



No. 3

Pierce Alexander Marks

The Merit of the Photographer

Once we begin to think of artistic success as a matter of bringing objects worthy of love for their own sake into being (as described in No. 1 and No. 2), we can easily see the difference between aesthetic value (or creative success) and the praiseworthiness of the artist. An artwork, or any human artifact, might have value, be worthy of love for its own sake, be inherently beautiful, or count as a “success” of the creative process without the artist being worthy of (any significant) praise. An artist may create an artwork by pure accident, playing a purely accidental role in the creative process. Perhaps the painter stumbles over a few bottles of paint, spilling them onto a canvas in just the right way. The final product, though it may be an exceptionally beautiful abstract work worthy of love in its own right, is not really due to the intentions or deliberative actions of the artist. As such, it does not seem right to lavish praise on the artist for creating the artwork--the work displays no technical skill, no aesthetic vision, no expressive or emotive intention. And yet the work may be exceptionally beautiful. The aesthetic value of what we create and the praiseworthiness (moral status) we receive from having created it are distinct (though interrelated).

Further, the degree to which an artist deserves praise seems to correlate with the degree to which their intentional, deliberative processes and activities are responsible for the final product. Narrowing in on the world of photography, imagine two photos. The first is a quickly taken snapshot that turned out beautifully by sheer luck. No post processing was done on the image and, in the moments leading up to the firing of the shutter, the photographer was paying no attention to the subject, giving no thought to composition, etc. A finger accidentally depresses the shutter release, and, click, a magnificent photo--a seemingly stylized rendering of a sunset--is born. Now imagine a second image, identical in all noticeable aspects, except one: the photographer had envisioned the final product in their mind beforehand, and through a long and painful process of trial-and-error was able to produce the image. Clearly, the first artist got lucky, and it is not to their credit that the photo exists. But the latter has done something commendable. And yet the image is the same. The more intentional, focused energy the artist puts in, the more they themselves are worthy of praise. Yet, the value or beauty of the artwork itself remains unchanged.

Instant photography, along with snapshot and pure photography, are wonderful examples. Each of these mediums can produce stunning results even without intentional post-processing. But, compared to the more ‘painterly’ approaches to photography, the involvement of artistic intention in creation is minimal...



Fort Smith, AR



Wichita, KS

...That is not to say, as some suggest, that there is no intention or individual style of expression in these photos. The pure photographer can, in fact, exert considerable influence on the final image. Artistic input is merely limited, much more limited than music, painting, or other forms of photography. If this reasoning is correct, such limitations imply a limitation on the artist's responsibility, and therefore praiseworthiness.

Along these lines, Strand's criticism (mentioned in No. 2) has recently weighed me down: is my photographic work really just a manifestation of a desire to paint, without the ability? Is photography merely serving as a less impressive stand in for painting? Is being a photographer somehow less impressive or worthy of praise than being a painter, musician, etc?

Upon introspection, I do seem to desire something akin to the praise one gives to a master painter. I desire to be seen under the romantic idea of "the arts," as a visionary or great creative mind manifesting new forms of beauty through technical ability and sheer acts of will, guided only by good taste. Knowing that I, by pursuing my passions (prose and photography), neither garner nor deserve this kind of praise sometimes bothers me. But why?

Choosing a line of work that is seen, in the eyes of the prevailing culture, as "lower" than others is difficult for those not given to overconfidence. Recognizing that, in some respects, culture is correct to lavish a lesser degree of praise on us breeds more insecurity. My thoughts along these lines often get the better of me, and I have several times given up creative projects because of them. In this way, my ego often stands in the way of my creativity.

But there is a fairly easy way to defang such thoughts. Notice that this way of thinking is focused primarily on an artist's insecurities about themselves, not on the status of their art. By shifting our focus onto the artworks themselves, and by taking delight and fulfillment in them regardless of how they can aggrandize us, can be liberating.

Think back to the nearly identical photos discussed above. Should we not delight in the very existence of the photograph, and focus less on the artist's role in creating it? Both are surely valuable, but to place so much emphasis on the role of the artist at the expense of the photograph is to devalue the artwork. Even if, as the most skeptical anti-photography aesthetes charge, the photographer is only an instrument of beauty, and neither the creator nor the visionary responsible for that beauty, would this strip significance from the pursuit of photography, from the photograph, and from the artist?

When I reflect on these questions, I come again and again to the same conclusion: regardless of the precise role my free, intentional actions play in creating beauty, my engaging in photographic processes is still meaningful... valuable in virtue of its bringing beauty into the world.

Especially as regards pure photography, my role as photographer is primarily one of cooperation with the natural world in such a way as to produce a beautiful image. I, who am part of nature, harness nature to bring a further natural being, the photograph, into existence. I may adjust certain color values, stitch together several images, or frame what is before me in certain ways, but I am always still harnessing what has been given, combining it with my capacities, and bringing forth something new. This is an incredible process to engage in, even if I am serving as just one of many causal factors in the production of an image (which I grant here only for the sake of argument).

Only the dense could fail to see that these difficulties apply to all other artforms, differing only in degree. For freewill and artistic inspiration are always limited, restricted by external, cultural and natural forces: we are less responsible than we'd like to think. This should put to rest the myth of the artist, of a single, artistic visionary responsible for the creation of the artistic masterpiece. The only such artist would be Being itself, the source and rational principle of all things that borrows nothing from any other.

In light of all this, I have begun to acclimate myself to the idea that responsibility for the final product is always limited, artistic agency always restricted. And yet I find myself grateful to engage with nature, with God, as mere co-creator. By shifting the focus away from my own status as an "artist," I am able to marvel at the beauty of creativity as synergistic co-creation, a union of God with His creation in and through the human being. Let us strive to create artworks that are beautiful, valuable, lovable in themselves, and which better the world just by existing. Let us love beauty and serve it. Does the stem of a flower chafe at its total dependence on the sun to produce its bloom? Or what of the tailorbird, is it any less honorable for its ornate nest to be a matter of instinct, not completely unrestrained deliberation? How ironic: in shifting the focus away from the self, and onto the very processes that once seemed to be restrictions upon that self, the baseline value of the photographer as an instrument of beauty has been revealed. Of course, the photographer can be much more than this, given that great control can be exercised over a pure photograph.

Instant photography has become a spiritual discipline, a sort of meditative practice in my life. It provides an opportunity to engage with the world creatively, while intentionally placing limits upon my role in the creative process. Unencumbered by the complex controls of a full manual camera, I am free to consciously embrace the fact that each photograph is something more than a pure act of my own will, something other than an embodiment of my artistic vision, and that the beauty of the resulting image does not belong to me.

P. A. Marks
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Wichita, KS



Pawnee, OK



Oklahoma City, OK



Oklahoma City, OK



Stillwater, OK



Fort Smith, AR



Talequah, OK



Wichita, KS



Along HWY 97, WA



Brewster, WA



Grand Coulee Dam, WA



Methow, WA



Near Twisp, WA



No. 3: The Merit of the Photographer

Music can captivate the ear in an instant; films are able to command attention through motion. But a still image, no matter how beautiful, is easy to overlook unless presented as something set apart from the ordinary. This photobook series is an attempt to liberate our view of photography from purely instrumentalist or hedonistic understandings. Each begins with a short essay on aesthetics, intended to frame the spirit of the pictures that follow.