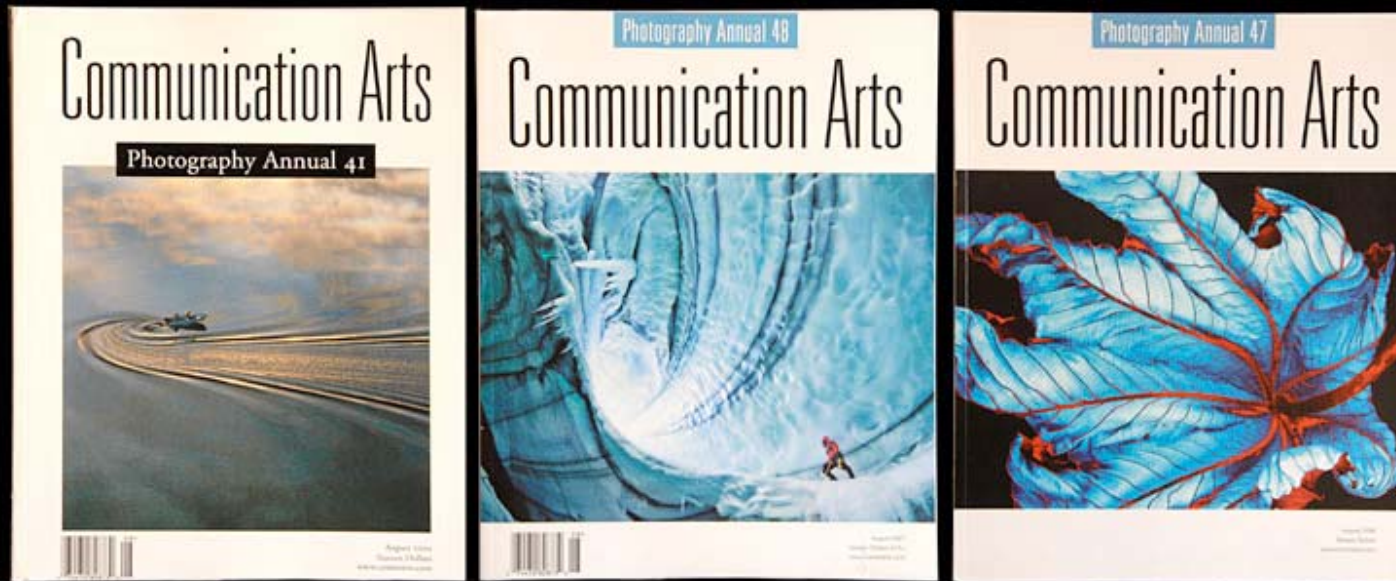
The Light Table Analogy

(continued)

Populating your mental light table takes a lot of time and thought about what is good and why. However, once you have a full light table then placing another image on it is easy: all you have to do is compare it to what's there.

This is why experienced judges can accurately make very fast judgements (1-2 seconds): it's not a matter of thinking about the attributes of an image, it's a matter of "pattern matching" against the set of images that the judge has previously seen.

Aside: One place to find good images…

For examples of strong images in a very wide variety of styles, check out the Photography Annual edition of Communication Arts, published in August each year.

Different Approaches To The Judging Process

Considerations

Choice of scoring scale

Number of judges

Anonymous vs. designated judges

Two Examples

These are taken from actual club competitions and represent
opposite ends of the spectrum in almost every respect

Example 1:   Christchurch Photographic Society
                      (Christchurch, New Zealand, spring 2009)
- Participants turn in one image (it's a big club).
- A single judge reviews the images over several weeks.
- The judge selects a subset (less than half) as acceptances.
- From the acceptances the judge selects 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and HMs.
- At the next meeting, the judge presents all images with a critique and awards.

Example 2:   Meterites
                      (Salem, competitions circa 2003-2008)
- Participants bring several images to meeting.
- As the images are presented, all participants fill out a score sheet using a 1-9 scale
- When scoring is complete, four sheets are chosen at random (three plus an alternate)
  and the results are tallied to determine which images are forwarded to 4Cs competition.
- No additional review or use of the scores.

Considerations

The needs of your participants should steer your choice of whether and how to judge.

- Do you only want to select winners or provide feedback for all participants at the risk of confirming losers, i.e., placing images at the bottom? Feedback is great unless you're the one at the bottom. If you don't want to confirm losers, that eliminates some scale options.

- Will participants be present at the judging? The threat of lynching decreases the probility of honest feedback on weak images. Also, judging in front of participants imposes a time limitation that makes some types of scoring impractical.

- Is the group self-judging? Are they likely to lynch each other if the group has a bad night? Self-judging makes confirming losers particularly problematic.

- Will results be compared across judging sessions? How and why the comparison will be done may steer the choice of scale.

Types of Scoring Scales

Absolute
In/Out
Relative
Normalized

Scoring Schemes: Absolute

Images are judged using a fixed scale, where a given score
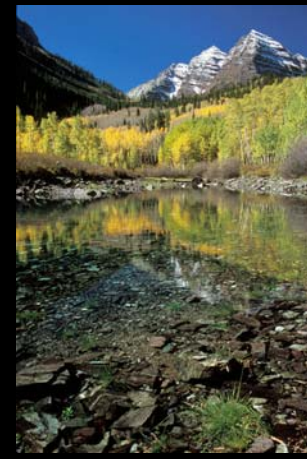always means the same thing.

5   7   7   8

Advantages and Disadvantages: Absolute

Pro:

1. Results can be fairly compared across multiple judgings.
2. Does not require preview.

Con:

1. Judges have to understand the scale.
2. May place images at the bottom.
3. May produce ties.
4. Low scores are absolute and may be tough to swallow.

Scoring Schemes: In/Out
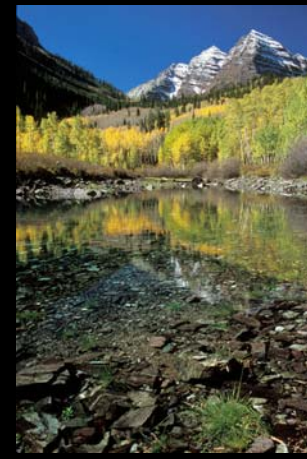
Images either make the cut or they don't.

out   out   in   in

Advantages and Disadvantages: In/Out

Pro:

1. Does not place any images at the bottom.
2. Does not require judges to understand the scale.
3. No implied order, so no ties.

Con:

1. Requires preview.
2. May require multiple passes.
3. Provides less feedback for participants.
4. There are no numerical results to compare across multiple judgings: a photographer may improve dramatically but see no change in his or her results if the "in" group is relatively small.
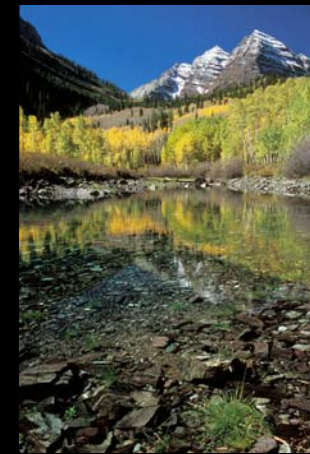
Scoring Schemes: Relative

Images are ranked.

4   3   2   1

Advantages and Disadvantages: Relative

Pro:
1. Breaks ties, ensuring a clear order.
2. Does not require judges to understand the scale.

Con:
1. Requires preview.
2. Explicitly places images at the bottom.
3. Slow to implement, probably requiring a preliminary round of judging by a different mechanism.
4. Numerical results cannot be fairly compared across multiple judgings: images of equal quality may produce wildly different results in different judging sessions.

Scoring Schemes: Normalized

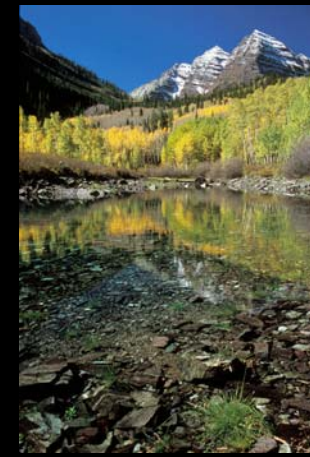Image scores are stretched or squeezed to fit a given scale.

6   7   8   9

Advantages and Disadvantages: Normalized

Pro:

1. Ensures (in theory) the same range of numerical results regardless of the judges.

Con:

1. Requires preview.
2. Explicitly places images at the bottom.
3. May produce ties.
4. Not an intuitive scale for some judges.

How many judges?

Using multiple judges mitigates the damage that a bad judge can do, but also tends to produce results that are "safer" (i.e., more mainstream). If you want to reward work that is new and different, this can be a drawback.

Popular vote is a nice way to involve everyone but is tougher to administer in club settings and may produce odd results if there is insufficient judging experience in the group.

Anonymous Judging

Everyone scores on an individual scoresheet, and afterwards some subset of the scoresheets are chosen at random and tallied.

This is tough to administer in a club setting but very egalitarian: everyone judges and nobody knows whose scores are actually used. If participants are conscientious about the judging, it's good practice.

Part II: What Makes A Good Image?

The Answer:
Communication

This means that judging is necessarily subjective,
since what an image communicates depends not just
on the image but also on the observer.

Important Caveat:

If photography is about communication
then objective judging is a myth
(and a good thing, too!)

At some level, image evaluation reduces to how much the
image evokes interest. For any given judge, some subjects
will do this more than other subjects. A competent judge can
and should try to set aside his or her biases, but this effort
will never be fully successful.

So… how does an image
communicate effectively?

My answer:
Efficient expression of conceptual richness.

In other words, the image should say something
interesting in the simplest way possible.

I see this as the largely unarticulated Uber-Principle of photography.
It seems to apply to just about any creative pursuit.

Example: Making an image more efficient

Both of the following images illustrate the same basic ideas:
stairs with interesting contrast in color and shape.

This version illustrates those ideas but include several elements that are unnecessary: the siding at the top of the image, ground behind the steps in the lower left, the hand rail part of the railing, and the front face of the steps.

This version eliminates those elements but still illustrates the ideas that make the subject interesting in the first place.

Example: Making an image richer

The next two images share the same subject-- backlit cherry
leaves-- but illustrate different ideas.

This version illustrates the leaf structure, edge shapes and different levels of saturation associated with thicker layers. Not much compositional interest, though.

This version illustrates the same ideas as the previous version,
but adds the complexity of the compound curves of the leaf tips
and the overall design to make a much richer image.

What specific attributes
should judges consider?

The standard answers tend to involve these five and their constituent attributes:

Technical Quality
Composition
Lighting
Subject Interest
Creativity or Personal Vision

Details on evaluating these attributes is beyond the scope of this presentation. (Sorry-- that would fill many books…)

Part III: The Principles of Judging

I count 5 of them.

Principle #1
The Golden Rule
(Do Unto Others…)

Approach judging the work of others as you
would want others to approach judging your work:
conscientiously and-- to the extent possible--
without personal bias.

A judge who scores down an image because "I don't like
snakes" or scores up an image because "I love kittens" is
failing miserably to observe this principle.

Principle #2
Analyze instead of just responding

The two most important sentences in image evaluation:

This image is effective *because…*
This image is not effective *because…*

Principle #3
Judge each image as a whole

Take an image's best and worst attributes into account, but don't use one or the other as the sole basis for judging.

For example, an image that has great composition but bad lighting is not as good as an image that handles both well, and is better than an image that handles neither well.

When there are widely varying scores on an image, it's a good bet that one or more of the judges is failing to observe this principle.

Principle #4
Be consistent

Don't change the way you are evaluating images in the middle of a judging session-- even if your scores are noticeably higher or lower than the scores of other judges. Doing so would unfairly distort the results.

If you change anyway, you're fired.

Principle #5
Use the scale as described

If an absolute scale (like the 4Cs scale) says that
most images will be scores of 6 or 7,
expect to give a lot of scores of 6 or 7.

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For a detailed look at 4Cs scoring
see the associated presentation,
"The 4Cs Scoring Scale".