

# STRENGTH IN STORYTELLING

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This year's photography and illustration winners prove time and again that smart ideas and subtext underlie the strongest images

by Craig Welsh

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The 2012 *Applied Arts Photography & Illustration Annual* emphatically affirms the strength and value in visual storytelling. From candied apples, cameras and sneakers colliding with birds to an imaginary, larger-than-life, illustrated swim through a street in Montreal, to a series of arresting shots of a child being delivered via Caesarean section, the work is incredible.

The range of images in the annual certainly shows a firm grasp of and appreciation for aesthetic considerations. Elements such as lighting, colour, texture, contrast and scale are utilized to create compositions that command our attention—a noteworthy accomplishment given how many media compete for our time on a daily basis. However, it is the images' underlying statements that provide the most meaningful substance to the visual narratives being shared.

There are a number of themes that thread through the photography pieces. One that is of particular interest, given the rate of dramatic changes around the globe, is that of "deterioration." Whether it's a shot of a lonely, windswept and worn grain elevator in Southern Saskatchewan or a series of images of decaying structures in Prypiat, Ukraine, taken 25 years after the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, viewers are left to contemplate the consequences of humankind's impact on the natural world, and vice versa. And images of conflicts in Egypt and Libya provide striking realizations of just how fragile the human condition is in many parts of the world.

Yet, in contrast, we also see "vitality" as another subject among the photography showcased. The genuine enthusiasm and spirited potential revealed in images of Tanzanian school students along with shots of dogs charging forward in a campaign for pet nutrition are but two instances of possibility and hope.

The illustration work also includes an impressive spectrum of styles and interpretive sensibilities. An image for shared family reading time includes a scene with playful filigree filled with imaginative ideas. Another series of images of two ducks stuck in an unintended game of hide-and-seek embraces a clear sense of structure and purpose in its visuals, while its characters struggle to make sense of each scene's actions.

There are dozens of these kinds of visual stories in the annual. Which visuals we most strongly connect to and how we interpret their meanings and expressed

views are valuable lessons in gaining understanding and growth as creatives.

As with all annuals, the gathering, critiquing and showcasing of work is an attempt to capture an aggregate moment in time of the industry's most compelling efforts—a retrospective view of where we've been for the past 12 months. It's a time to take a good, solid look at the state of creative work being produced. Where did we focus our energies? What stories did we tell? Which projects were truly outstanding and representative of our collective best efforts on our best individual days?

It's also a time to see if there are any significant shifts in how work is produced that may help to guide projects we undertake.

Photographers seem to be more willing than ever to accept, if not fully embrace, digital tools' influences on image making. The lines between photography and illustration are increasingly blended. Software-driven lighting, filter effects and editing tools provide new capabilities year after year. It's mildly shocking how many photographers now openly speak about handling image details in post-production, where years ago such a thought would have been deemed punishable. At the same time, much of the illustration retains a clear connection to being handmade, even when it has been enhanced or altered by digital tools and hand-lettered typography.

Having a smartphone does not make each of us a photographer, just as having a pencil does not make each of us an illustrator. Having a smart idea is still the most critical element of producing exceptional images, something that is demonstrated time and again in the *Photography & Illustration Annual*.

Annuals fuel our creativity and establish benchmarks by which we measure our creative efforts. As we move forward as individuals, agencies and studios, and as an industry, it is imperative we hold high standards for creative achievement and conduct.

We must be motivated to push ourselves, those we work with and those with whom we share our various stories. We must commit to making memorable work that speaks with honesty and impact. And we must applaud the efforts of those who make beautiful images.

To everyone who produced work in this year's annual: Great job!



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