

An Address to the Cary Photographic Artistes

Cover Slide

Thank you for taking time out of your evening to attend this meeting of the Cary Photographic Artists. Your support of this organization by attending events and especially by paying your dues promptly is a demonstration of your commitment to photography especially in the summer when the best photographic light is right about now.

To provide some goal/path clarity for this evening's adventure I will be talking about an exhibition of my photographs at the Page Walker Arts and History Center starting on July 8, with an Artist's Reception on July 29. The exhibit is entitled, "A Winter Day and a Summer Morning." These are the two latest chapters of my long term project of photographing in Cary. The presentation tonight will alternate between talking and showing photographs from the overall project. We'll finally get to my latest projects, photographs of two houses in downtown Cary, the Jones Cottage (on the corner of Academy Street and Dry Avenue) and the Ivey Ellington House on Chatham Street. I will then conclude with a tech talk on the current show. If you're interested only in the tech part of the program, tell the person next to you to wake you up when that time comes.

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Let's begin.

So, where and when did this project start? The "when" is 1987, just after I moved to Cary after spending four years in Washington State. By that time, I had been photographing for about fifteen years and was looking for something to photograph that wasn't a West Coast Landscape. I decided that Academy Street was a good place to start photographing Cary.

Up until that point, my reference for the holy grail of photography was the absolute stunning "killer" image hanging on the wall of an art gallery. Think a big print of Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico, Clearing Winter Storm or any of the other great landscape photographs by Ansel Adams or any of the other recognized masters of the genre. It was made with a large format sheet film, a view camera, developed and printed by hand, mounted, matted and hung on a wall. It was the artistic equivalent of the animal head hanging on the wall of the trophy room.

Why did I think that way? It was because my generation learned photography from examples of the Masters. We sought to emulate the masters of modern photography because that's what Fine Art Photography was; a matted, framed print hanging on a wall. While the big gallery show was the ultimate in photographic showmanship, this "trophy hunting" approach to photography was a long shot because there are so few of these opportunities available. I had to think up an alternative photographic strategy because there are no Grand Landscapes in Cary.

At the same time, I was challenged by a friend to begin thinking in terms of a "project" rather than a single photograph. I thought why not combine these two ideas? North Carolina is not the place to make a grand landscape of the American West, so why not begin a project on Academy Street? It was a logical combination, a new place and a new way to work. I chose to start photographing Academy Street in Cary. The basic premise was, "How many photographs

can you make on Academy Street?” In March of 1987 I put my big wooden view camera on a tripod, slung a bag of film holders over my shoulder and started walking down Academy Street making photographs. Here are the results of the first attempt at project photography to be exhibited on my web site.

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A Walk Down Academy Street photographs.

One of my favorite houses on Academy Street is the Jones Cottage, located at the corner of Academy and Dry Streets. That structure seemed to attract me and I made many photographs of the cottage.

The photo I titled “Winter Door” became a sentimental favorite from among the first photographs made on Academy Street. Some photographs you like more than others and this was one of them. It was this photograph that made me like that particular house more than the others on Academy Street.

It was this group of photographs that sold me on the concept of photographing with a project in mind. It confirmed that I was no longer going to be “trophy hunting” but evolving to projects as a photographic narrative. I created projects in MacGregor West and Carpenter. I learned that by making more photographs in a particular location my photographs got better. Those that weren’t “the best” still could be used to transition between the “the best” photographs to tell important parts of the story. Think of a circus tent. The tent poles hold up the highest point in the tent, but the tent itself goes from tent post to tent post.

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Something odd happened along the way to working in this fashion. I slowed down. I spent more time in a single location making photographs. Rather than running from location to location I stayed put in one place making a lot of photographs in a single location. This approach to making photographs taught me to value productivity more than mobility. It makes sense. You can spend your time driving around looking for the obvious or you can stay put and look for the photographs everyone else drives by.

In short, the less time you spend driving around, the more time you will spend photographing. The more time you spend photographing, the better your pictures will be.

It took me a long time to figure this out, but I think it was worth it. I slowed down. I stopped. I looked. I waited. I asked myself questions before I began photographing:

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- Am I here at the right time?
 - Is this a “morning” or “afternoon” photograph?
 - Is this a summer photograph where we can use the leafy trees for shade?
 - Would this look better in the winter when the sun is low in the sky and there are no leaves on the trees?

- Am I pointed in the right direction?
 - What am I looking at?
 - Why am I looking at this?
 - How can I accentuate what appeals to me?
 - Where to I have to stand to make this happen?

So, you slow down your pace to take time at your location. You can do a lot of thinking, planning, conjecturing, imagining, visualizing and anything else you can think before you make a photograph. Does this sound like procrastinating? Maybe it is, maybe you are figuring out what you need to photograph. But eventually, you will have to make that first photograph.

Now getting started is tough. I've always thought the first photograph is the toughest one to make. Observing is one thing, but somehow you have to figure out how to make the first photograph. One of the tricks I taught myself was to ask the question, "How can I manufacture a photograph from what is around me?" What is the best arrangement of the things in front of me and where do I have to stand to make that happen? The three things required to make a photograph are you, light and something illuminated by the light. The question you have to answer is where do I have to stand to make the best arrangement of what is in front of the camera? When you start practicing (because that's what it is; practice), then you will work up a photograph, which is the object of the exercise. That's the key point: it's something you made happen. It may not be the best photograph, but it's one you deliberately made to start the process of creating photographs. Once you start "working up" a couple of photographs you find that you start to understand how your surroundings are organized and then you will be able to organize better compositions and then become more adventuresome. This ability to move through an area and making many compositions will help you start to think in terms of multiple images and projects rather than "trophy hunting" for the single image.

You will get the "trophy" photograph. It will probably be a better trophy than the one you think you might have made in "drive by mode." Great photographs never show up by themselves. They are always surrounded by some friends they met along the way. Hang around a bit and make some friends.

Working through a project in this fashion rather than going on a trophy hunt changed the way I approached photography and gave me experience with photographic projects. Changing the way I created photographs led me to the CPA sponsored photography project of the Icon Transformed exhibit with Jim Larsen and Heath Clayton. The exhibit covered three venues in the City Hall complex. While working on this exhibit, I took some time off and found more photographs on Academy Street. This project was "A Change of Pace."

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"A Change of Pace" photographs.

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One of the things I observed during the "Icon Transformed" project was the quality of light on Academy Street. As part of the Icon Transformed Project, I wanted to photograph the front of the Cary Elementary School. The one issue I had with that was that the front of the building was always be in the shade because it faced north. I feared that I would never be able to get the

photograph I wanted, until I noticed in the spring that the early morning sun was getting closer to putting light directly on the front of the school. Around the summer solstice the early morning sun did actually shine directly on the front of the building. It happened only at this time, for a week or two around the summer solstice. So, to take advantage of this phenomenon, I went out and made some photographs of the front of the building early on a summer's morning. By the way, I also checked out the late afternoon sun. That didn't work at the time because the large magnolia trees in front of the west side of the school shaded the front of the school.

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A Few Photographs of the Front of Cary Elementary School

As I created this talk, I noticed that it looked like the projects seem to link themselves together. It felt like something that I figured out on one project would be a key event in the next project. Moving from single pictures to projects got me from Academy Street to the Cary Arts Center. Finding the time the sun strikes a north facing building was a very important thing to learn. And it helps if you can actually remember what you learn from one project and apply it to the next or a future project. That knowledge was important for the next project.

One of the distinctive houses in old Cary is the Ivey Ellington House. It's the Gothic cottage on Chatham Street set back a little bit from the street. I have always liked that house because it is different than the rest of the houses in the area, but I never figured out how to photograph the house well. Then it struck me. The house also faced north and also might have some nice light on it around the time of the summer solstice. The waiting game began as the summer solstice approached. Then the scouting trips began, always with an eye on the clock. The quest was to get to the house early enough to get myself ready to photograph before the sun was ready to illuminate the house. I checked the afternoon sunlight and the trees to the west of the house shaded it well in the summer. It had to be a summer morning series of photographs. It took a few years for me to get that right because three things needed to come together; summertime, a sunny dawn and me remembering to get up really early on a Saturday morning. Having all those things happen was pretty difficult to orchestrate. Eventually, I got it done and was able to make a series of photographs of the Ivey Ellington House on Chatham Street.

This is a project that was conceived and planned with a very specific set of lighting conditions that occurred only during a specific time of the year. A lot of thought planning and waiting went into making the photographs. This is one of the two projects to be shown at the Page Walker in a few weeks.

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Photographs from "A Summer's Morning." The Southern Gothic Project

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Nothing stays the same; especially if you live in Cary. Academy Street is no exception to that rule. A few years ago on Martin Luther King Day, I was driving down Academy Street and I noticed the Jones Cottage was undergoing renovation. The "modernization" of a glass wall

enclosing the porch was gone and the cottage exterior was back to its old self. I was happy to see it looked almost the same as it did in 1987.

At once, I decided to trash the day's plan, grab my camera and come back and photograph the cottage. No thinking, dreaming or planning was involved. It was pick up the camera, tripod and go. Less than an hour later I was inside the construction barrier, photographing the light and shadows on the porch. A truck drove up and parked in the yard. A man got out and came over to me. I figured I was going to be asked to leave the job site. Instead, I asked him if it was OK to photograph the house. He said that wasn't a problem. I decided to up the ante and asked him if I could photograph inside the house. He said since it was a holiday, no one would be working and he would be happy to unlock the door and let me photograph the inside of the house.

I was just given two of the most important gifts that a photographer can receive. One is the gift of time. I had the entire building to myself all day because there were no workers on site. The second and most important gift was the gift of access. Access is really important because if you have permission to enter a place, you cannot be thrown out. Seems kind of simple, but knowing you have unrestricted access to a location will allow you to concentrate on your photography. At that point you are the person deciding when you are finished, not a police officer. That is worth a lot because you are free to concentrate solely on your photographic compositions without being asked to leave or being arrested for trespassing.

So I spent the morning photographing the Jones Cottage and stopped when I could see nothing more to photograph. Here are some of the photographs I made that morning. These photographs will also be exhibited at the Page Walker.

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Photographs of the Victorian Lady

I am very pleased with the way this project turned out. The images and the presentation seem to go together very well. It was one of those days where everything seemed to work out for the best. The beautiful winter sunlight, the shadows, the ability to access the building and having it all in a place that I enjoy very much made this project a success to me.

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So, now that I have shown you many photographs, I would like to discuss some of the more technical aspects of these presentations. So, wake up those folks that went to sleep because we are going to talk some tech. There is always the warning that comes with describing tech stuff. This is the way I do it. I do it this way because this is the way I learned to do it to meet some specific needs for the way I present my photographs to the world. I think it's best to think about what I am trying to do rather than doing exactly what I am doing.

Starting right at the beginning gear-wise, I use the Panasonic GH-2 with several lenses. The XD 14-45 and the Vario 7-14 zoom lenses were used in the last two projects. The camera and lens were supported on a Feisol CT3301 graphite fiber tri-pod. I always use a tri-pod when doing photography. I also use a remote shutter actuator. (It used to be called a cable release.) These are the old habits of an old view camera user. Some things I just can't give up. While I do

embrace the advances in technology such as image stabilization, I much, much prefer analog image stabilization over the digital variety. I don't know if it's true or not, but digital image stabilization just might manipulate the pixels right after capture. If I'm going to digitally manipulate a file, I would rather do it with a full size processor rather than something that runs the camera. (This may not be technically true, but I sometimes don't let facts obscure the way I think the world is.) I also like good lenses. You can use the \$200 kit lens or spend three times that for the pro lens. The Panasonic XD lenses are really expensive and I might add really, really worth it. You can see that on the screen.

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For post processing images I use a combination of Light Room and Photoshop. Light Room is a help in cataloging and just about all the basic, non-destructive image editing. I also make edits in photoshop to rectify images, straighten lines, remove wide angle convergences and other edits where I want a lot of control over the image. When making architectural pictures, we all expect to see vertical and horizontal lines. I have never achieved any reasonable skill with spotting in LightRoom, so I use photoshop if I need to spot an image.

I will do a tech tip here on sharpening, because I do sharpening in both LightRoom AND photoshop. It makes it so much better.

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Here are the sharpening settings I use when I sharpen in LightRoom. They are not intuitive. I got them from my friend Brooks Jensen who earns his living making sure peoples' photographs published in LensWork magazine look great. I convert to black and white, because I really like black and white. It's a character flaw. When I started doing photography, if you were doing your own processing, it was black and white. I can "see" black and white much better than I can see color. With the advent of digital photography, everything is color and sometimes it is very beautiful, but just about everything I do is still in black and white. I use the slider bars in Lightroom and I have found that only a few colors will actually make a difference when I convert an image to black and white. Then, I use the LensWork platinum split toning pre-set to give me that warm split tone look. When I was making silver prints in a wet darkroom, I liked the cool blue grey black from selenium toning, but once I started making my own platinum prints, I fell in love with the warm tone and have never gone back to the cool selenium tones. My friend Brooks Jensen says warm tone prints look sharper than the cool tones. If that's so, I'm OK with that, too.

I export the LR files to photoshop and then I apply another sharpening regime to the image. This second sharpening technique was suggested by another photo friend, Harold Ross. Harold is a commercial photographer who is a master of light painting. His technique, in combination with Brooks technique gives some really sharp images. Again, here are some really non-intuitive settings for sharpening. There is always the possibility that you can over sharpen. Noiseware comes to the rescue to soften parts of the photograph up so they don't look crunchy.

At this point the image has been perfected in PhotoShop. This is what I call an exit point in the process. The normal person will print from photoshop or send the file out to a commercial printing house. I do neither. Descend with me into the madness of my extended work flow.

My final work products are publications rather than individual images. When you view them on my web site, they feel like a book. Because they are publications I go through yet another workflow to create these documents. Adobe InDesign meets my needs to combine pictures and text because photoshop does not do text well and Illustrator doesn't handle images. Creating documents requires an entirely different set of skills and new stuff to learn, decisions to make and a new way to look at presenting photographs. Here are a few of the things I worry about in completing a photographic project:

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- Writing an introduction or artist's statement.
- Sequencing the images
- Selecting the proper font that works with the project
- Positioning the image on the page
- Borders and backgrounds for the images
- Title blocks
- Cover art and end pages
- Hand finishing the folios if I create a physical publication.

I wind up creating an InDesign document that is multiple pages because if you look at the web version, it has to be a complete book and if I choose to make a printable folio, it's easier to print out. So, yes, if you are paying attention, I create two separate InDesign documents, one for printing a folio, one for viewing on the web, and in this case, I created a third document that is used for making exhibition prints. And yes, I have to re-size the photoshop versions for all three versions of images to use in the presentations and I have to create different InDesign publications for each one.

Once the InDesign publication is complete, I export the InDesign publication to Adobe Acrobat. Acrobat file format is a universal format that can be viewed by many different devices, so it's the logical choice for on screen presentation. It also greatly decreases the file size and makes it much easier to print on a photo printer or view on your iphone, ipad or computer. After the InDesign publication is converted to an Adobe Acrobat document, I can print it on my printer. I use the adobe advanced black and white function with a nice warm tone. I use Epson inks and Epson Ultra Premium Matte Presentation Paper. My printer is an Epson R2400. I have no idea how old it is. It just keeps chugging along and turns out very nice prints. I will use it until it stops working, can't be fixed or Epson stops making ink for it.

I mount, mat and frame all my photographs so that is a task that takes up a lot of room and a lot of time. One way to make the process easier to manage is to standardize the size of the prints, mats and frames. This current show will have two sizes. The Victorian Lady photographs will be framed to 16" by 20" and the Summer Morning photographs will be framed to 11 x 14. This decision is driven by the exhibition location. The Victorian Lady photographs will be hung in the gallery and the Summer Morning photographs will be hung in the outside hallway. There is a definite limit on how far away you can be from the photographs in the hallway, so I thought the small photographs would be the right size for people walking down the hallway. In the gallery, you can stand back a bit, so the images can be a bit larger and still be viewed from a comfortable distance. I want to have sufficient space between the images so they don't feel too crowded together.

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Another major consideration for the exhibition is how to hang the show. The sequencing of photographs experienced by the viewers as they walk through the exhibit is always a matter of choice. The goal is to have the viewer experience the images in some sort of order that will allow them to move visually from one image to the next to absorb the vision of the exhibit. This exercise starts with a dimensional map of the exhibit space. Looking at the dimensions of the space and the running feet of wall available for exhibit, requires a mental exercise to balance the number of photographs, the size of the photographs, the lengths of available walls and what you, as an artist, want to convey to the audience. There is some arithmetic involved in determining spacing and number of photographs, but for the most part, this exercise is an iterative process. The other thing to think about in hanging the show is the height of the picture from the floor. Because most people are fairly short, I set the top of the frame for all photographs about fifty inches off the floor. I just like the way that looks.

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Here's an illustration about how I set up the photographs that occupy the longest wall of the gallery. Getting to that sequence of images is a fun project. I used Lightroom to create a "proof sheet" of the images to be used in the show. I then sliced up the proof sheet and played paper dollies with all the images to sequence them properly on the walls of the gallery. This allows me to understand how the photographs will look when they are on the wall together. Some photographs may not make the show, others that I didn't think would work might be called up to pinch hit in a certain position. While a pdf can have unlimited number of pages, there is only so much room in a gallery. Choices must be made. This task is a necessity only if you want to get finished with hanging the show in a short period of time. If you made a model of what you want the show to look like, then you can make all the aesthetic decisions ahead of time and hanging the show in the gallery becomes a mechanical project and can be accomplished quickly.

One of the requirements from the Town of Cary is that I have to provide labels for the photographs. A few years back I was involved with a project that used QR codes to conserve paper at an annual conference. Rather than take up a lot of space in the printed program, we published a picture of the speaker and a QR code that had all the information that would have normally been printed. QR codes were also used by Brooks Jensen in his book, "Looking at Images" to provide additional commentary on photographs in his book. I thought this would be a good thing to do for my exhibit because some people might be interested in hearing the artist speak about the work in the exhibit. It's like having a docent in the gallery all the time, but actually better because the artist is the person with the comments. The labels for some photographs have a QR code that explains a bit more about the photographs and the project itself.

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That's how I completed this current photographic project. I'm willing to take the time for any questions you might have. If you'd rather leave, feel free to do so, if you would like to come up and ask some more detailed questions, please do.

Thank you for your attention this evening.