

TROLLING FOR FOOLS

by

Brooks Jensen

From time to time a person has to stand up for what they believe in and do so even if that means the risk of alienating some who think differently. It's time for me to do so.

I am, not to put too fine a point to it, fed-up with the silliness that goes on relative to the pricing of photographs. Here is a case in point: There was a photographer recently featured in an email newsletter who was offering a photograph for sale in the newsletter sponsor's gallery. It was a large "chromogenic photograph" of an out-of-focus leaf on a tree, advertised for \$3,700. I cannot let this go by without comment.

This kind of idiocy in marketing actually makes me angry. As a photographer, I am incensed because this kind of marketing makes us all look foolish. There is no wonder that the general public laughs at artists. If you don't think this is true, use my *airport test*. Go to the airport and study the people walking past you on their way to catch a flight or meet an inbound passenger. You'll find a nice cross-section of folks – average Americans and a good sampling of others from around the world, business folks, retirees, housewives, mothers and fathers, young adults, teenagers, power ties and business skirts, Levi's and Buddhist robes. They are all at an airport. Ask them if they think a photograph is worth \$3,700 – any photograph, by any artist, anywhere, at any time. Better yet, ask them if they would be willing to *pay* for one at this price. Ask the average person – not an art patron, not some museum director or gallery owner – that is to say, ask some *normal* person (ahem), what they think of art and

art prices and you'll find out just how out-of-touch and absurd we artists – we photographers – are seen in the eyes of the average person. Closer to home, ask your aunt how much she paid for the last piece of artwork she purchased.

This photograph from the online gallery is a good example. It is a photograph of some out-of-focus leaves on a tree by a photographer who's relatively unknown and certainly not a household name. It's a big print, so large it's not likely to be displayed in the average person's living room – which may have something to do with the price. Perhaps they hope to sell it to some museum or corporation for their offices. I can see the marketing logic now: *They want big and of course they have lots of money.* Wrong. It is a delusion that museums and corporations have money to burn on artwork. Do not assume that because they are large enterprises they have so much money they can't figure out anything else to do with it. People who think like this have never run a business. Businesses are just as financially squeezed as anybody else because they have lots of financial obligations – like inventory, payroll, taxes, and operating expenses, just to name a few of the legions who demand to be paid. Believe me, artwork is very low on their priority list.

But I digress. Back to the \$3,700 price tag. Now, just as an exercise, let's think about

how this looks to the average person at the airport. What is \$3,700 in their lives?

First, in order for someone to buy something for \$3,700 they have to spend more than that – don't forget the sales tax. Where I live in Washington, sales tax is 7.9%. To buy a \$3,700 piece of artwork will actually cost me \$3,992. Let's round up to \$4,000 to make things easy. In order to spend \$4,000 on the photograph, one also has to pay income taxes on their gross income in order to have that money as take-home pay available for spending on artwork. If you are in, say, a 28% tax bracket, you actually need to earn \$5,500 (gross) to buy the photograph for \$4,000 (net) that sells for \$3,700 (before sales tax). According to the IRS, the average income in America is about \$35,000 annually or about \$18 per hour. That means to purchase this photograph, the average person in America would have to work 8 hours a day for 7½ weeks to earn that much. They would need to spend almost 16% of their annual income to buy this piece of art! How ridiculous. Clearly, such marketing is not targeting the "average person" but aimed at the elite in society who can afford such luxuries. More about that in a moment.

Furthermore, compare this photograph to what else you can buy with \$3,700 (excluding taxes) in other walks of life. For example, \$3,700 will pay my lease

payments on my (fairly nice) car for eight months. According to Expedia, I could fly roundtrip to Japan six times for \$3,700. Thirty-seven hundred dollars is what I pay for my cable TV service – in eight years! It is about what I would spend to go see 400 movies in the movie theater. It would buy you a 90-year subscription to *LensWork*. (No, this is not a hint.) For \$3,700 you can buy a fishing boat or a used car. You could feed a small family for six months on \$3,700, maybe even a year. You could buy 1,800 gallons of milk, a hundred pair of Levi jeans, baseball mitts for twelve little league teams, 250 CDs of music, 90 all-day ski lift tickets, or 5,700 Twinkies. (This is fun: how about 370 pounds of Starbucks coffee, enough compact flash cards to store 23,000 jpeg images without downloading, 2.4 million paper clips, or $\frac{3}{4}$ of a tonsillectomy. *Somebody stop me.*) And yet, photographers – some photographers, anyway – have the audacity to say that *one* of their photographs is the equivalent of all of these things. Then they don't understand why it is that people laugh at them, why people think artists are silly, naive, self-inflated, self-absorbed buffoons.

Over the years I've talked with a lot of photographers about this issue. It often offends them to think of their work as a commodity like this. They prefer to think that selling their artwork is not selling a physical thing, but rather the years of

dedication, sacrifice, sensitivity, training, and etc. They believe that their artwork exists (or should) outside the normal laws of economics and the free market's rules of supply and demand. I have one word for this elitism and self-absorbed delusion. Crap. Artists are and always have been players by the same rules as everyone else in the economy, like it or not.

When someone chooses to buy artwork, they are using the same money they would have used to buy, say, a motorcycle. So when the artwork is purchased, the consumer is essentially saying they value the artwork more than the motorcycle, or the 1,800 gallons of milk, etc. Spending money is a way of expressing value, regardless of whether the item of purchase is artwork or aardvarks. There are no exceptions – especially not for hoity-toity artists.

This elitism is particularly prone to infect visual artists. Other creative people (e.g., musicians, novelists, florists, chefs, to name a few) seem to understand how regular folks think about money and why they are willing to part with their hard-earned treasure. Why not photographers? When you buy a CD of music, for example, you are not paying for the years of practice the musician obviously endured to master their instrument. You don't hear musicians complain that they ought to make more on the sale of their

CDs because their instruments are so expensive or that technology is forcing them to buy new equipment. Chefs go to school for years to perfect their skills. Novelists toil for years to write the great novel. You don't see them demanding special status outside the normal economics of life nor pedestalizing themselves with prices only the elite can afford. That's not the way things work in the real world beyond the visual arts. It's time photographers realize this.

Similarly, when one prices their work for sale, they are saying what they think it is worth. Fine. Price it \$3,700 if you want to. But don't be surprised or incensed if the public does not share your enthusiasm for your giant, out-of-focus picture of leaf. You may think it's a brilliant piece of genius work, but in the market it's always the other guy who decides whether or not to swap the cash for it – based on *their* perceptions of value.

Why is it that so many photographers believe their work is worth so much? In 1938 Edward Weston charged \$25 for a print. Factoring for inflation, that's the equivalent of about \$350 today. *Edward Weston!* Ansel Adams (the undisputed king of all photographic brand names) sold his last prints in 1975 for about \$500. In today's dollars that's the equivalent of about \$1,800 – and he was THE MASTER. (Just four years later his fame would be

so great that he would be featured on the cover of *Time* magazine.) And today's unknown, unpublished, unrecognized photographers think that their work today is worth twice that much? Sure, the photography market has matured since those novice years of the 1970s, but not that much! It takes a particularly clueless ego to think so highly of one's own photographs.

Of course, you might argue, the market prices have risen faster than inflation. Ansel Adams' photographs no longer sell for \$1,800 so math based simply on the rise in Consumer Price Index is meaningless. It's a seductive argument, but again I would propose my airport test. Sure, the prices of *collectible* artwork have risen as museums and investors have scrambled to acquire a limited resource (that pesky supply and demand thing), but you and I are not collectible artists – at least not yet. We haven't paid our dues. We haven't *earned* it. Our "supply" far exceed the market's "demand" and prices are influenced by this harsh reality. There are garage bands (large supply) and then there are the Rolling Stones (limited supply – thank God). Garage bands hope to get a percentage of the pub's cover charge and the Stones sell out football stadiums at \$100 a pop. How many concert tickets do you think a garage band would sell for \$100?

And, don't forget that Ansel Adams never sold a print for \$1,800. Even when he announced in 1975 he would stop taking orders for prints, his prices were never that high. Only the secondary market (galleries) have sold work at escalated prices long after Adams, as he would say, "went into the final wash." His fame (demand) and limited number of prints (supply) are reflected in the market prices for his work. When you and I are as famous as he is, perhaps we, too, will be able to sell work for those prices. Until then, we'd better be a touch more realistic if we expect success in the marketplace.

Of course, it's a free market for sellers as well as buyers. Anyone can charge anything they want for anything – so long as the other guy is willing to pay for it. But are they willing? Prices are set by the seller, but the buying decision is made by the buyer. Those of you who price your photographs at gallery rates, ask yourself honestly: How many photographs have you actually sold at these prices? How much income have you generated for yourself and your family? If it isn't working, why are you still doing it? If it is, more power to you, stop reading, and bask in your success. For the rest of us, time to, as they say, *get real*.

I am appalled that the state of marketing photography-as-art is so pitiful. Photography has been around for 175 years

now and there is functionally no market for contemporary fine art photographs unless you include the art & craft shows or perhaps the Internet sellers– who are universally derided by the serious art world as hacks, an art world that does precious little to encourage new photographers nor provides them an encouraging path for ascension into the higher ranks. Do you realize how anemic this is? There are literally thousands of people who make a living playing music – no, tens of thousands. There are more cartoonists and tattooists making a living with their art than there are fine art photographers. There are more quilters and knitters. There are more woodcarvers and jewelry makers. (Check your local yellow pages if you doubt me.) There are visual artists who make art T-shirts, paint swoopy flames on cars, create animations for Hollywood, but there are damned few fine art photographers who make a living selling fine art photographs – hardly any. I might, if pressed, be able to name a half a dozen, but even some of the most famous of today's fine art photographers do something else to pay the rent. They shoot commercially, they manage trust funds, they teach workshops, they have day jobs. Why is that?

Why is it that the fine art photography industry is so devoid of people who can make a living at it? Is it because, as an industry, we've done things that hurt what

it is that we have intended to do? We say we want to make artwork that enriches people's lives – both as consumers and producers of artwork. But if few people are buying photographic artwork, isn't the market broken? A "Gold Record" is awarded to an LP (or CD) that sells 500,000 copies. By comparison, I believe the best selling photograph of all time is *Moonrise, Hernandez* by Ansel Adams at about 1,000 original photographs – just shy of "Gold" status by 499,000. However, this does just qualify for the coveted status of "Tin Foil." It is my contention that this colossal failure is entirely based on this business of pricing. Everybody loves great photographs! Then why are so few sold? Could it be that price is a *barrier*?

When is the world of fine art photography going to learn what everybody else in the world seems to know? It's not how much you charge *per piece*; it's how much you earn in aggregate that counts. It is a much healthier market selling a million of something for \$1 than one of something for a million dollars. Isn't this obvious? Okay, it's more work; but is it our objective to be *lazy* or *productive*?

Think baseball. Think of all the people who are making a living in the world of baseball – managers, coaches, scouts, grounds-crew, promotional staff, hot-dog vendors, broadcasters, sports writers, minor league personnel, journeyman

ballplayers, and a few superstars who make millions. (It's not the superstars who define the health of baseball's income structure, it is the thousands of others who the economic model supports, that broad base of participants whose foundation allows the pyramid to grow so tall.) And every person in baseball is paid as a result of customers, that is baseball fans, paying a \$10 or \$20 entry fee in the form of a ticket, buying a hot dog, or being enticed by an advertiser's message. Sure there are probably \$3,700 box seats, but if that were all there were, there would be no baseball.

Any sports event can be thought of this way. Any music event can be thought of this way, any dance event. Even going to the museum is a \$10 affair where you can see the greatest artwork ever produced from the masters, but yet if you want to buy and own a photograph – at least the photograph in my example – it's \$3,700. Huh? I just shake my head. Whoever is advising these people – be it galleries, agents, or just habit – is hurting photography and this photographer, too. It's time we recognize the silliness of all of this and bring photography into its rightful place as the art of the masses, not the art of the elite. (I know, I know. *Owning* a photograph is not the same as *visiting* a museum, but let's not split hairs and miss the larger point.)

Why do galleries advise young photographers to start with these kinds of prices? Is it greed or sage counsel? Of course, galleries are highly motivated to sell work for as much as they can. We all are – just like the book publishers, car makers, grocers and everyone else in the market attempting to make a living selling their wares. But, the point that the art world seems to miss is that the objective is to *sell it*. Years ago I worked for a larger retailer who used to say, “Nothing happens until a sale is made.” Another way of saying this is that without distribution there is no purpose in making things. Sure, there might be self-gratification in the production of artwork, but then why put it in the market (for \$3,700) unless you hope to sell it?

Try this little game. I’ll list a number of businesses and you note your mental reaction on a two-position scale – inexpensive or expensive. Ready? Here’s the list: Costco. A used bookstore. The local bakery. An art gallery. I’ll bet you thought the first three were inexpensive and the art gallery was expensive. But – and this is the entire point of this article – which ones have you, personally, spent more money in during the last year? I’d love to see a poll of this, but I will predict that 98% of you reading this spent more in your local bakery last year than you spent in your local art gallery. Matter of fact, I’ll predict that a lot of you spent more in your local Costco or Sam’s Club last year than

you’ve spent on artwork *in your entire life*. And, if you are reading *LensWork*, you are probably more of an art appreciator than the average person at the airport. Imagine posing this question to those for whom art is not a part of their life!

There is no room in the honest market for the self-aggrandizement and puffery reflected in the inflated prices photographers place on their work. The free market is where all goods and services are comparable in the neutral unit of money. In this context, what you price your work is a reflection of what you think your work is worth *relative to everything else in the market*. For example, I price my 8x10 photographs for \$20. I do so because I think an 8x10 photograph ought to bring someone about the same amount of joy as a CD of music. A good meal in a nice bistro is \$20. A nice bottle of wine is \$20. A book is \$20. A bouquet of flowers is \$20. My wife and I can go to the movies for \$20. I would like to think that my photographs can bring someone as much pleasure as a well-prepared meal, a bottle of wine, a book, a bouquet, or a movie. But I cannot, by any stretch of imagination, conceive that one of my photographs is the same value as a week in a posh resort in Hawaii – or 350 visits to the art museum.

One other comment about my \$20 prices for 8x10s. People (i.e., *other photographers*) will often chastise me, “They’re priced too

low. They are worth a lot more than that!” Okay, let’s think about that for a minute. What if you were in a car dealership and you saw a car that was priced way under the market. Let’s say you knew the car was worth \$20,000 but you could buy it for \$5,000. What would you do? Would you tell the dealership they are under the market, or would you buy it and then sell it yourself for the tidy \$15,000 profit? What if you were wandering around a bookstore and saw a pristine first edition of Edward Weston’s *My Camera on Point Lobos* for \$10? Would you buy it? Even if you already own one, you know you’d buy it anyway because you can sell it for a lot more. On eBay. Tomorrow.

Well, if my prints are worth a lot more than \$20 then you ought to buy as many of them as I will sell you. Then, if you’re right, you can turn around and sell them for a handsome profit. That’s what you’d do if you had the courage of your convictions. (I’m waiting. . .) So, if you don’t buy a pile of my prints right now, is it because you know in your heart that they are not worth more than \$20? In fact, if you hesitate at all it’s probably because you know that they’re worth about what I price them – in which case your only motivation to buy them is because you want to own them, not because they are a good investment. Either that or I am one heck of a lousy photographer whose work is not

worth 0.5% the value of a large, out-of-focus color photograph of a leaf.

Let me be blunt, if not even a little crass. When an unknown photographer prices a photograph for \$3,700 what they are really doing is trying to sell their photograph to a stupid person who doesn’t know it is not really worth \$3,700. They are trolling for fools. They are trying to sell hype. And this is what really annoys me: I don’t like, as a photographer, that my “industry” promotes such an inflated, over-priced sense of value. This is not the basis for a healthy marketplace. It is not the basis for a growing market where sellers and buyers thrive. It is not a marketplace that encourages more artmaking and invites those with creative vision to join in.

So, what should we do?

- First, stop kidding ourselves. Begin by looking outside the microscopically tiny circle of photography (collectors, galleries, museums – and other photographers) and realize the big wide world of the other 5.999 billion people on the planet. You know, they *might* be interested in owning photography-as-art if we would make artwork they could afford.
- Second, learn that it’s not what we price the work, it’s what we *sell* it for that counts. If you want to be in the

marketplace, learn its rules and measures. Remember the old business maxim that “Sales cures all evils.”

- Third, remember that other old business maxim, “A quick dime is better than a slow quarter.”
- Fourth, acknowledge the difference between *making* art and *marketing* it. Don’t confuse the two. Don’t fall into the seductive trap of thinking that how you price your work is a measure of its artistic merit or value. Artistic merit is a measure for critics; value is a measure for buyers.
- Fifth, as a fundamental component of your marketing strategy, admit that not all buyers are the same. Some want big, some want small. Some want sophisticated art, some want décor. Some can afford anything, some can afford very little. Have a marketing strategy for all markets and don’t be elitist, appealing exclusively to one market or the other. This means you might have different price points and even different products for different markets. That’s okay.
- Sixth, start measuring your marketing success (or failure) by aggregate sales rather than individual print prices. Measure monthly or at least quarterly. Marketing is a business. Treat it as such.
- Seventh, don’t be afraid of pricing work

too low. What’s the worst that can happen? You might sell *too much*? And if you do, you can always slow down sales by raising your price. How bad can it be?

- Eighth, be patient. Adam’s commercial success happened when he was in his 70s. There is no shame in working your whole life making artwork that sells for modest prices. Lots of great photographers have done it before you – like Adams, Weston, Smith, Cunningham, Bullock, Weston, Stieglitz, Capa, Kertész, Lange, Atgét, Strand have I made my point? Besides, aren’t most of us in photography for the love of it rather than for the income it will generate? (I love the story of Brett Weston bragging that he never filed income tax for years and years because he never made enough money to need to. Even so, I’m not promoting poverty. On the contrary, basic economics tell us that if prices come down this attracts more buyers and income goes up.)

Finally, and most importantly, be honest with yourself. If it doesn’t hunt, don’t kid yourself into thinking it does. When it comes to taking advice about all this, listen to the truth of the marketplace rather some gallery owner (or publisher) who says they know best.

Oh, and I almost forgot, my website is www.brooksjesenarts.com – just in case.