



Don't Take Photographs, MAKE them!

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You don't take a photograph, you make it.

- Ansel Adams

Don't get too hung up on reality. Do you want to produce art, or simply produce a copy of what's present? If all you do is record reality, then you as a photographer add no unique value, and since the definition of art requires human interaction with the medium, simple copies of a time and place have questionable qualifications or value as art. Someone could simply nail a high resolution camera to a tree or to a doorjamb of the room and photographers are unnecessary and obsolete.

On the other hand if you capture a scene but skillfully manipulate it so the result best conveys and elicits from your audience the emotion that you felt at the time, then your involvement in the process and your skill in producing the resulting image was the key to its outcome and success.

Consider Ansel Adams. His images were often the result of a dozen hours or more of darkroom manipulation. The beauty of his images was that they were dramatic and elicited emotion. His images were entirely plausible and realistic while often not being true to the original scene or his camera's immediate interpretation of it. He often went back and reworked his prints in the darkroom time and time again over the years in pursuit of his vision for a given image.

So how can you achieve that? The same way you get to Carnegie Hall . . . practice, practice, practice. First it's a good idea to know how to use your camera and what filters are available and when to use them. Assuming you capture the exposure as well as you can, the biggest barrier to or enabler of your success will be your skill in using Adobe Lightroom, Photoshop and similar programs.

When you have the whole process in mind onsite and can decide what filter to put on, predicting what you'll also do with it in post-processing, you'll be able to make far more compelling shots than you'd ever be able to simply take. Ansel Adams called this process 'Previsualization'.



Original shot, no filters, no post-processing. Image reflects the scene as viewed.



Image taken with filters in front of the lens and after post-processing.

In the example above I show the original shot and below that an adjacent shot for which I held a graduated neutral density filter in front of the lens to brighten the foreground and a Tiffen Enhancing filter to bring out the sunrise color. During post-processing, I manipulated the contrast in the Tone Curve function in Adobe Lightroom to boost the white areas to bring out the foreground detail. From there I transferred the image to Photoshop, where I applied the Auto Contrast function to adjust the overall contrast and brightness.

It didn't take a lot of time at all, but I did have to anticipate the result and use the two filters while taking the shot, and I had to know about and use the simple adjustments in the editing software. You can learn about common filters and editing steps in courses, field seminars, and through your fellow photographers in a local photography club. During our Mammoth Lakes workshop, I will be going into this area in much more detail.

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