

## Response to David White's "Meaning in Art" Essay by Marta Nammack

I agree with David's premise in his essay, "Meaning in Art," that techniques and skills designed to highlight human feeling are used by the creative artist to express himself or herself in a much more fundamental and human way than possible with expository language. But, I think other literary forms, such as novels and poetry, can express and evoke feelings in the reader as well as any visual artist. Therefore, I do not agree with David's assertion that one cannot describe one's feelings within the limitations of speech. Charlotte Bronte, Thomas Wolfe, and Amanda Gorman are only a few authors whose works are full of feeling.

Having said this, I agree with David that "[t]he power lies in the work itself as it interacts with the artist and, ultimately, with the individual consumer in real time." David noted that Picasso's "Guernica" expresses the dynamic feeling of events as they happen, and he explained how Andrew Lloyd Webber's "Jesus Christ Superstar" "pushes the listener to interact with the performer and, ultimately, with the artistic work on a foundational level, intellectually and emotionally." Similarly, photographers who want to go beyond simple documentation will use various techniques to express feelings about what they see and evoke feelings in the viewer.

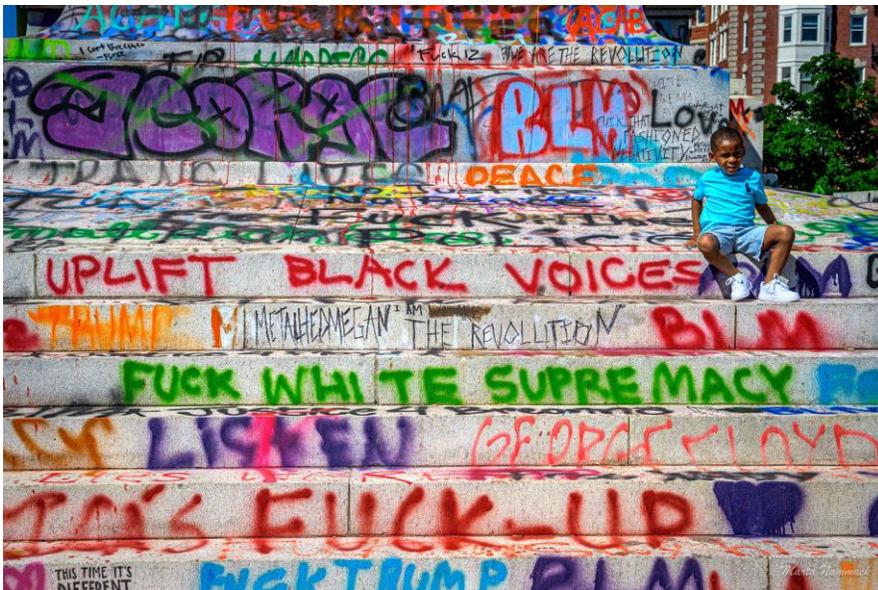
Sam Abell, a National Geographic for 33 years, said: *"But there is more to a fine photograph than information. We are also seeking to present an image that arouses the curiosity of the viewer or that, best of all, provokes the viewer to think – to ask a question or simply to gaze in thoughtful wonder. We know that photographs inform people. We also know that photographs move people. The photograph that does both is the one we want to see and make. It is the kind of picture that makes you want to pick up your own camera again and go to work."*

I am a photographer, so I will share several of my images to illustrate my points. I use the techniques of composition, texture, color or monochrome, and tones to create images that reflect the feelings I have when I take the photograph.



Afternoon smoke break

In my “Afternoon smoke break” image (above), the subject is the woman. The light draws the viewer’s eyes to her face, while her companion is like a ghost coming out of the shadows. I converted this image to black and white to minimize the distraction of the bright colors in the posters and graffiti on the stairwell that frames the couple. I wonder what the woman is thinking about and how the man interacts with her as they take their work break, and I hope the viewer is also curious.



Black Lives Matter

I took this “Black Lives Matter” image (above) of a boy sitting on the steps of the defaced Robert E. Lee monument in Richmond on June 12<sup>th</sup> last year, the day before the 5000 Man March for racial equality and police reform. The bright colors of the graffiti, the contrast of the inflammatory language and the innocent boy, and the placement of the boy on the steps of the monument result in movement, or pull, to move the viewer’s eyes around the image, as the colors, contrasts, and placement do for Clyfford Still’s pieces David mentions in his essay. I see the innocence of the boy in the face of the harsh reality of the challenges we still face as a nation in achieving racial equity, and I hope that the viewer can feel the same tension.



Black and White

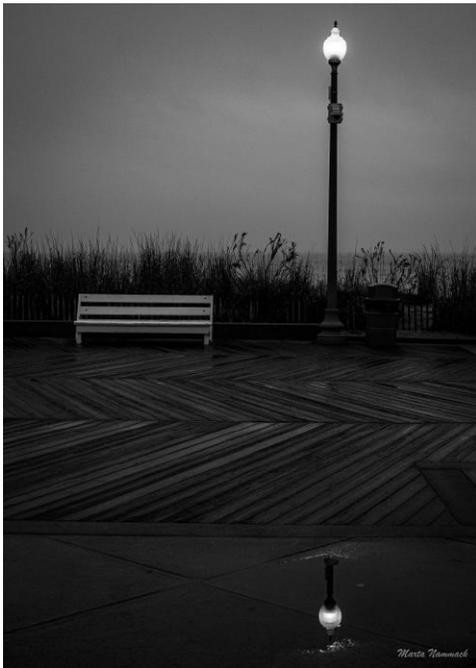
Ironically, a little later in the afternoon that day, a woman in an antebellum dress, shading herself from the sun with a parasol, stood in front of this monument, with an escort, in apparent protest over the efforts to have these confederate monuments removed. I titled this image “Black and White” because of the stark contrast between the views expressed and because I do see this as a black and white issue: the monuments must come down. I placed the woman in the bottom right corner of the image so that the monument would be more prominent. I also converted it to black and white so that her white dress would stand out.

In October, the NYT named the Lee statue as the most influential American protest art (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/15/t-magazine/most-influential-protest-art.html>), and National Geographic used an image of the same statue, with George Floyd’s face projected on it, as the cover for its January 2021 Special Issue: The Year in Pictures (<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/graphics/2020-the-year-in-pictures-feature>). This monument has become an emblem of the Black Lives Matter movement and a newly

diverse public gathering space that will be changed once this last monument is removed. The protest art that has been produced is full of strong and heated emotions and feelings.

Adam T. Crawford discussed the term “equivalence,” coined by the abstract painter, Wassily Kandinsky, whose mission was to create more emotion with his painting so that the viewer could find and feel an emotional connection to his work. The American photographer, Alfred Stieglitz, incorporated this concept that colors, shapes, and geometric lines reflect one’s inner emotions into his photographic process. By studying Kandinsky, Stieglitz found meaning in his own work (<https://digital-photography-school.com/how-to-photograph-with-meaning/>).

Even in images that don’t include people, colors, shapes, and geometric lines can reflect the artist’s feelings as he or she takes the photographs, as well as evoke feelings in the viewer. In “Quiet Reflection” (below left), I hope that the viewer’s eyes move in a triangular fashion from the bright lamp, down to the textured, zig-zag pattern on the boardwalk, to the lamp reflection in the puddle, and then over to the white bench, leading him or her to reflect quietly in this moment of peace. And in “Shadow Ladder” (below right), I intended for the viewer’s eyes to first look at the fence posts in the foreground, then climb the rungs of the fence post shadows, and then reach the two WWII observation towers. There is a foreground, middle ground, and background, and this multi-layered composition provides the depth to help the viewer feel that he or she is there.



Quiet Reflection



Shadow Ladder

I will finish with this Ansel Adams quote: “*There is nothing worse than a sharp image of a fuzzy concept.*” It’s all very well to be technically excellent, but if you cannot convey feeling or meaning, the picture is worthless. I think this is consistent with how David explained the meaning in art.