

Types of Images

by Philip Gebhardt

These are brief descriptions of Terry Barrett's six categories of photographs although they can be applied to any type of art image.

1. Descriptive Images

In a sense, all images describe in that they offer descriptive, visual information about the surfaces of people and objects. Some images, however, are not meant to be more than descriptions, such as identification photographs, medical x-rays, NASA space photographs, surveillance photographs and reproductions of artwork. The artists are attempting to accurately record subject matter. An ID photograph, for example, neither attempts to express the sitter's personality nor flatter the sitter's appearance, but rather to accurately describe the sitter, so someone can match the photograph to the person. A painting of a flower could fit into this category.

2. Explanatory Images

Explanatory images are used to scientifically explain how things are. They are often subject to scientific testing procedures. While explanatory images are well-suited to physics, social scientists also use photographs to explain. Most press photographs that attempt neutral, objective reporting about people, places and events can be placed in this category.

3. Interpretive Images

Interpretive images also seek to explain how things are, but they do not attempt scientific accuracy nor are they subject to scientific testing procedures. They are subjective and personal interpretations. They are usually fictional and often use the directorial mode in which the artist causes something to take place which would not have occurred had the artist not made it happen. For example, photographers stage people or objects in front of the lens or intervene in real-life situations, directing the participants.

4. Ethically Evaluative Images

Ethically evaluative images make ethical judgements. They praise or condemn aspects of society. They show how things should or should not be. They are politically engaged and usually passionate.

5. Aesthetically Evaluative Images

The images in this category point out what their artists consider worthy of aesthetic observation and consideration. It is the kind of "art photography" familiar to most people. Aesthetically evaluative images are usually about beautiful things portrayed in beautiful ways. Although the subject matter is wide-ranging, the three most conspicuous and common are the nude, the still life and the landscape.