

The Lion Cubs was rated highest when people saw it on its own. The Mountain stood out as strongest when they saw all ten together. **Both are true.**



8.37

Lion Cubs

AVERAGE SCORE

Seen on its own, with time. The highest-scored photograph of the ten.

Photograph: Gurth Bramall



25%

Mountain

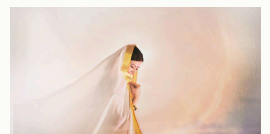
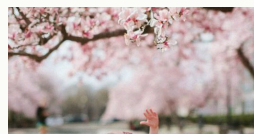
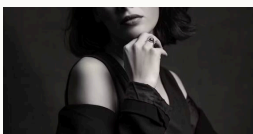
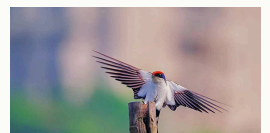
CHOSE IT STRONGEST

Seen beside the other nine. 60 of 243 respondents picked it. Its score ranked third.

Photograph: Sergey Pesterev

Same respondents. Same photographs. Two questions, ten minutes apart — and two different winners.

THE TEN PHOTOGRAPHS, IN THE ORDER THEY WERE SHOWN



A like is a courtesy, not a verdict.

A like tells you a number. It does not tell you what was seen, what was felt, or what to do next. And most of them come from the same close circle, where liking is closer to good manners than judgement. **The two people whose opinion would actually tell a photographer something — a stranger, and a mentor — are missing from almost every photograph made today.**

People meet a photograph emotionally, first.

What you meant by it is not what reaches them. What reaches them is what they feel in the first second — and your point of view may never arrive at all unless they are moved enough to look for it. **When photographs are seen in their millions, fatigue decides what gets that first second.**

So we asked for more than a number.

243 people gave each of ten photographs a score out of ten, the feeling it gave them, whether they saw a story in it, and what they would change. Five questions, ten photographs, **12,150 answers**. It is more than a like has ever told anyone.

What we found.

SIX FINDINGS

+1.39

WHAT A STORY IS
WORTH

A story moves the score. Nothing else comes close.

When people saw a story in the photograph they scored it **8.18**. When they saw none, **6.79**. Not sharpness, not light, not technique — nothing else we measured moved a score even half as far.

37.4%

WANT ONE
STRANGER
TO FEEL
SOMETHING

What photographers want is not applause. It is one stranger, moved.

Asked what would make them happiest, more chose **“one person who doesn’t know me says this made me feel something”** than chose family, a photographer they admire, or a mentor. A thousand likes came last. Emotion is the thing being asked for — and the one thing nobody is ever told whether they achieved.

7.26

AGAINST 7.97

The image is dependent on who is judging.

Men picked one photograph as strongest; women picked another. People who don’t make photographs scored them **7.97** on average. The keenest amateurs — the ones who care most about craft — scored the same ten photographs **7.26**.

48.9%

SAID “NOTHING”

Half the audience had nothing to say. That isn’t indifference.

Asked what they would change, half wrote nothing at all. A nine-year-old who took the survey answered every single one — and **his comments named things the professionals missed**. “Nothing” is what you say when nobody ever gave you the words.

7.12

LAST OF TEN

Polish is now held against you.

The most worked-on photograph in the set finished last. The most common response to it was not criticism of the craft. It was **“is this even real?”**

0

STANDARDS IN
USE

And no photographer is ever told any of this.

You enter, you are shortlisted or you are not, and nothing comes back. No criteria, no reasons, no feedback. A photographer today cannot tell you how good their photograph is — **because nobody has ever been asked to say**.

Six findings, one conclusion.

Every one of the ten photographs was scored **10** by someone. **Eight of them were also scored 1** — by someone in the same room, on the same afternoon.

What a photograph scores depends on **who is holding it**. And no photographer is ever told any of this.

The full study — 51 pages — and all 243 raw responses.

makingimagesmatter.com/study



2 cubs — and most people had an **opinion**.

The best-scoring photograph of the ten. Then the same people were asked one more question — what would you change? **111 had an answer.** Six of them, with the score each gave it:

10/10**DOESN'T TAKE PHOTOS**

“Nothing at all. The way they’re waiting, for their mom, anything else would spoil the image.”

6/10**AMATEUR**

“Cannot see what’s there in this photo. For me, it’s just two cubs looking into the camera.”

8/10**PROFESSIONAL**

“I would go tighter, lower, so that they are in your face, and thus make it more impactful.”

5/10**AMATEUR**

“It’s really oversaturated, needs re-editing more delicately. Nice pose though.”

9/10**AMATEUR**

“... I’d clone out the light brown leaf that is in the background above the ear of the cub on the left.”

9/10**DOESN'T TAKE PHOTOS**

“It’s almost perfect — their mother’s inclusion in this photograph would make it perfect.”



Too much space on the **right**.

The lowest-scoring photograph of the ten. **154 people said what they would change** — almost all of it geometry.

7/10

AMATEUR

"I will not include about 25% empty space in the right of the frame."

3/10

AMATEUR

"Crop it so she is not in the centre."

4/10

AMATEUR

"Less space on the right, more taut composition."

8/10

DOESN'T TAKE PHOTOS

"The woman is merging into the background."

7/10

AMATEUR

"Either place the subject dead centre, or obviously off centre."

THE PHOTOGRAPHER

"A paid pre-wedding shoot, composed like a Raja Ravi Varma painting. The space is the point. Everything merges into the background except her smile."

THE BRIDE PRINTED IT AND HUNG IT ON HER WALL



“Another bird on a stick.”

That was one person’s entire review. **127 people had notes on this one.**

4/10

AMATEUR

“Another bird on a stick! Re-shoot with a higher contrast background.”

8/10

PROFESSIONAL

“I would love to see the habitat. Otherwise this is just another technically good shot.”

5/10

AMATEUR

“The bird is dominated by the ugly wooden post.”

7/10

AMATEUR

“I think the subject is too small in the frame.”

8/10

DOESN'T TAKE PHOTOS

“Would have preferred the wings to have been slightly vertical.”

THE PHOTOGRAPHER

“I wasn’t looking at habitat. A wire-tailed swallow is fast — the idea was the extended wings at the moment of landing. Pure aerodynamics and colour. What we call a record shot.”

Nobody could agree what this **was**.

130 people said what they would change. **Several weren't sure what they were looking at.**

3/10

AMATEUR

"I'm not sure what the photographer is trying to capture."

7/10

AMATEUR

"I am not sure what am I looking at."

5/10

DOESN'T TAKE PHOTOS

"It confuses me, not sure what it represents."

9/10

DOESN'T TAKE PHOTOS

"A faster shutter speed would freeze the action."

8/10

PROFESSIONAL

"It would be nice to see the feet properly frozen."

THE PHOTOGRAPHER

"In-camera multiple exposure. To portray the sound in the dynamic movement, as a blur of ghungroos moving. Entirely intentional."

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“Photograph the actual subjects, not their **shadow**.”

90.1% saw a story here — the highest of all ten photographs. It still placed fourth. Several people thought the father was a mother.

4/10

AMATEUR

“Maybe photograph the actual subjects rather than their shadow.”

6/10

AMATEUR

“Crop some of the shadow. Remove the father’s glasses.”

6/10

PROFESSIONAL

“Depends if it is posed or not. If posed, can bring the light source closer so the two shadows are nearer.”

3/10

DOESN'T TAKE PHOTOS

“It should be a tender moment, but it turns very dark. I don’t feel at ease.”

10/10

AMATEUR

“For me, this is the strongest photograph. It makes the viewer look for details in the shadows.”

4 of these 10 photographs were **mine** — and they were placed 4th, 5th, 8th and last. :)

So my questions are — **why do you shoot**,
and for whom, and whose satisfaction?

And how do I improve, thus?