

## *From the Kitchen*

10 March 2010



Having a new camera reminds me how much I try to capture, instead of simply enjoying, experience. Photography as an art has its place, but coming around a bend in a road and witnessing a breath-stopping scene and whipping out the camera is questionable behaviour.

I'm not using the term 'questionable' in a pejorative sense, but in the sense of: it's worth stopping and questioning what you're doing. The powerful effect a beautiful sunset or a stunning scene has on us, comes from the experience of it. With a landscape, the experience is often bound up with the context, which can be the sudden coming upon it, or its juxtaposition, or the changing light. To capture this as a still image, out of that context, can be nice and can help you store it with others, but it is usually a poor imitation of the original. If it's a sunset you're watching, it's not just the composition of the original, it's not just the composition of light and colour and cloud shapes and reflection that awes you, but its ephemeral nature and that it is changing as you watch. A photo of any one instant of this cannot capture all of these qualities.

It is also worth contemplating that the instant you capture in a photo, you miss out on as the photographer. At that instant the camera's LCD screen (on a digital) or viewfinder (on an SLR) goes blank. It's a Faustian contract.

None of this is to demean (or demonise) photography as an art or as a way of documenting events. I love looking through old family albums (or old tins and cigar boxes) full of photos and being told the stories that go with them. I also enjoy exploring to find previously undiscovered aspects of everyday objects and bringing these to light. Or seeing horses in trees (see FTK #22). And with my macro lens I can make visible many plants and creatures that are hidden to most people.

My new camera also reminds me of how many devices are made these days with bloated abilities. Some call it convergence, but it can get in the way of easily using a device for its primary purpose and to the maximum extent of that purpose. For instance, the camera will allow me to swap colours of objects or highlight one colour and make everything else grey, at the time of shooting. But I can do that easily with software on my computer, and undo it. I can use the camera as a voice recorder (without taking photos or movies), but I can also do that with my (bloated) mobile phone. Some of the most memorable and most stunning or beautiful photos were taken with what was essentially a box with a lens in one side and a sheet of film in the opposite side. When there are too many options, these can get in the way.

I'm not being a Luddite or simply old-fashioned. There are, for instance, mobile phones that pack an incredible number of useful (or just for fun) applications, that are easy (even simple) to use. My phone isn't. For instance, it takes eight separate key presses to navigate to and turn on the function that allows my phone to communicate with the hands-free monitor in my car. I have tried (with the help of the manual – all fifty-two pages) and cannot find a

quicker, simpler sequence. Until I spend the time becoming familiar with all the functionality of my new camera, I won't be able to quickly and easily use it for what *I* want to do. I need to learn about the (to me) useless functions to know how to avoid them or turn them off.

I can say similar things about modern TVs, set-top boxes, DVD recorders, MP3 players, computer operating systems and programs, heating and cooling systems (what's wrong with a thermostat control and an on-off switch?), office multi-function systems and pencils. Actually, I think I've almost mastered that last one.

So, what I've done is loaded onto my 64 GB USB memory stick a browser, an office suite, software for my camera, an audio-editing program, a photo editing program, Sudoku, Scrabble, Skype, my five thousand photos, my email client and my GPS maps. Now all I need to do is plug it into my new car's onboard computer and I can view what I want, displayed on my windscreen and controlled by my voice. I can find another number in Sudoku at each red traffic light, instruct the camera to take a photo of the numberplate of the car that just cut me off, order a pizza to be ready for picking up as I approach home and dictate my next blog post as I drive and try to explain to the police officer who just pulled me over why I was driving in the wrong direction up a one-way street. "But officer, I was only going one way."