

The Mouth of The Kenai

JANUARY 27, 2016 · 11:01 PM

Plugged In: Hard looks make easy work of photo curation

By Joe Kashi, Redoubt Reporter

Initially discarding technically deficient photographs is only the first step in arriving at a coherent set of consistently good photographs. Now it's time to pull together your remaining digital files into a single location, personally curate your own work and showcase only your best images, those you'll be proud to show to anyone other than a loyal canine friend.

Technical concerns are less daunting by this intermediate stage, but comparing and selecting your best work can seem daunting and beset by indecision. There are billions of technically excellent but supremely boring images floating in digital space. How will you distinguish yourself? Through personal curation — a process in which you methodically sort through your work to find the best images with broad appeal.

Rank beginners, including myself not so many years ago, typically inundate their viewers with every mediocre, unrelated but possibly interesting image on their memory cards, in the hope that something “sticks.” That's unworkable. You'll bore your viewers and fatally dilute the impact of your best work in a way reminiscent of those horror stories recounting interminable 1960s vacation slideshows.

Over the years, I've evolved a basic approach when sorting the wheat from the chaff, particularly when preparing a solo exhibit for viewers who are apt to be critical, such as practicing artists and art professors at various university galleries. The first step is to winnow out those photographs that only a mother — in this case, the photographer — can “love.”

If we're honest with ourselves, we realize in time that we initially overvalue most such images because they remind us of emotionally charged personal experiences rather than containing inherently good artistic qualities that might appeal to anyone else.

That's only human. While it's an excellent reason to retain such photographs, it's not a good reason to publicly exhibit those images to strangers or professionals and expect their praise.

First discard images that are obviously deficient technically due to subject blurring, camera shake, focus problems or unsalvageable exposure. Then, save the remaining hundreds or thousands of images in a single temporary folder that's set aside for several months until you can review them more objectively and dispassionately.

Rather than using a common USB 3 “flash drive” to store all those photos, I prefer a portable SATA III solid-state drive housed within a small, protective metal disk enclosure that plugs into the same sort of USB 3 port. SATA III drives read and write much faster than flash drives when handling large quantities of data, run cooler and are generally more reliable. You’ll need that performance and reliability when copying, sorting and processing quantities of large photo files.

A high-quality, 240- or 256-gigabyte SanDisk or Crucial solid-state drive costs \$70 to \$90 from Amazon. Add another \$20 or so for a suitable metal disk enclosure, such as the “TeckNet” 2.5-inch metal drive enclosure that’s proven reliable in my regular use. Avoid plastic SSD enclosures. They run hot and do not provide as much protection when transported.

When it’s time to sort through those accumulated photos, I’ve found two software programs to be particularly useful. Fast Raw Viewer costs about \$20 as a download from <http://www.fastrawviewer.com> and is a useful way to quickly find those files that should be obviously discarded. Despite its name, though, it’s not particularly fast and has some tendency to lock up.

After using Fast Raw Viewer for nearly a year, I reverted to Adobe Lightroom, with feature-rich visual cataloguing, keywording, ad hoc “collections” of related images, direct side-by-side comparison of two similar images and the ability to rate, flag and filter individual images in many different ways. It’s an efficient way to wade through thousands of images without anxiety.

If you move from computer to computer, as I do, you’ll find it convenient to configure Lightroom to store its data and catalogue on the same SSD or flash drive that contains the temporary folder containing your preliminary images. Doing so allows you to continue curating your images on any computer on which Lightroom is installed. In the process, you’ll avoid outdated Lightroom processing data. Be sure to back up those image and catalogue files, though.

That is the electronic infrastructure. Next week, we’ll discuss some criteria for actually making your curation judgments.