

How to Succeed in

PHOTO COMPETITIONS

By Nick Melidonis M.Photog.

Increasing your chances at being successful in Photo Competitions need not be rocket science. With valuable prizes offered by many national and international competitions as well as the exposure and prestige attached to being a finalist; understanding a few simple facts about what judges look for, will greatly improve your chances of being a finalist.

Read the Rules and Comply. There's no point in having the best images in the world if they don't get in front of the judges. Read the rules carefully, understand what images are eligible as an entry and prepare and name your images properly.

Sizing Your Images. Some photographers don't know how to size their images properly prior to uploading them on a competition website. This may result in the images being rejected, or at worst, clogging up somebody's website with large files. Most competitions request JPEGs around 1200 to

1400 pixels on the widest size. If you are unsure about re-sizing images, try this link to the iconPHOTO 09 competition in which I am one of the judges, and see the tips I give to preparing and sizing images: <http://iconicimagesinternational.com/competitions/icon-photo-09/preparing-images/>. The article is also available as a downloadable PDF. To download some free software on re-sizing images, try this link to download 'jpegsizer' www.tangotools.com/jpegsizer.

It's a Numbers Game. The more images you enter, the better your chances at getting one in front of the judges that they all agree on. Professional judges are competent people who understand good design and composition in imagery...BUT...they all have different tastes which can also vary on the day. See the next point.

It's Subjective. Competent, successful photographic judges all understand the basics of good photography and most will be able to spot an exceptional image,



Valencia Science and Arts Centre, Spain. Luck can sometimes play a big part in capturing the right light in a photograph. A storm was going through and as I reached the bridge overlooking the stunning complex, the sun broke through the clouds briefly in just the right spot. The original raw image still looked flat but as a black and white with some careful dodging and burning, it won a silver distinction at the 2009 AIPP Awards. What I liked about the shot was a strong, uncluttered composition with good depth and a striking sky. The latter element is something I always look for in my landscapes to add drama and mystery.



***Meteora Greece.** I arrived late to the small town of Kalambaka and drove immediately above the town to the where the most amazing monasteries cling to impossible crags in a bizarre landscape. The sun was slowly setting and I felt this simple, yet striking panorama would look better as a split-toned treatment of sepia highlights and blue shadows. This is an example where the content matter itself would make the image stand out for competition judges. Meteora has been captured many times before but I felt this viewpoint was different to the classic, full colour, vertical shot of a single spire and monastery found on most travel brochures. The image was one of three in a folio that won the 2005 WA Landscape Photographer of the Year.*

however, they will all bring with them their own tastes and prejudices, after all, they are human beings. I've had some images that scored very highly with awards in one competition only to be totally disregarded in another. That's life and I have learned over the years that creativity is subjective and I don't take it personally, but as outlined in the previous point, the more you have in the 'pot', the better your chances of getting one that they'd all agree on.

New Representations of Ordinary Themes. If you are going to enter photos of a sunset, or the Taj Mahal, or the new baby or the family pet; they better be absolute masterpieces. The judges have all seen similar images before; probably by the thousands. What will make your image stand out? If you see images from the best photographers, what stands out is that they present a new way of seeing an old theme. It's the same reason why people often buy certain prints and postcards over and over again. The images show the subject matter in a different light. Examples of that difference could be the angle that it was taken; capturing that decisive moment or even showing the scene with dramatic weather and skies. Something has to be different to grab the judge's eye.

The 80:20 Rule. Your aim is to get your image in the first 20% in the initial cull. With very few exceptions, most judges will agree what the top 20% of the images are and will probably agree on the 80% that won't make it on this occasion. If you're in the top fifth of the cull, your chances of being a finalist are about as good as anyone else's, because from here on, the judges will debate depending on their particular tastes and a majority vote will decide the finalists.

Know Your Craft and Skills. Great images are often let down by poor technical skills or finish. If the image is overworked digitally, or soft where it should be sharp, or shows banding or other technical flaws, then all things being equal, the judges will choose an image from the top 20%

that demonstrates that the photographer has a good eye AND is technically competent.

Keep it Simple, Keep it Clean. Look at a great photograph and there is doubt as to where the photographer wants the viewer's eyes to rest; and often, they will give you an interesting path to get to the main subject matter. Images that contain too much information that is irrelevant and confuse the issue, rarely make it to the final list. Look at your image - is some detail distracting or unnecessary? If so, get rid of it, perhaps by cropping. Further examples of judging 'sins' are having bright areas at the edge of an image, hence the viewer's eyes are led out of the picture. Many photographers put a small vignette (subtle darkening of the edges) around the image, to 'contain' it, or keep the viewer focused within the image.

Go for Impact. The image has to grab the judges' eyes in the first few seconds if it is going to get past the first cull. Choose images that you like that have impact, after all, that's probably the reason why you took them in the first place. Again, all things being equal, a powerful image with impact will nearly always outscore an image that is technically brilliant but lacking punch; or where the author has chosen a 'safe' path or approach. If you enter a few images, pick a couple that are really 'left field' and bold and take a chance. They may succeed with the judges or they may 'bomb' but don't always play safe as the eventual winner will have an exceptional image that will take us to 'somewhere we haven't been before'.

Coloured Mattes? I have judged numerous club competitions and sometimes found that brightly coloured mattes or borders tend to detract from the image itself. The AIPP (Australian Institute of Professional Photography) has a rule that all entries are to be placed within a 16x20ins white matte. This then means that the judges just focus on the image itself. A good personal rule to follow if you



Mist and Reeds, Lake Wanaka, NZ. I shot this image with Ilford XP 2 black and white film. I liked the stark simplicity of the reeds and their reflections against a soft background with no visible horizon due to the early morning mist. I added a faint blue tinge to the submerged rocks. Simple, strong compositions generally tend to attract judges during the first cull in a competition. The image was part of a set that won the Self Promotion (Open) Category of the WA AIPP Awards.

are entering prints in a competition; is to use simple white mattes around your image. Also, give it room to 'breathe', that is, don't matte the image too close to the edge. On the odd occasion, a black and white image may be enhanced by a black matte, but if this is the case, ensure the black matte doesn't make your blacks in the image look washed out.

Fancy Digital Borders. There are plenty of third party software companies that provide fancy digital borders for your photos, and on the odd occasion, they can work quite well. In competitions, however, these sometimes tend to be frowned on as again, they often tend to bring attention to the border effect rather than focus the judge on the image. Digital filters or techniques on the other hand, can often be used to bring a different look or 'signature' to an image and these are used in many professional competitions. The final result, however, must not 'scream' filter and good photographers use the technique sparingly. No digital technique can turn a bad image into a good one; it just makes it more obvious.

Presentation. Have a good look at your print or digital image before you enter it; better still, ask someone you trust to look at it for any flaws (see below). I often lament at a Camera Club judging when an excellent image is marred by dust or sensor spots; clumsy cloning; dirty, re-used mattes; prints coming un-glued etc.

Mergers. Mergers occur when outlines of main objects intersect and cause confusion. A classic example is the telephone pole in the background that seems to grow out

of Uncle Fred's head. Keep the outlines of your main subject matter clean and avoid messy or confusing backgrounds.

Good Composition. There is not enough space for this article for an in-depth discussion on the 'rules' of composition. Suffice to say, competent judges know and would have used most of them and they would normally reward a brave but workable deviation from the classic rules. There are many good articles, books and websites on photographic composition and if you are going to enter competitions, you should be aware of these. More often than not, images with bad composition tend to get eliminated early in the judging. A good rule to follow is; if the viewer is struggling to find the central or main element or message of your image hidden amongst a lot of distracting and irrelevant detail, then the composition is not good.

Sleep on It. There have been times that at two o'clock in the morning after my second bottle of wine and a marathon Photoshop session; I'm convinced I have an absolute masterpiece. After breakfast the next day, "What the heck was I thinking last night?" (Or words to that effect) spring to mind. You will be surprised how the contrast, saturation etc. of the image can look very different after a day or two away from the computer screen. I remember many years ago when I was printing in the darkroom, I took the advice of a world class printer who told me to put the finished print upside down in one corner of the darkroom and view it from a distance. If the tonal values and relationships or the



Mykonos Church. This church is one of the icons in Mykonos and the late afternoon light produced a very ordinary photograph but I could pre-visualise its potential as a split-toned image similar in treatment to the Meteora image. With dodging and burning, I created a highlight around the two crosses and darkened the tonal values around the rest of the church to make them stand out. The image received a silver distinction at the AIPP Awards.

placement of the main elements in the image didn't seem to be balanced, then re-examine the image again for design and compositional flaws.

Test the Waters. Often, we are too close to our images and sometimes too emotionally attached to them. A technique I often employ before I enter a competition is to show a selection of my images to some competent photographer friends and let them choose which they like; rank them in order of preference and give me feedback about the compositional and technical flaws they spot. If you choose to do this, don't shoot the messenger.

At the end of the day it has to be fun. Choose images

that you are proud of and look at every competition as a learning process. Give the judges your best 'shot' and remember, you have to be in it to win it. Good luck.

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