

Exhibitions from Three Perspectives

I have been lucky enough to have experienced Exhibitions from three different perspectives; an entrant, a selector and a helper. From these experiences I have come to understand many things. Amongst these is entering exhibitions is an important incentive to photography, that there is a considerable amount of effort to putting on an exhibition and that selectors are not out to get you personally!

Perhaps the most common experience for photographers is that of an entrant. I hope that all camera clubs are encouraging their members to enter the federation and national exhibitions. Entering makes you consider your photography more carefully and maybe even prompt you into going out to seek photographs for exhibitions. This can only help to improve the standard of your work.

To enter an exhibition you need to have an entry form, there will usually be some around your camera club or someone will know where to get them. Read the entry form carefully to check for special rules, which sections are being run and to find out closing dates and entry fees. Then you can gather your entries together, fill out the entry form and post them off (or hand them to a local contact where available). You need to keep records of your entries, because you will never remember what you entered, especially a year later when the next exhibition comes around. Then you wait!

Eventually, after the selection day, you get a report card back. I receive these with a mixture of excitement and trepidation. How many photos have been accepted, have I won any awards or are the results disappointing as normal! At first the scores are just a jumble of numbers. You have to sort out the acceptance score, which can vary between sections and between exhibitions. Then you can sort out how many of your photos have been accepted. I usually go through the emotions of shock, disbelief followed by anger followed by resignation. Occasionally winning an award makes up for the disappointments. You can't judge a photo on a single exhibition result, appreciation of photographs is largely subjective and all selectors are different. However, if a photo gets low marks at, say, three exhibitions, then maybe you should seek advice from an experienced exhibitor. I would hope that this sort of advice is being given by judges at our internal club competitions but, in my experience, some fall short of the mark.

Just a few words of advice from someone who has been entering exhibitions for some 20 years, accept the results and move on, listen to other peoples advice and opinions, keep records and persevere. Aim for one of the distinctions based on acceptance (BPE star ratings, FIAP ratings). This will give you a sense of purpose for your photography and the catalogues will give you ideas and show you the standard you should be aiming for.

Once you have 'paid your dues' as an entrant and have shown that you understand and can produce work of the required standard, you may be invited

to be a selector. I am proud to say that I have been a selector for many exhibitions from Federation to International level. Being a selector allows you the chance to choose pictures that you like, but you don't have it all your own way because there are usually two other selectors as well, each with their own ideas and, of course, there is a general high standard to uphold.

I'm sure that most of you understand the process of selection, but I will remind you of the major points. There are usually three selectors and each has a marking machine to give scores of 2 to 5 for each photo. Therefore a photo can score between 6 and 15. The organizer knows how many photos he requires in the exhibition and sets the acceptance level accordingly. Quite simply, if a photo scores the acceptance level or above, it gets into the exhibition. Usually the acceptance level is around 11. Occasionally there may be too many acceptances if all the 11s (for example) are accepted. The 11s are then marked again by the selectors and split into 4 groups. It should then be possible to choose which of the 11s make up the required number for the exhibition. If you see a score of 11+ it means that the photo scored 11 and then was remarked to be accepted.

Now let me describe a day in the life of a selector. Selection usually starts about 9.00am, so if you have a distance to travel this may require an early start. When you arrive you are met by a state of organized chaos, with people working round tables covered with piles of prints or slides, people setting up easels, projectors, screens and the marking machine and, quite often these days, a small group clustered around a laptop muttering things like "have you tried switching it off and on again?!" You are offered a cup of tea or coffee and meet your fellow selectors. After a while the organizer calls for order and the day becomes more serious.

You take your seat in front of the easel or screen and the organizer explains the different sections to be seen and details of the awards to be decided. The a hush descends and the selection process begins. First a random selection of entries may be shown to get the selectors' eye in. Now the work starts in earnest. Like a metronome, a photo is shown, the title read out, the selectors mark, the score is announced and we move on to the next entry. This continues until the section is finished (maybe 500 to 1000 photos) or until a break for refreshments is called.

It is obvious when a picture only deserves a 2, usually because of some technical problem (e.g. camera shake, over sharpening, wrong exposure etc.) or simply because of lack of interest (a snapshot). It is also pretty obvious when a picture deserves a 5, because it has some special appeal to the selector (the 'wow' factor). However, it is less obvious to decide on scores of 3 or 4. There are so many aspects of the photo to consider and very little time to think. This is why selectors are chosen for their experience. It is difficult to say why some pictures score 3 and some 4. To be honest, a selector reacts instinctively but, if asked, could explain why they gave that particular score. The major aspects to be considered are appeal, interest and technical quality. A picture with a clear and simple message, with good lighting and no obvious technical faults will generally

score 4 or more. Remember that the difference between scoring 3 or 4 could mean the picture scoring between 9 and 12. A picture with 9 will rarely be accepted, a picture with 12 will normally be accepted.

There is little or no discussion amongst the three selectors up to now, but that is about to change. After all the entries for the section have been marked the organizer sorts out the acceptance level. Sometimes this is just right, but we may have to remark one score level to get the numbers correct. Once the organizer is happy with the numbers, we can move on to the best bit of the day, choosing the award winners. There are a few variations between different exhibitions. Some accept any photos where at least one selector has given it a 5 and these photos may be shown again, along with all photos that scored above 12 or 13 so that the selectors can whittle these down to the award winners. This is where the selectors discuss the photos as the award winners have to be a consensus decision. In my experience, although the discussion can sometimes become agitated, it is quite easy to agree on the winners. Usually, each selector can also give an award to their own favourite picture.

Eventually all the entries have been seen and marked and all the awards decided. Sometimes the selectors may be asked to make some comments on the experience and after that they can go home. I find selection days exciting. I travel home still feeling the buzz from the day, until the inevitable tiredness kicks in!

The last perspective I would like to describe is that of a helper at a selection day. I have been an organizer of one national exhibition and have helped at countless other exhibitions. Quite simply, these events would not happen if no one volunteered to help. The organizer's job is obviously the most difficult and he (or she) is usually helped by a sub-committee. The tasks to run an exhibition last the whole year round, booking the selectors, arranging support from advertisers, arranging exhibition space, booking the room for selection, sending out entry forms, receiving entries, running the selection day, sending out report cards, sorting out the catalogue, returning non-acceptances, setting up the exhibition, returning accepted work and then starting all over again for next year. Fortunately, there are usually enough experienced volunteers to allow the exhibition to run smoothly.

As a helper, I try to arrive early on selection day. If it is a venue we have used previously, then we know where to put easels, screens, sorting tables and selectors. We can sort out the marking machine and lighting for easels or blackout for projection. Computers are booted up and back-up paperwork sorted. Other helpers produce the much-appreciated cups of tea and coffee. Everything normally goes to plan, but occasionally odd problems crop up. At this year's N&EMPF projection selection day we kept suffering from power cuts. Not ideal for projectors or computers! Happily, experience usually triumphs over the stress.

When the selection starts, all the helpers know their jobs and are in place. For slides, one person operates the projector, another focuses each slide and another sorts the marked slides into appropriate piles. For digital images, much of the work is done before selection day sorting out files. The software to run exhibitions is becoming more sophisticated and much of the work sorting out acceptance levels etc. is done automatically. For prints, more helpers are required, to put prints onto the easel, to take prints off the easel, to put marked prints into piles and to move some prints when the piles get too high. For all selections there are of course the scorer, the title reader and someone keeping paper records of scores.

Eventually, all the entries have been marked, the acceptance level chosen and the awards given. Now we have to clear everything away, packing things carefully for next time. At the N&EMPF exhibition, an effort is made to return non-accepted work to the photographers as quickly as possible, by hand if it can be arranged to save time and postage. For slides, all that is required is a tabletop and a couple of sorters, but for prints this becomes a marathon task. We have to sort the prints out into a pile for each club, check that the prints are in the correct pile and then sort out the correct packaging. Believe me, carrying around piles of prints becomes tiring very quickly!

Well, there you have my views of exhibitions from three perspectives. I get very excited if I'm asked to be a selector and do my best to mark fairly. I enter exhibitions because it gives me an incentive to improve my photography and hopefully earn the respect of my peers. I help at exhibitions because they would not happen without volunteers. From whichever perspective, I get involved with exhibitions because I find exhibitions fun!

Now, what's that? Ah, another report card has just come through my letterbox. Shall I turn it over? Damn, those selectors really are out to get me! Never mind, there is always next time.

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