Critiquing in Art

Critiquing consists of a description, an analysis and an interpretation of the image, criticising consists of finding fault with the image.

Critiquing is an important and essential component of art. It helps you learn about art, helps you improve your craft and it improves your ability to see. One way to approach it is to do the following three things.

Describe - tell what you see

Analyse - the effect of what you see

Interpret - what the photographers intent was

A method of critiquing might include a discussion of the elements of art and principles of design, the elements of photography and post production, the impact and the artistic merit of the image.

When critiquing an image try to remember that all photographers make decisions about what to include in the frame when they draw that little black box around the world.

Assume that all elements in the image are there for a reason. This is especially true the more experienced a photographer becomes. Early on it is easy to include something you didn't want because of inexperience or inattention; otherwise elements are there for a reason and in your critique you need to discover why.

Special Note: Statements in a critique should begin with "The image…" or "The photographer…" or one of the elements listed below, for example, "The strong vertical lines in the image enhance the feeling of…" If you can remember, avoid the use of statements that begin with, "I like…" because you are then talking about you rather than the photo.

Elements of Art

Line   - types - vertical, horizontal, diagonal, curve, oblique
               - quality - thick, thin, heavy, straight, zig zag

Colour   - hue refers to red, green, blue etc.
               - value refers to how light or dark it is
               - intensity refers to how bright or dull it
               - direction, direct or reflected, high or low key etc.

Shape   - has only height and width
               - generally defined by line

Form   - adds depth to shape
               - basis of sculpture, decorative arts, architecture

Texture   - surface quality of an object
               - can be indicated in two dimensions by colour, line, shading etc.

Space   - feeling of depth in an image
               - positive and negative space

Tone   - use of light or dark, shadow and highlight
               - relates to contrast

Principles of Design

Balance   - sense of equilibrium
               - can be symmetric or asymmetric

Proportion - relative size (how big) and scale (how big compared to other elements)
               - value refers to how light or dark it is
               - intensity refers to how bright or dull it
               - direction, direct or reflected, high or low key etc.

Unity   - all parts have equal importance
         - consider proximity, similarity, repetition, theme etc.
         - harmony and disharmony

Emphasis - element that catches the eye
         - stands alone or contrasts
         - different in size, shape, colour etc.

Pattern   - repetition of elements
         - can create rhythm, movement etc.

Rhythm   - related to pattern
         - creates mood
         - imitates music of movement

Elements of Photography

Exposure - combination of aperture (size of opening) and shutter speed
         - no ideal - must be suitable to photographers intent

Depth of Field - sharpness throughout the image
         - determined by aperture and shutter speed
         - can be affected by lens choice

Framing   - what you decide to include in the image
         - can use elements within the image to frame centre of interest

Composition   - how you arrange elements within the framing
         - rule of thirds (hint: there are no "rules" in photography

Perspective   - position of photographer in relation to the image

The elements of Art and principles of Design are of course also elements of photography. For example, a photograph might be largely a single colour, contain leading lines, mimic texture etc.

Elements of Post Production

These are simply too numerous to enumerate. You should be aware of them when critiquing because they will show up in the images you see.

"Pictures don't lie" is a lie. Since the beginning of photography images have been manipulated, in the dark room, onto glass negatives, in the printing process and afterwards. Research some examples of famous "lies" in the photographic world; you might be very surprised.

Modern computer programs from very simple to highly complex have to some extent made post production easier. That's the good news. The bad news is now the photographer does it all while before we used to give a list of things we wanted changed to the lab and someone else did it for us.

The photographers who have always developed and printed their own images used to do what people now do in the computer.

If you don't yet use computer software, try to educate yourself on what is possible because often the alterations are so subtle they're difficult to pick up.

Impact

Impact in a work of art is what elicits an immediate response from the viewer. The response is generally an emotional one. Any photograph that makes an impression, makes you look more than once, moves you or in some other way affects how you feel has impact.

The important thing to do then is to ask questions like what impresses me in this work, where does the impact come from, why does it move (upset, delight etc.) me so much and so on. Chances are very good that if a photo does make an impression on you, the photographer included elements on purpose to achieve the effect. It is up to the person critiquing the work to try to discover what the photographer did to achieve the response you felt.

Fulfilled Intent

Photographers (artists) have reasons (intent) for taking the image(s) they present to the world. Elements in a photo are there for a reason, and this is more true the more skilled a photographer becomes.

We've all discovered elements we wish we had seen and thus been able to exclude. It is not true that "you can fix it in Photoshop," although much undoubtedly can.

A critique should try to discover the intent of the photographer (see Impact above). We will sometimes be wrong because we bring our own experience and knowledge to the work and thus interpret it to some extent through our eyes, not through those of the artist.

Artistic Merit

This is the hardest of all to assess. Even the so called experts sometimes get it wrong. The Salon in Paris and the Impressionists is an excellent case in point.

Criteria for artistic merit might include the following. The judgement of history is important in determining the merit of a work of art. Often fads come along which are later dismissed, or fads are dismissed which later are judged great art. Examples of both can be found all throughout art history.

The uniqueness of a work is a critical part of determining artistic merit. A new way of seeing (the Impressionists), a new technique (a choral element in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony), a new medium (photography), or portraying something ordinary in a new way (perspective in art as discovered by Brunelleschi) are examples of uniqueness in determining the artistic merit of a work of art. This is why those artists who are responsible for a new form of art are judged the "masters of the form."