Photography and Perceptions of Beauty

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis explores what “beauty” means and how to explore it through photography. Beauty is a broad idea that needs to be deconstructed and put back together so that we can functionally understand it for our daily lives. While it is subjective, the concept of beauty isn’t so hard to reach. While it takes effort to understand, it can help understand our own selves on a deeper level and how we interact with the world. Photography can be used as a tool which we use to both explore what beauty means to us and communicate those ideas to others. This manuscript examines dimensions that contribute to this understanding and provides examples.

[keywords]: photography, beauty, poetry, art, taste
Introduction

When the issue of choosing a thesis topic befell me, I immediately knew I wanted to do something that was both challenging for me to accomplish and interesting enough to keep me engaged for an entire year of study. My eye landed on the creative outlet of photography. From there I expanded to the idea of pursuing beauty and how we can accomplish and exemplify the concept of beauty through the lens of a camera. This is a creative thesis topic, and I wanted to really challenge myself in that regard. I wanted to really dig into the idea of beauty in everyday life. The end result is a reflection of my research into the philosophy of beauty and how it is reflective of my personal creative journey. Through my thesis I hope to explore beauty and photography, as well as tell a story that hopefully will inspire others.

The Problem with Beauty

Beauty is such a broad term, and can be hard to explicitly define. The word beauty can be applied to so many different things in life. Defining it becomes so complicated that anyone attempting it will throw their hands up and concede that beauty is subjective, saying there is no use in pinning a definition to it. Simply rest on the old saying that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” as it were. While this view of subjective beauty holds some truth, the idea is lazy and encourages people to accept social and cultural norms of stereotypically “beautiful” objects without any further thought of their own.

The word “beauty” gets thrown around a lot in our contemporary culture. It may be used to refer to a piece of art or a model. In a quick Google search of the word beauty, the first page is dominated by make-up and fashion. While these are certainly objects that contain beauty, it is a rather narrow perception of such a broad term. The word is typically used in a shallow way that
rarely goes beyond exterior appearances. Often there is a lack of understanding or agreement of what exactly makes an object or a piece of art beautiful. While there are often many external reasons, such as the object’s visual appearance, what is missing is a connection to the intention and context behind the creation of the art.

It is easy to walk into an art museum, glance around and say “wow, this art is beautiful” walk out, then leave. To understand the beauty presented there it takes a certain amount of intentionality and thought on the part of the viewer. Questions a viewer might ask in order to understand the beauty of an object might include the following:

- What is this piece portraying?
- What does this piece make me feel?
- How does this piece speak to me in my current situation?
- What is the artist trying to communicate, and to what degree do they succeed?
- What was the context behind the creation of this piece?
- Why did the artist make this piece?

Questions like these allow a viewer to better explore and understand what makes a piece of art beautiful and why it is so. This is meaningful because beauty exists everywhere in our world and it goes beyond pieces of art in a museum.

There is a wealth of beauty to be found in nature. Scenes like mountain ranges, beaches, or sunsets can all be beautiful. There is beauty in the people around us. Our friends, family, and spouses all hold beauty, both within themselves and within the relationship that is shared between both parties. The examples of how we perceive and experience beauty are endless.

People perceive beauty in many forms around us in our daily lives. The challenge comes when we want to break down and understand that beauty. If we want to see beauty as something
that can enrich our lives, and not as a shallow word that gets thrown around on Instagram, there needs to be intentionality in the way we pursue beauty in our own lives.

Deconstructing Beauty

The hurdles to truly understanding beauty are not so high as they may seem. Beauty is not some lofty abstract idea reserved exclusively for the highly artistic minds in our society. You don’t have to have a degree in Philosophy to understand and pursue beauty in your life. Life is full of challenges we must figure out regardless of career path or social status. Wrestling with these ideas is a good thing for furthering our understanding of both ourselves and the world around us. Encountering problems along the way allows us to grow in how we view beauty.

Understanding Subjectivity and Taste

The first hurdle we come to in the discussion of beauty is the idea that “beauty lies in the eye of the beholder.” As stated before, this isn’t entirely untrue, but is a cheap way out of actually understanding what makes something beautiful. There exists a tension between the subjective views of each individual person and the objective truths about the objects themselves. Let’s look at food as an example. One of my favorite places to grab dinner in Richmond is Cookout. You can get a surprising quantity of decent food for five dollars. I love it.

That being said, Cookout is very clearly on the lower end of the spectrum when it comes to eating experiences. It’s quite easy to see that a dish from the Arpege, a 3 Michelin-Star French restaurant in Paris, would be objectively better than a five-dollar Cookout tray. The chefs at the Arpege have trained years to perfect their craft and deliver the best dining experience possible. They use only the freshest ingredients to craft their dishes. The restaurant itself has earned 3
Michelin-Stars, the most sought-after accomplishment in the restaurant business. Meanwhile
Cookout employs high schoolers who may need to be reminded to wash their hands on the way
back from the bathroom.

The difference here is obvious. Yet, despite the objective difference between the two
places, despite Arpege clearly having the finer food, a Cookout tray still brings great joy to many
people, including myself.

Of course, there are many factors that play into this. Things like cost and availability
heavily sway perceptions of these two restaurants. But the point to be made here is that simply
because the Arpege is objectively better than Cookout in many ways, the tension between the
objective truth of these two restaurants and the subjective perceptions of those enjoying them
shows there is space for personal taste to dictate the importance of objects around us.

**Familiarity: Intimacy vs Novelty**

Once we better understand our personal tastes, knowing how to intentionally encounter
beauty becomes our next step. In this respect, life experiences can be categorized in two ways:
 novel experiences and intimate experiences.

Novel experiences are completely new to us. These could be experiences like going to
see the Grand Canyon or hiking a mountain. Anything that is new to us and serves as a break
from our routines. It is their newness that makes them novel experiences. Intimate experiences,
on the other hand, are those which we encounter often, sometimes on a daily basis. Waking up,
going to work, and making dinner might be considered intimate experiences.

While it is often easier to see beauty in a novel experience, the potential for experiencing
beauty exists in both. It is easy to get caught in the day-to-day routine and fail to see the beauty
that exists around us. That which we are intimately familiar with has a huge potential for beauty. This is easily seen when considering art. Music, as an example, contains high potential for both novelty and intimacy. The first time hearing a song can lead the listener to nodding their head and tapping their foot in time to the beat. Somewhere in the middle of the song a thought similar to “dang, I really like this song” may pass through their head and lead the listener wanting to hear more. This initial experience is new and offers the listener a way to encounter the beauty within the song.

On the flip side, once that song and all the other songs on the album have been listened to 100+ times, the listener is intimately familiar with the music. The way in which listeners are experiencing the beauty within the music has changed from the first time they heard it, but their comprehension of what makes music beautiful may have increased as well. With familiarity can come a rich understanding of what makes an object or experience beautiful. While it is easy to understand the benefit of familiarity for pieces of art such as music, it can be harder to apply to the familiarity in our daily lives. The day-to-day can often become mundane and uninteresting.

Wonder is the key to seeing beauty in both the novel and intimate experiences. Since wonder is a feeling of awe or amazement, often at things unexpected, it can be easy to feel in novel experiences, but it is also important to be looking for it in the intimate experiences too. We fail to see the wonder in things we are intimately familiar with because we have grown used to them and they fade into the background of our conscience. It can be hard to ascribe the word wonder to our morning commute, but the reality is there is an abundance of opportunities to find beauty in our daily lives, we just have to open our eyes and look for them. There is wonder to be found in our intimate experiences, and it just takes some effort on our part.
Photography and Beauty

Photography helps us understand and capture the tension between the subjective views of each individual person and the objective truths about the objects themselves. As an artform, photography allows us to follow a process that brings out the beauty in our lives.

There are two ways photography is approached today. The first one, which we’ll call the “Arpege” approach involves people who are highly skilled with a camera and take pictures as a way of creating art. These photographers are professionals and artists who have a clear vision of the shot they want to capture and will go to great lengths to get it. These are people like Ansel Adams or Robert Frank, photographers whose work continues to impact people to this day. The Arpege approach to photography involves thousands of hours of dedication and hard work but results in pieces of art that communicate deep emotions to their audience long after the photographers are gone. Many would say their pictures capture and portray beauty.

The contrasting approach would then be dubbed the “Cookout” approach. This would include the majority of non-professional photographers casually taking pictures using smartphones. These people don’t have thousands of hours of photography under their belt and don’t typically take pictures with a clear artistic vision in mind. But due to the ease of accessing photography via our smartphone cameras, many people still take and cherish hundreds of pictures as they live their lives.

Despite the clear difference between these two levels of photography, there still lies a potential for immense value in both. Beauty can be found, captured, and portrayed by someone without years of photography training. While it takes some thought and intentionality, thousands of hours of training isn't necessary to take pictures with your phone that hold value, both in your
life and for others. Skill and experience obviously matter, but just as clearly, they are only part of the formula when it comes to creating or embracing beauty in its manifestations.

While the difference between these two approaches is real and shouldn’t be dismissed, it should be understood that a photo that captures beauty does not have to be the highest quality photo or be shared with and admired by thousands of people to be valued or meaningful. A picture captured on an iPhone may only be viewed by the individual who took the picture. Yet, the value lies in that person's experience and the degree to which they were able to capture the beauty within the experience using photography.

A deeper understanding of beauty can be sought after and achieved by considering the important philosophical ideas behind it, and studying art forms, such as photography, to gain a functional grasp of that which seems out of reach. Beauty can be something that every individual
is striving to experience in their day-to-day lives. To do that we need to understand what it is we are looking for, and why.

A deeper understanding of the topic of beauty requires a look at both the scholarly and artistic work of those who have come before us. As important as it is for us to look inward to ourselves and forward to the future for inspiration, History can serve to guide and inform the way we look at beauty.

**Scholarly Research**

Crispin Sartwell in his *Six Names of Beauty* examines beauty as understood in the context of multiple different cultures (2004). Sartwell reflects on beauty as we experience it in our day to day lives. We all wake up to live life every day, but that life probably looks a little different for a person in Southeast Asia than it does for a Canadian. It would stand to reason that the way we perceive beauty probably differs as well. Crispin’s analysis of different cultures emphasizes both the vast difference between cultures, but also reminds of us of how similar we truly are. The content of our days may differ in the language we speak, the food we eat, and the way we learn, but we are united in that we all desire to experience that which is beautiful. This comparison serves as a reminder that people, even in Richmond, KY, come from a variety of backgrounds.

Throughout his breakdown of “beauty” as we understand it in our western culture, Sartwell points out how beauty lies in experiences and memories, more so than objects themselves. While objects and people do inherently carry some type of aesthetic value, the beauty he refers to is tied to the person experiencing it and less so the object that manifest it. While it is important to recognize the objective beauty in design and aesthetic value, Sartwell
strongly suggest that the most relevant discussion of beauty lies within the realm of life and how we experience them. Beauty and how we perceive it is tied to us and how we see it more than it is tied to the objects and people we see everyday. From this perspective, beauty becomes more of a pursuit of experience than a visual encounter. What we look at as beautiful is more closely tied to the stories we tell than the decorations we have in our house.

Artistic expressions such as poetry and music are similar in expressing what beauty truly is a more of an emotional and round-about way than we experience in most social or scientific studies. Emily Dickinson is an example of such an artistic person who expresses herself through the use of poetry. Her poems, unnamed and unreleased during her life, carry an artistic weight different from the visual art of photography. Her poetry is laden with many meanings and often hard to interpret. However, her poem starting with “I died for beauty, but was scarce” is a short 12 lines of poetry, but helps us frame what beauty truly is.

I died for beauty, but was scarce
Adjusted in the tomb,
When one who died for truth was lain
In an adjoining room.

He questioned softly why I failed?
“For beauty,” I replied.
“And I for truth,—the two are one;
We brethren are,” he said

And so, as kinsmen met a night,
We talked between the rooms,
Until the moss had reached our lips,
And covered up our names.

This short poem is very impactful. Two characters in the form of truth and beauty are introduced, lying in a tomb. The death of two who died for powerful ideas, finding themselves on the brink of obscurity. This poem illustrates the unity of two ideas that are considered to often
to be opposites. The pursuit of beauty could be considered as a detached idealistic lifestyle while the truth is often associated with hard facts and a logical, reasonable lifestyle. But to Dickinson, the two are brethren. These two ideas are so interwoven that, even at death, the pursuit of them becomes tightly connected. Within beauty lies truth, and vice versa. The two in fact are one. Beauty as a pursuit, she argues, should be reflective of self, so much so that a person’s perception of beauty is a reflection of their inner truth. These two ideas should not be separated in the journey to understand beauty.

While this Dickinson poem helps us understand the characters of beautiful experience, these ideas of truth and beauty, poetry can also allow us to express the feeling of experiencing beauty in a way that isn’t quantifiable. In *Poppies on the Wheat*, Helen Hunt Jackson puts into words the simple experience of walking through a wheat field in Italy.

Along Ancona’s hills the shimmering heat,  
A tropic tide of air with ebb and flow  
Bathes all the fields of wheat until they glow  
Like flashing seas of green, which toss and beat  
Around the vines. The poppies lithe and fleet  
Seem running, fiery torchmen, to and fro  
To mark the shore.  
The farmer does not know  
That they are there. He walks with heavy feet,  
Counting the bread and wine by autumn’s gain,  
But I,—I smile to think that days remain  
Perhaps to me in which, though bread be sweet  
No more, and red wine warm my blood in vain,  
I shall be glad remembering how the fleet,  
Lithe poppies ran like torchmen with the wheat.

Jackson brings this seemingly ordinary experience alive with her words. Jackson’s delight in this wheat field is contrasted against the farmer’s disinterest. While Jackson sees
poppies running to and fro, the farmer is merely trudging on. Burdened by his job to take care of the field he is disenchanted from the simple wonder that this field brings.

Now, while both the Farmer and Jackson are experiencing the same thing, a wheat field in Italy, it means entirely separate things to each of them. The beauty of the situation is there, waiting to be noticed and embraced. Sometimes it takes an inspired artist to pull it out of the mundane to help us realize what is truly there.

Beauty in Photography by Robert Adams (1996) organizes these large philosophical thoughts and arranges them in relation to the art of photography. This book by Adams is a collection of essays he has written and taught over the course of his career as a photographer. The book directly relates to the thesis topic of idea of beauty, but equally to the practice of photography. Adams’ insights into photography as an art form are incredibly valuable. His years of experience allow him to break down this broad idea of beauty into something that is a little more manageable for people with less experience.

In contrast to Sartwell, Adams’ explains beauty as a consequence of form. He describes form as the shape which beauty takes in the art (like a photograph) to simplify the complexity of life. Life contains beauty, and any kind of art form we use, including photography, is simply the use of form to put that beauty in a frame, to help us look into the things that lie beneath the surface. Adams spent his life as a professional photographer looking for ways to capture images that communicate this sense of beauty. Adams would agree that the beauty we find in art is not a perfect reflection of what life is, but an interpretation of both the photographers experience and the subject’s environment. Photography, then, is the quintessential art form for capturing beauty as it is in life.
Thus, we’ve learned that beauty is an idea to be constantly built upon and explored, whether in a personal manner or as an academic and creative pursuit to be shared with many. While there is a certain objectivity among mediums of art, beauty ultimately lies within a person's experiences. It is often reliant on the individual waking up to see the beauty around them. While we can’t go as far to say what is beautiful and what is not beautiful, holding on to these ideas allows us to build out our own definition of beauty. While never completely separate from the cultures around us, our perceptions of beauty contain something that is wholly unique to the individual.

**Functional Definition of Beauty**

Beauty may still be nearly impossible to put a set definition on, as in determining this is beautiful or this is not beautiful. Rather, we have a functional definition of beauty that guides us towards our own framework of what beauty is. Knowing that beauty is largely dependent on personal experience and tied closely to an individual’s taste, there are three things we can look for to help us identify beauty.

1) Physical appearance or aesthetic value
2) Emotional response
3) Personal experience and connection to the object of beauty.

We can think of these three things as pyramid, one being built on the other. Look at the chart below;
The base of this process is the physical appearance of the object of beauty. In our daily lives we see a lot of various things. Be it people, buildings, trees, or a countless number of daily objects. The point is we see so many different potential objects of beauty. It doesn't mean every single one of them needs to hold value, but that there is a lot of potential for beauty.

The next step are the objects we connect with. Whether they have some personal significance, that remind us of something precious, or that they represent something particularly exceptional to us. These objects will still be many, and may be important to us, but it might not be the beauty of the object that we connect to. We find the beauty in the emotional response we have to the object, or the sense of wonder we experience. This could be as simple as saying “wow, that is a beautiful building.” In comparison to the countless objects we see every day, the amount that we respond to emotionally will be few. We each have our own specific version of this process that is guided by our tastes. Understanding this process helps us know what we think is beautiful, so that we can in turn find that beauty in our lives and communicate it using photography.
My Personal Process

This thesis began as a way to stretch myself creatively, so the best way to communicate how beauty should be experienced on a daily basis is to first do it myself. Taking my own photos to capture beauty allows me to grow creatively as well as become more aware of what beauty is to me.

Taking everything we’ve discussed so far, I wanted to take a series of pictures that I find to be beautiful. This process stretched me creatively to intentionally capture that which I find beautiful. Here is what I looked for when shooting these next two photo series:

1. Find the beauty in an environment that is very familiar to me.
2. Connect my personal experience to the photography. This could be my childhood home or my places I am very familiar with.
3. Capture images that elicit a sense of wonder in me.
4. Connect my pictures to other works of art that communicate beauty to me. There are many other works of art in this world, and it is appropriate that we be inspired by what we find beautiful.

For this thesis, I created two distinct photo series. In both are pictures that portray some aspect of the above. These photos are personal to me and probably won’t hold meaning for others, and that's totally fine. This process illustrates how others can accomplish something similar on their own. With that said, I hope you can find some beauty in them as well.
The Hometown Series

This series is a collection of images from the place I grew up in, Richmond, Kentucky. This is also the place where I went to university, so it is a very familiar place to me. These images capture that which I am intimately familiar with and portrays the beauty they have to me. From my childhood home and my parents to EKU’s beautiful campus, this series shows the wonder I find in the day-to-day.
This is my mom, who I love. My whole life she has been the one taking pictures of me, now i get to take pictures of her taking pictures of me!

Here is my dad, coming out of his garage, which I helped him build years ago. He’s a hardworking man who has always provided for our family.
These are both scenes from around my house. The first is the space between the woodshed and the utility shed. While a seemingly nonconsequential place, this image reminds me of my childhood and growing up playing outside. The second picture is of the road leading away from my childhood home. It reminds me that no matter how many times I leave home, I can always come back to a warm meal and a place to sleep.
These three photos are of EKU, where I go to school. These are all scenes I see daily as I walk through campus. They never fail to make me stop and appreciate the beauty around me.
The Reaching Toward the Sky Series

In this series I captures something that fills me with a sense of wonder. Seeing buildings that thrust into the sky just make me stop and say wow. I see a picture of man reaching up to the heavens in these pictures. I take inspiration for assembling this series from both a piece of scripture and a favorite song.

The scripture comes from the Bible in Genesis 15:5:

“He took him outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”

The song is “start/end” by EDEN:

“Cause I've been looking at the sky to show me where I went wrong

Been looking at the sky like someone was looking down

But it keeps raining on me

And I've been looking at the sky since I was like five years old

Been looking for the stars but it seems like they're all gone”

Both of these pieces are important to me and both address looking toward the sky in a reverent manner. With these two artistic in mind, I assembled this series of photographs displaying the wonder in looking up toward the sky.
Conclusion

This last picture is a summary of everything I’ve tried to capture throughout both series. Too almost everyone in the world, this is just a random picture of some random bedroom window. But this picture holds significance to me because it is the window of my childhood bedroom. It combines both the familiar and the wonder of looking up towards the sky. Overall it is a simple composition, but it holds immense value to me.

Armed with some knowledge, intention, and a camera, I was able to capture that which I find to be beautiful. In doing so, I can easily communicate what is important to me with others. With a camera in our pockets, we can all use photography to pursue beauty in our daily lives,
even when life feels mundane. This process helps us breakdown and understand how beauty interacts with us in our lives. Be intentional, take some pictures.
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