

Titles Are Worth Thinking About



By Jeff Dunn

Photos © Jeff Dunn

Any mention of products or services in this article or anywhere else in the *PSA Journal* does not constitute an endorsement or approval of those items.

Spending a lot of time coming up with a title for your image may seem like wasted effort. Aren't titles just a way we can uniquely catalog our images, file them away, and get on to making the next? Hardly! Thinking hard about titling, at least once in your photographic evolution, can be a life-changing experience. "How so?" you may ask.

Titles are "Docents"

If you're ever involved in club competitions, exhibitions, or other public showings where titles are made available to viewers, your titles are far, far more than catalog designations. They are docents, as we shall see. Thinking about titles delves into the heart of the photographer's purposes in the art: What do I hope for from my images?

An image is not finished when it is done. It continues to have a life of its own until it is destroyed, and even then it may continue to live in memories. PSA photographers mean to have their images viewed by others, which will therefore generate in others an experience in art. Photographers, at some point, should take a short vacation from their own preoccupations and consider their images through the eyes of others, the viewers: What will that experience be like? The Australian photographer Maris Ruis hit on the importance of taking viewers into account:

"For folks actually intent on the photograph, the partial explanation offered in the title hints to them what mental machinery to invoke to make sense of what they see."

If you care what your viewers see—at least

initially—consider if you want to provide some directional guidance with your title, like a docent in an arboretum would convey a lesser-known fact about a flower.

How to Think About Titles

Of course you can enjoy an arboretum very well without docents at all. They are not required. Nevertheless, they can be highly enriching. When you feel in the mood, just as an experiment, you might consider going through the following process in choosing a title. On occasion, this process might be as significant as choosing what scene to capture in your lens.

1. What feeling do you want to generate in your viewers? Will your title help do that?
2. What is the first thing (impact) that your viewers will notice? Is that what you want them to notice? If so, it doesn't need to be in the title; they'll notice it anyway. If the first thing they'll probably notice isn't as important as something else you want them to notice, suggest what you do want them to notice in your title.
3. After the first thing you want your viewers to notice, what else do you want them to notice (interest)? Will they need guidance from your title? For example, do they need to know where the image was taken? Is it an abstract or an extreme close-up of something you'd like to identify for your viewers?
4. Is there something not strictly contained in the image that you want your viewers to be aware of? Consider alluding to such in your title.

Examples include:

- a. Similarity to another, more famous image
 - b. Symbolic or cultural significance of something in or suggested by the image
 - c. Something you want viewers to know about the circumstances of the creation of the image
 - d. Humorous aspects of an image that may not be readily apparent
5. Is there some other more esoteric aspect of your image that most viewers would be unaware of? Shouldn't you inform them of it somehow?
 6. Once you've determined the content of your title, rework it as necessary:
 - a. Does it suggest the main purposes of your image?
 - b. Is it expressed succinctly?
 - c. In the case of an emotive image, should it be expressed poetically?
 7. Finally, test it out: Show your image to some friends and strangers. Tell the title to some and not others, and see if it makes a difference.

I must emphasize that titles should have nothing to do with judging the quality of the image itself, when it comes to pictorial or creative images (by contrast, informative titles are a necessity in travel,



Image A

nature and journalistic categories). Nevertheless, an evocative title can help viewers better appreciate inherent but not readily apparent attributes of a quality image. Why risk depriving full appreciation in others with a weak title?

EXAMPLES

If *Image A* is titled Window, it states what is obvious and adds nothing to the viewer experience. But if you imagine what viewers might feel looking at the image, you could guess they might (a) feel repelled by the apparent lack of maintenance and messiness of the building and its content, (b) be interested in the old tools shown and fantasize examining them at a yard sale, or (c) admire the way the diagonal shade goes against the rectilinearly of the window boundaries. These are all reasonable responses, but I realized I wanted viewers to go a bit beyond pure observation, and perhaps think about what sort of person might own the properties shown in the image. So I titled it Window Into a Soul.

Image B depicts what viewers could not help but concur is a nice day of tree, clouds and grass. But I wanted to emphasize the glory of light and shade, and to concentrate viewer attention on the positioning of the tree right at and below the intersection of cloud and horizon, and what that might represent. So I titled it One Oak Under God, invoking the solemnity of the Pledge as well.

Abstract images can be left open to free interpretation. No problem. But it's also okay to suggest directions of interpretation as envisioned by their makers. *Image C* is a Creative photo of part of a rural, shot-up road sign that read LOOSE GRAVEL. I rotated one of its letters, cloned in two more bullet holes, and stroked in a gunsight at the letter's "eye." Rather than directly title the image, Dead Letter, I hoped that viewers might recall a cartoon showing X'd eyes for dead characters without prompting. Instead, I wanted to emphasize that using weapons is a primal urge, like learning the alphabet—and that that urge can be destructive, whether or not one is an advocate for gun control. So I titled it R was for Rifle, with an emphasis on the "was."

Image D viewers can be led in several directions by titles: Literal, Halloween Skeleton on the Bonneville Salt Flats. Humorous, He Didn't Believe in Sunblock. Philosophical, End of the Line. But what I wanted viewers to think about was margins, and hope they might discover that the contours of the skeleton match the horizon lines of the hills. So I titled it Edges of Desiccation. Perhaps a bit too subtle, but worth a try.

Readers who concentrate on competitive photography know that titles may be ignored or not even read to or by judges. My interest in titles does not apply in such situations: I am most interested in helping to convey the pleasure of viewing to attendees at club events and gallery exhibitions. If you think about what you're trying to say with your images, and help viewers along with appropriate titles, you're helping to create a better world in photography. ■



Image B



Image C



Image D