

Photography Beyond the Image: A Way of Affirming Life

Yo, what's poppin' people? It's Dante.

Today I want to share some thoughts on photography beyond the image and how I use photography as a way of being—a way of affirming life itself.

I'm currently exporting photos off my iPhone. My NAS drive is backed up. My iPad is ready to be cleared and deleted. All of my devices are full. Every hard drive is packed.

And as I'm trying to offload everything, it has me asking an existential question:

What if all of these photos just disappeared?

What if all the work was deleted?

Would I give up?

Would I keep shooting?

How would I interact with the fact that maybe I could continue making photographs, but never actually see them?

It's just a hypothetical question, but it's an interesting one.

Chasing the Next Best Frame

In the past, photography was about seeking.

I traveled the world looking for my next best frame.

I would immerse myself in bustling scenes, go to places where I knew I could find something interesting, and spend hours searching for moments. Searching for photographs. Searching for something great.

That approach worked.

I made photographs I'm proud of.

But I think when you become attached to the outcome of the photograph, it can get in the way of actually living your life and experiencing the moment.

Photography as a Way of Being

Lately, I've been treating photography differently.

I have all my photographs organized on a timeline, and recently I've been reflecting on the last three years and seven months of shooting exclusively in black and white.

What I've realized is that photography has become a way for me to simply affirm life.

When I look back through the work, I see photographs that were made from a complete awareness of the moment.

That's not to say my color work lacked awareness. Of course I had to be aware. I had to synthesize foreground, background, light, timing, and all the different elements within a scene.

But the way I interacted with the medium was very different.

For example, there was a period where I spent entire afternoons working one location.

I remember standing in a fountain for three or four hours waiting for the perfect rainbow, waiting for everything to align, treating photography as a process of trying to make something.

Now I've let go of that almost entirely.

I've detached myself from the outcome.

The Photograph as a Byproduct

These days I'm using the camera less as a tool for capturing great moments and more as a tool for experiencing life more deeply.

It's an excuse to pick up a leaf and study the veins.

An excuse to inspect things.

To see clearly.

To feel deeply.

The photographs I make now are a byproduct of that direct experience.

It's less about composing something great.

Less about making my next best frame.

More about using the camera as an excuse to fully experience whatever is happening in front of me.

Photography has become a way of being.

Feeling Life Through Photography

I enjoy the sights, the sounds, the smells of the street.

I notice patterns in nature and human behavior.

The beautiful light.

Birds in flight.

The way people move.

The way seasons change.

I'm using photography as a way to feel something.

And that's what I'm really honing in on these days.

Photography beyond image-making.

Photography as a way of experiencing life.

Photography as a way of feeling deeply.

And I think that's ultimately why I love it so much.

Looking Back Through Old Work

As I go back through some of my older photographs, I'm reminded that immersion has always been part of the process.

When I look at photographs I made while serving in the Peace Corps in Zambia, many of those images were created from a completely immersed state.

I wasn't chasing photographs in the same way.

I was learning the local language.

Doing volunteer work.

Farming.

Handling daily tasks.

Living life.

And when I look at those photographs now, they resonate with me because they allow me to revisit those moments.

It feels like yesterday.

It feels personal.

Photography has this incredible ability to bring you back.

To reconnect you with experiences that would otherwise fade with time.

Zambia vs. Mumbai

Then I look at work from places like Mumbai.

That trip was completely different.

It was all about photography.

I woke up every day and hammered the pavement.

I threw myself into bustling markets.

I searched relentlessly for moments.

I was actively trying to make great photographs.

Meanwhile, in Zambia, I was simply living.

Interestingly, I hardly made any photographs there compared to a trip like Mumbai.

And that's where the dichotomy appears.

Is it better to be attached to the outcome?

Or detached from it?

Honestly, I don't think one is inherently better than the other.

I'm just sharing my experience after a decade of shooting.

Why Detachment Matters

What I've realized is that detachment eventually becomes necessary.

Because photography is hard.

It's difficult to find something meaningful.

It's difficult to come home with a photograph you're proud of.

It takes time.

It takes miles walked.

It takes countless hours spent wandering and observing.

If you're completely attached to the outcome, it becomes very easy to quit.

To let the hard drives corrupt.

To put the camera away.

To stop photographing altogether.

Because the results don't always come.

Building the Foundation, Then Letting Go

There is definitely a period where attachment to the outcome is useful.

Trying hard matters.

Looking for great moments matters.

Nailing compositions matters.

That process helps build a foundation.

It teaches you the fundamentals.

But eventually, that way of operating becomes burdensome.

At least it did for me.

When I relinquished that burden, photography became enjoyable again.

And because it became enjoyable, I started shooting more.

And because I started shooting more, I naturally started finding more things worth photographing.

It's a flywheel.

Saying Yes to Life

These days I pick up the camera because I want to enjoy the day.

I want to go for a walk.

Meet new people.

See something I haven't seen before.

I'm no longer trying to prove myself as a photographer.

And because of that, I'm finding more joy in life generally.

Photography goes beyond the imagery.

It's a way of saying yes to life.

A way of affirming my everyday existence.

A way of finding meaning in ordinary moments.

Regardless of the outcome.

Regardless of the photographs.

And hopefully, over time, that way of being will reveal itself in the work.

Final Thoughts

Thinking about photography this way has genuinely been life-changing.

That's why I wanted to share these thoughts.

Maybe they'll resonate with you.

Maybe they'll encourage you to think more deeply about why you photograph.

Because the mindset you bring to photography shapes not only the images you make, but also the way you experience the world.

And that's the thought of the day.

Just some candid reflections as I start the morning.

Thanks for watching.

Peace.