

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

October 13, 2006

On the forums

Filed under: [photographs \(mine\)](#) — alecsothblog @ 10:07 pm

A few months ago there was a terrific [parody](#) of online photography forums. My work was recently examined by one such forum. The [thread](#) started with an analysis of the lighting in this picture:



The replies are hilarious:

“It looks like there was no special lighting used at all. Just the normal overhead room light. Not very flattering at all.”

“This image, as are most of the others in the same series, is excruciating in its banality — as if THAT was a merit in itself!!”

“Personally i like your image. I think it should be cropped so that it is a vertical image instead of a square one. Taking off the sides enhances the subject. as for lighting – it depends what you want to achieve. I kind of like what you have.”

“Mr. Soth seems to be more of a slavish rule follower than I have seen in a long time.”

To read more, click [here](#) and scoll to the messages at the bottom of the page.

27 Comments

1. This is great. I'm forwarding to a forum I frequent!

Sean

Comment by [Sean Cayton](#) — October 13, 2006 @ [11:00 pm](#)

2. every interest or practice in the world has its fair share of nerds. People want rules so things are easier to understand.

Comment by [Dan](#) — October 13, 2006 @ [11:41 pm](#)

3. I would like to add- as a guy who visits internet forums regularly, they do seem to attract an unproportionate number of bitter people...

Comment by [Dan](#) — October 13, 2006 @ [11:43 pm](#)

4. That was a very enjoyable thread. It's interesting that such an indepth analysis of the Bonnie photo didn't bring up the name Stieglitz, the father of all camera clubbers. I've never been able to look at that image without thinking of his Equivalents. Could they have missed the point? Or did I?

Comment by [danden](#) — October 14, 2006 @ [12:28 am](#)

5. Wonderful stuff. Good to read MJs parody again too.

Though I'm sure we all agree that your work would be much improved if you used a Canon. Or maybe a Nikon.

Comment by [guybatey](#) — October 14, 2006 @ [2:00 am](#)

6. Oh how I've always loved the closet camera brigade's comments. Photography does attract it's fair share of social rejects, and whilst that seem harsh initially it becomes reality when you read the forums for a length of time.

The image to me is about emotion, what does the viewer feel when they first see that image?. I could get wound up about the lighting, the crop factor, if i shot it with the correct camera setting.. but I don't (unless the client is paying then i go into camera nerd mode)

Alec, your images are genius. Ignore the masses and smile at them as it annoys them even more :0)

Comment by [Daniel](#) — October 14, 2006 @ [6:42 am](#)

7. Hah! I blame it on Duchamp!

Comment by [Brian](#) — October 14, 2006 @ [8:08 am](#)

8. There's a "them & us" line here that's a little too easily drawn. Simply put: We (artists/appreciators of artists) laugh at them (camera clubbers/forum folk) and they laugh at us. However, when I read through the thread I was struck by some genuine attempts to grapple with what is new and challenging and engaging in Alec's images. (OK, I did also laugh very hard, I admit...)

It takes a lot of looking and thinking and photographing and self-criticism to understand why, say, the work of Paul Graham or Jem Southam or Martin Parr is contemporary art worthy of the most serious consideration, but that the images presented as models in magazines and "how to" books

are not. Learning to distrust the "how to" gurus and to be excited by the new is how you move from one side of this line to the other, and is largely an act of faith which has little to do with "photography" and a lot to do with openness of mind. It can be a long journey.

If Alec's images haven't moved you out of your "comfort zone" even a little, then either you're very young (congratulations) or you're just not seeing them! What is hilarious in this forum thread is the spectacle of "opinionated yet underinformed" people desperately trying to get this work back into their comfort zone ...

Comment by [Mike C.](#) — October 14, 2006 @ [10:34 am](#)

9. i love this quote, say's a lot:

"People want rules so things are easier to understand." *

* <http://alecsoth.com/blog/2006/10/13/on-the-forums/#comment-631>

Comment by [nelson d'aires](#) — October 14, 2006 @ [10:45 am](#)

10. [...] I've been following Alec Soth's blog for a couple weeks now, it's pretty good if you're into that photography or thinking thing. His latest post points to the online experts that are out there. After reading his post you may question some of the advice you read online. Bless those that follow the rules all the time. More HERE. [...]

*Pingback by [yes, this is Design*Notes \[a q a i n \] » I learned...](#) — October 14, 2006 @ [10:48 am](#)*

11. That is hysterical.

Comment by [Zoe Strauss](#) — October 14, 2006 @ [2:26 pm](#)

12. This is a dandy!

The parody, the forum, the art ... Mike C. hits on something I think – with it being" ... largely an act of faith which has little to do with "photography"... Taken out of context – what a happy link to Bonnie and her picture.

It's a little like Cinderella with a prism upon some weird looking glass – (I like to imagine getting into Bonnie's head too – the pretense of it all) – what a great fairy tale.

How quirky, finicky, and awkward is the fear of being mistaken or misunderstood.

I still wonder though ...just what did Bonnie see that day? I'm glad she found proof of it though – she looks comfortable and was able to make a picture of it.

Comment by [Matt Niebuhr](#) — October 14, 2006 @ [4:33 pm](#)

13. Hysterical, but also a little bit sad.

Comment by [Zoe Strauss](#) — October 14, 2006 @ [4:52 pm](#)

14. Aren't you glad, Alec, that real experts finally tell you about all the problems in your photos?

Comment by [JM Colberg](#) — October 14, 2006 @ [9:07 pm](#)

15. they'd piss their pants if you made an appearance!

Comment by [aizan](#) — October 15, 2006 @ [2:31 am](#)

16. On the brightside and not to jump on the "let's bash *them*" bandwagon, at least there is somewhere opinions can be openly and freely exchanged.

Comment by [Terence Patrick](#) — October 15, 2006 @ [2:52 am](#)

17. You ever heard this one: "opinions are like a-holes, everyone has one"

It's easy to be in "this" club and look down upon members of "the other" club. Let's not be exclusive, everyone is entitled to their opinion.

My 2cents is that it's a good shot for sure, but not a great shot (with due respect & I'm a great fan of Alec's work).

Comment by [Frank](#) — October 15, 2006 @ [8:47 am](#)

18. I'm not making claims of being more enlightened than the forum folks. Blogging is no less nerdy. And just like the forums, I'm entertaining myself with a little banter. Nobody should take it too seriously.

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — October 15, 2006 @ [10:18 pm](#)

19. It's interesting how when something isn't 100% accessible instantly, whether aesthetically or conceptually, some people get offended by it.

I am going to start 'a club' of people who aren't so insecure.

Comment by [Ross](#) — October 17, 2006 @ [10:05 am](#)

20. Alec, at least you're in good company. They don't like some of those "hack" painters either:

"Many people celebrated Jackson Pollack as an artist. His work never did anything for me either."

Comment by [Chris](#) — October 20, 2006 @ [11:21 am](#)

21. [...] While reading his blog, I came across this post,alec soth » On the forums that really makes me shake my head. It's obviously not limited to particular pursuit or form, and we've all experienced at sometime or another in our lives (especially my friends carving out a space in academia) – you really gotta follow the link to the forum and take the time to read the comments. Priceless. [...]

Pingback by [William Bragg](#) — October 25, 2006 @ [5:13 am](#)

22. [...] I've been following Alec Soth's blog for a couple weeks now, it's pretty good if you're into that photography or thinking thing. His latest post points to the online experts that are out there. After reading his post you may question some of the advice you read online. Bless those that follow the rules all the time. More HERE. [...]

Pingback by [DesignNotes by Michael Surtees » I learned...](#) — December 26, 2006 @ [8:07 pm](#)

23. i've been thoroughly enjoying this blog for about six weeks now and just came across this thread. i'm not a high minded artist (yet?) but altogether respect the work discussed here. so, please don't berate me for asking, but how was this image lit? i understand if it's not open for discussion but would love to know. i think it's perfect. cheers...

Comment by [Lance Rosenfield](#) — January 4, 2007 @ [3:00 am](#)

24. There was [this similar episode on Flickr](#) a little while back, with a Cartier-Bresson picture.

"This looks contrived, which is not a bad thing. If this is a planned shot, it just didn't come out right. If you can round up Mario, I would do it again. This time put the camera on a tripod and use the smallest aperture possible to get the best DoF. What I would hope for is that the railings are sharp and that mario on the bike shows a blur. Must have the foreground sharp, though. Without that, the image will never fly."

Comment by [Matthias Bruggmann](#) — January 7, 2007 @ [9:33 am](#)

25. [...] Related: Alec Soth: On the Forums Digg This Save to Del.icio.us [...]

Pingback by [Personism » Blog Archive » What Makes a Great Photo \(according to Digg users\)](#) — March 28, 2007 @ [3:54 pm](#)

26. Hello,

Unfortunately for my workload I have spent the better half of my morning following the blogs and the forum posting on this issue/photograph. I'm by no means a great photographer but I am pursuing it both as an art form/means of expression and for any commercial reward it can bring.

I love jazz music. Do I love or even like everything Miles Davis played? No. In the past when the subject of jazz has come up, I have heard – "I don't really listen to jazz, I don't understand it". Unfortunately that is because jazz, especially traditional, straight-ahead jazz, has been placed in these lofty, ivory towers where only the highly educated and most appreciative of connoisseurs can listen and expound on it's merit. Bull crap.

Jazz is music. Either you feel it or you don't. You like it or you don't. If it touches you – it does for whatever reason. It's has nothing to do with "understanding" anything. It's about feeling.

I take the same thing for photography. I've been to photography galleries in New York and I have seen some photographs on sale for thousands of dollars. The photos were utter bull crap. I know they were someone's expression. Sure. But the fact that you're telling me it's worth my mortgage payment for a year then warrants my opinion of it.

I like some of Alec's work. Some of it I don't like. Most importantly I deeply respect his pursuit of his work. That's a beautiful thing. He has been afforded the luxury of having that same pursuit put food on his table.

I am very turned off by "arty know it alls" that scoff at people's criticism of fine art photography. The same way I am very turned off by commercial photography that make "perfect skin" out of everyone.

Just my 2cents. Thanks Alec for allowing me to give it.

-Sherman Charles

Comment by [Sherman](#) — March 29, 2007 @ [10:25 am](#)

27. I'm new on this site but have been teaching for 4 years. I have a year 5/6 class in Rome. Challenging kids, 100% non-English speaking background, lots of fights, little interest in learning and I love every minute!

I do enjoy reading about different school systems and teaching practises and condition and have found a lot of great ideas on this site previously.

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and please leave all your comments as this gives me support

Thanks,

Fred

Comment by [fredtory](#) — November 12, 2007 @ [3:31 am](#)