Ban the Bed Sheets Size Matters

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by David Kachel

Have you ever had this experience?...

You decide to attend an outdoor art fair and after parking your car, begin to walk toward the displays, at once noticing from a distance what appear to be sails billowing gently in the breeze. Or perhaps it is laundry hung out to dry in the warm summer air?

You see what you imagine must be hundreds of them dominating the scene and immediately wonder if you have mistakenly happened upon a gathering of sailing enthusiasts or perhaps an exhibit by a group of laundry detergent manufacturers demonstrating their new whiter whites. Suddenly you realize that, no…

Those are photographs!

The trend over the last few decades has been for photographers in every specialty but particularly in fine art photography, to make photographs as large as they possibly can, approximating the size of bed sheets. (Allow me a little fun with what is after all, only very slight hyperbole.)

Photographers have always had a tendency to be just a bit confused about what photography is, how it should be presented, where it is going and how it fits into a larger view of the world, especially the art world. They are particularly prone to be blown by the prevailing winds, more so when said winds promise long sought rewards, *like food*.

Even Saint Ansel was not immune as attested by the infamous coffee can affair.

I admit to being a long-time, recovering Ansel Adams clone and have even written quite a few magazine articles on the Zone System and on techniques I invented primarily, though not exclusively, for Zone System use. But something has significantly bothered me about Ansel Adams' work since the first time I saw it face-to-face as it were, and it has taken me years to finally put my finger on it.

Since viewing that first Adams show, I have encountered this uneasy feeling over and over again when seeing original works by many other photographers. In fact, the problem is entirely undetectable *unless* you are looking at original prints (or posters), and really has nothing to do with the talent or skill of the photographer or the artistic merit of the work. And the problem did, to an extent, start with Ansel.

It has to do with the inherent nature of a photograph and how we relate to it. I have often stated that an artist in whatever medium is not doing the best work possible unless he/she is making the most of that medium's unique characteristics.

A pianist who insists on trying to make his piano sound like a tuba has surely lost his way. With great effort he may one day succeed, but he will have accomplished little of lasting significance. The inherent characteristics of a piano are not and never will be, *tuba-like*.

The overriding unique characteristic of a photograph is its illusion of reality. Though the public may still buy into the dated idea that a photograph actually represents reality, photographers know just how far removed is even the most literal photograph, from what was in front of the camera.

A photograph is an illusion, deftly abstracted from the real world, and one that is so nearly perfect that it fools very nearly all of the people, all of the time. (None of this is likely to come as news to most fine art photographers.)

But the photograph has another characteristic that, while not unique to photography, plays a vital supporting role to the illusion of reality and in making a photograph a photograph. That characteristic is one of intimacy and it makes or breaks a print.

Intimacy is a vital characteristic of a photograph and it is that aspect of the photograph and the way in which it supports the illusion of reality that Ansel Adams sometimes violated by giving in to the demands of gallery owners that he produce larger prints so that those galleries might sell them at higher prices.

Even if others made large prints first or during the same period, because Ansel had such a disproportionate influence on several generations of photographers, huge photographs now blanket the world due almost exclusively to the initial influence of Adams and overly profit-oriented gallery owners.

The problem *is* size. Photographs, especially landscape photographs, all too often are printed too large, robbing the photograph of its intimacy and therefore at the same time, of at least some of its illusion of reality.

Please understand that I am not talking about size as it relates to viewing distance, as most photographers would tend to think. A passport size photograph still should not be viewed from twenty feet. Nor should a mural be enjoyed from six inches. I am talking about size only as it relates to intimacy and the photograph's characteristic illusion of reality.

The basic nature of a photograph is that it is a small, fragile, tactile, finely detailed and intimate object.

For the first several decades of photography, all photographs were small and in fact an 8x10 was generally the largest anyone saw because most photographs were contact prints; the same size as the original negative which was most often quite small.

The vast majority of photographs were much, much smaller than 8x10 and a photograph was something delicate that you held in your hands, carefully examining it in every detail. In fact, the earliest photographs were often encased in elegant enclosures or ornate albums. They were unique and special objects that people treasured and enjoyed. And because the technology of the time forced photographs to remain small, a lack of intimacy was seldom if ever a problem anyone experienced.

Please take careful note that I am not claiming photographs should be small just because they used to be small! In fact, I am not saying that photographs should necessarily be small at all. I am saying that photographs should be *intimate*.

Intimacy is a photograph's most important characteristic after the illusion of reality and the bigger the photograph, the less likely it is to retain this quality of intimacy. Photographs are by nature, intimate objects. The fact they started out small was just a happy coincidence that allowed us to experience this intimacy from the beginning.

Almost everyone's earliest experiences with photographs have to do with small, *one-person-at-a-time* interactions, passing photographs around the dining room table or looking at the pages in a family album. (Or more recently, viewing them on a small camera or cell phone screen.) The illusion of reality happens on a subconscious level, but so does the

intimacy. We naturally interact with a photograph in that way without realizing it consciously and at those distances and sizes, intimacy can't be avoided.

People who take up more than a casual interest in fine art photography invariably end up purchasing a number of books of master photographs. This is because the work of many if not most fine art photographers is financially out of reach, and is also not offered in any *collectible* form other than books.

Books of photographs involve small images held in the lap. This is one of the best and most rewarding experiences of photographs and one we are all drawn to naturally, again without giving conscious thought to the underlying illusion of reality and experience of intimacy.

Just about everyone who has had the above experiences has also had this one:

You walk into someone's living room for the first time and on the wall you see a gigantic, *California-King Size*, hideous, gaudy, tasteless, oversaturated, color family photo, the photographer of which should probably be in prison (if there is justice in the world).

It is the *Borat* of photographic portraits. You try to pretend you don't notice it, but your eyes are drawn to it like a gory traffic fatality on the side of the road. Sadly, anyone who owns one of these photographs is also proud of it and eagerly asks for your opinion (mostly after misinterpreting your *deer-caught-in-the-headlights*, dumbfounded expression).

Forget for the moment the plaid golf pants, high-rise hairdo, children dressed in funeral garb, perplexed family pet and utter lack of any semblance of photographic talent. Does that photograph not also lack intimacy? Not that you'd want that experience with such a photograph, but that is not the point. Even if they weren't the Addams family and the photographer actually had any talent, this photograph would still not feel right.

This is because the quality of intimacy is missing. OK, not just missing; it has been savaged to death!

The photographer enlarged it out of existence, and what you are feeling at that moment is not unlike the recurring dream we've all had of suddenly realizing we are out in public, wearing no clothes. While we are trying for intimacy, the photograph is screaming *look over here* to the whole world.

Here's something with which we can all identify, but with a twist I bet you never imagined…

Just about every photographer who has ever had photographs in a show of one kind or another has made the same complaint, or at least heard it, about some of the attendees at the show:

He couldn't just stand there at a normal distance to view my work. He had to walk up to it and press his nose against the glass as if that's the correct way to look at a photograph.

Everyone makes the same assumption when this happens… the owner of the greasy nose print must be another photographer being overly and annoyingly critical of the technical quality of your work.

In many cases that conclusion is undoubtedly correct. But I submit there is something more going on here, even when the fellow with the greasy nose *is* in fact an overly critical photographer.

What is going on is *intimacy*; or more precisely, the frustrated attempt to achieve it, and by extension, the desire to heighten the illusion of reality mentioned earlier.

Perhaps the viewer is pressing his nose against the glass in an attempt to achieve an experience of intimacy that is not possible at the *correct* viewing distance for that particular print size, and which experience may indeed not be possible *at all* with that particular image at that particular size.

This by inference means that there is *no correct viewing distance* for that image, at that print size. If the viewer must step back to take in the whole print but step forward for the experience of intimacy, the print cannot be enjoyed at any distance because we expect and seek out *both* detail and intimacy while at the same time trying to take in the whole image.

To be clear, I agree with the widely held premise that photographs should generally be viewed at a roughly specific distance based on size alone. Closer for small prints, further away for larger prints. However, this only tells us where to stand based on the size of the print, *not its content*. Neither does it tell us what size to make the print in the first place.

I am not suggesting there is a formula for print size; 'portraits should be 8x10s and landscapes should be 16x20s'. No. What I am suggesting is that for every image there is a size (or a short range of sizes) which best allows the viewer to interact with that photograph under optimal conditions.

A size at which the illusion of reality, visibility of detail, potential for intimacy and viewing distance all converge for the best possible experience. Seldom is the best possible experience of a photograph the same as the experience one gets with a road map fully unfolded in the lap or with the smallest line of an eye chart seen from the other side of the room.

I am also suggesting that this optimal size is entirely independent of the floor space or ceiling height in a gallery or museum. If an image works best as an 8x10, this fact is true whether the photograph is in the viewer's lap or hanging on the wall of the largest gallery in New York.

Just because your photograph looks like a postage stamp on the Great Wall of China, does not *necessarily* mean you made it too small. It is more likely they made the wall *too big*.

If you doubt these ideas, then think for a moment of Edward Weston's Pepper # 30. I am fairly certain you have never experienced a print of this image larger than 8x10 because Weston never owned an enlarger!

I am also fairly certain you are a pretty cold fish if you have never once gotten lost in this photograph. Think of your most enjoyable experience of that photograph but then imagine it enlarged to 30x40 inches hanging on the wall at the conventionally prescribed proper viewing distance for that size.

Did the produce department at the grocery store or some other nightmarish connection just pop into your head? Did the intimate experience of the photograph and the illusion of reality disintegrate with the increase in size?

Fortunately for both of us, this entire topic is one of those subjects where you don't really have to decide whether or not I am right based on the logic of my arguments. You can very easily test it for yourself.

I'm guessing that for many photographers, all I have really done here is to shine a light on observations you have already made, but may not have yet fully analyzed. Now that you have this idea that the best experience of a photograph involves the convergence of multiple factors: *detail, the illusion of reality, size, the experience of intimacy and viewing distance*, you will start looking for this convergence. It is not at all hard to determine once you start consciously looking for it.

The natural tendency for photographers, in the absence of outside influence, is to make smaller prints. The trend to larger prints is due mostly to the desire on the part of galleries to make more money (they don't make much money on a 5x7 print) and the previously mentioned influence of Ansel Adams who was in turn influenced by the aforementioned galleries.

The larger a photograph becomes the more quickly it ceases to be photographic art with all the best qualities of a photograph and starts to turn into decorative wallpaper. If we wanted to create wall-

paper, most of us would probably have picked some medium other than photography.

WHAT SIZE?

What size is the right size?

I hesitate to discuss this at all because we are talking about a convergence of factors and subjective opinion. There is no formulaic approach. It depends on the photograph. An image with a lot of tiny detail that amounts to many separate small *subjects*, such as a class photograph, might be quite large because there is so much to see and it is really many small photographs contained in one. The viewer's intimate relationship with it may well legitimately take place at the *nose-to-the-glass* viewing distance previously mentioned.

A different photograph containing a lot of detail but not consisting of numerous objects perceived as separate subjects might best be viewed much smaller. The photographer must decide for every image individually. All I can say is that it becomes very easy once you know what you are looking for and why. It is far simpler to do than to explain.

Back to bed sheets…

A photograph should be no larger than the maximum size that still allows the viewer to be comfortable and intimate with it and experience the illusion of reality, all at the same time and at the same distance. I believe that size for most photographs will very rarely be larger than 16x20 inches and often not that big.

I invite the reader to judge for yourself but I emphatically claim that currently popular photographs measured not in inches but in *Twin, Full, Queen and King,* are absolutely too large and positively destroy the all-important factor of intimacy.

SOME RANDOM RELATED THOUGHTS

Most photographs work best at a specific size and therefore have their greatest value at that size. If an image works best as an 8x10, then obviously a 16x20 would be worth *less*, not more! And more important still, if the photograph is large enough that it has been robbed of it's intimacy, hasn't its value actually been destroyed completely?

Another proof of the point: Why are photographs generally printed with less contrast and more fine detail, as they get smaller? Why are they printed more harshly as size increases? I suspect this is because, in the large photograph the intimacy is lost and an effort is made to compensate for this by increasing contrast for a more dramatic image.

Another thing that tends to interfere with a feeling of intimacy is the glass in a frame and to a lesser extent, the frame itself. Glazing is very likely a contributing factor to the *nose-pressed-against-the-glass* phenomenon previously mentioned, because the glass steals intimacy which the viewer attempts to regain via greater proximity.

Glass also robs a print of its tactility and often, the visual impact of the surface texture of the paper. In addition, it introduces reflections that further push the viewer away from intimate interaction.

And finally, glass is *green*! This often destroys the subtle tonal color the photographer worked so hard to get exactly right and may in some cases prevent all the different experiential factors from coming together at all.

Lastly, fine detail often needs a small print, while prints with broad tones and lacking in fine detail can often be larger.

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