

Stephen Schiff Artistic Manifesto

A person works, and reaps rewards. Satisfaction and enjoyment are benefits for those of us who are lucky enough to be doing something we love, but in any case, money. Or at least that is the way it is for most. Even if one is a "professional", a scientist or engineer for example, one realizes monetary benefits even if one is forced to assign one's inventions to one's employer. The pay is good, and the satisfaction of doing a good job, creating something useful, is immense. I know from experience.

Contrast that with the artist. There are rare cases - Monet, Picasso, Richter for examples - where an artist has received appreciable monetary compensation during their lifetime, but for many, perhaps most, monetary recognition comes only after death, if at all. And, to add insult to injury, we have things happen to us like what happened to Garry Winogrand: some museum curator got their hands on his negatives and contact sheets, and produced an exhibition of material he never printed himself, in his name! Never did they ask why he did not personally print those negatives, and never did they reach into his long dead mind to glean the techniques he would have used had he reconsidered and printed them. Of course this is not unique to photographers; people write novels using the names and styles of long dead authors, imagining how the original author would have developed the plot, characters and narrative had he/she only lived another n years.

I do not think it is honest, and I do not think it is fair. You buy one of my images, have at it! Sell it for 100 times what you bought it for, I have nothing whatsoever against that. But wait until after I am dead, then mine my unsold works and archives for your personal profit? Not a chance! It is not as though I am in poverty; rather it is a matter of principle. As the person who labored to produce my oeuvre, I am entitled to participate in its monetary benefits.

So: I have decided, and have willed, that whatever works of mine are unsold at the time of my death, including but not limited to extant prints, slides, negatives and digital files, shall be destroyed forthwith. I tell you this now, because I don't wish to appear vindictive, but rather to advise you that my works are available only for a limited time. Currently I am planning to shut my business down not later than 2020, but who knows, I could be dead by then. (Actuarially, the probability I will live thru 2020 is currently 0.707726.) So the odds are on your side, you could wait until then before speculating in (or god forbid, buying for your personal enjoyment) my works. It's your decision. As for my legacy, I am not concerned. Long before the time the sun reaches its red giant stage my legacy and that of every single human being who has lived until now, or will live in the next billion years (in the extremely unlikely event we last that long) will have long since vanished.