

The simple pumpkin



Challenge Yourself with PSA's New Advanced Photography Course: One Beta-Tester's Review

Are you curious about what being a photographer involves? Are you a person who has fun with new challenges? Are you serious about moving beyond your present work? If you are answering these questions in the affirmative then consider pursuing **Jon Fishback's** new course: *PSA Advanced Photography: Beyond the Rule of Thirds*. The course is all about challenges and will inspire you to try your best to meet them. It will stretch your creativity and require you to improve your photographic skills.

One course goal is to conceptualize a photography project to cover a subject's basic categories with a small set of images. The set is presented as a deliverable product, for example, matted prints for a gallery exhibition, prints prepared for an archival clamshell portfolio, or a fine-art book. Successful completion of the course is determined by the quality of each image and how well each one relates to the others in the set.

This beta-tester had four months in which to

complete the course and has a glowing report to share because the personal learning experience was profound. The best part of the course was working with Jon Fishback, the Director and instructor. Jon's interest and support was like that of a trusted friend, who brings fresh eyes and a wealth of photographic experience to a student's work.

The first part of the course involved deciding what to photograph. The first assignment was to read and study the text: *On being a photographer: A practical guide* (2008), by David Hurn and



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Flying pumpkin seeds



Pumpkin blossom greeting



Landscape of pumpkin trees

Bill Jay, whose photography-art criticism and philosophy are at the heart of the new PSA course. Next, this student generated a list of subjects (or topics) that inspired passion and curiosity without considering any aspect of photography. Later, with input from the instructor, doable projects were identified based on coverage of a subject. The criteria were: Would the subject sustain interest? Would the student have access to the subject and could it be covered in the time allotted? Could enough be learned about it within the time-interval allotted for the course? Could the subject be presented visually? Would it be of interest to others?

After several email exchanges with Jon, the subject of *pumpkins* was chosen for the following reasons: a continuing fascination with them as they are integral to memories of celebrations with families and friends; images would be created during the late summer and early autumn, months during which there should be many opportunities

to photograph growing pumpkins and pumpkin activities; a knowledge of pumpkins and people who would be good resources; the colors and forms of pumpkins and the many activities created around them could be represented visually. Finally, the subject of pumpkins holds general appeal for people of all ages. The first challenge was to define *pumpkins* because there are hundreds of varieties of squashes. Fortunately there are constraints on which members of the squash family Americans identify as *pumpkins* and those were used to define the subject matter.

Next, the project was fleshed-out by developing a framework of basic categories to cover: *growing, playing, and eating pumpkins*. For each category images to build were planned, as well as how to represent visual diversity: close-ups, wide-angles, stills, action, changes in lighting, differences in subject size and form. Pumpkin farms were explored and a decision was made about the equipment and props that would be needed. A tentative set of time-lines was developed for research, image building, and editing tasks. The final set of images would be used to create a fine-art type book. This initial planning kept the project's scope from becoming overwhelming. Once the instructor approved the plan, the student was ready to put it into action.

The second part of the course involved building the image sets. Each week a progress report was submitted with sample images to summarize what had been accomplished. Questions were raised and new ideas that developed were shared. Interestingly, the experience of planning and the



Autumn bounty



Pumpkin ice cream

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process of seeing the images through the lens were deeply rewarding, but most of the images produced were underwhelming. The prompt responses and quality of feedback received from the instructor exceeded all expectations! Sometimes there were demonstrations for a new crop, or on how to enhance the background, or on the use of a different perspective. Images were analyzed for relevance, impact, and technique. The comments were constructive and honest. The instructor would usually point-out something positive, but was direct in the need for continued improvement, raising the bar each week. One challenge after another was presented to this beta tester, in such a way as to inspire practice and learning.

The opportunity to study the subject over the period of a few months was particularly valuable. To create some of the images it was necessary to return to a location, and experiment with different types of lighting, perspective, and composition. New aspects of pumpkins not considered previously were discovered. The emphasis on a basic category also helped this beta-tester to concentrate on what to *see*, to learn from failures, and to build on potential strengths.

The third part of the course involved assembling the presentation for the final product. Making the final selections for inclusion in the pumpkin-book project was a brutal process. The instructions were to cover all of the basic categories without exceeding 20 pages of images and to consider how the sequencing of images told a story and demonstrated visual diversity. Furthermore, the layout designs were to convey a sense of rhythm and flow to form an integrated whole.

This student used a set of design templates that could be modified, provided by an online publishing company. It was great fun learning about the effects of different fonts, use of white space, and visual design.

All in all, *PSA Advanced Photography: Beyond the Rule of Thirds* became a first step on the journey to understanding what being a photographer involves. It deepened respect for those who embrace this art form; it challenged intellect, creativity, and photographic skill, and this student is already planning a new project, learning from this one! ■

Photography Courses (Part 2) Beyond the Rule of Thirds

Any member, of the Photographic Society of America (PSA), after the first year of membership may apply to join the course. However, not everyone will be eligible. This is an advanced course and the applicant should be very familiar with photography in general. For information email PSAadvancedPhoto@aol.com

Jack-O-Lantern, night

