



BY ROD MACHADO

Aviation photography

Swept away by still images

I DON'T UNDERSTAND contemporary art. Neither did a night janitor working the London's Eystorm Gallery in November 2001. It was there that famed contemporary artist Damien Hirst displayed his newest piece, titled *Party Time*—an assembly of cigarette butts in ashtrays; beer bottles; coffee cups; torn, stained newspapers; and other party ephemera. The collection was thought to be worth half a million bucks. When the gallery closed for the evening, the cleaning lady spied the mess, swept it up, and deposited it in the Dumpster.

Talk about a critic trashing a piece! Party over. So much for art by declaration in lieu of discrimination.

Call me old fashioned, but I think the discriminating quality of art should be that it is elevating. Art that elevates either inspires us with its beauty or the depth of its message. That is why I find much of today's professional aviation photography so compelling. A carefully chosen and thoughtfully composed subject can rattle the bones of those ancient archetypes residing deep within us, inspiring both meaningful thoughts and powerful emotions.

For instance, how can any pilot look at a thoughtfully photographed Piper Cub and not feel as excited as a hamster spying a Ferris wheel? It's a picture that can make us feel that the prevailing winds are about to carry us off toward some distant adventure.

A video of the same airplane in action often affects us in a very different way. In general, a video tells you a story. Still photography, by contrast, invites you to project your narrative onto the image. Video brings ideas to you, while the still photograph inspires ideas resident within you. Every time I peek at the stunningly beautiful cockpit shot of a Waco EGC taken by famed aviation photographer Robert Michael Fizer (mikefizer.com), *AOPA Pilot's* senior photographer, I'm transported to a time when the business of flying was more about actually flying an airplane than managing it.

That's why Mike's cover shots for this magazine are legendary. When I look at a flying machine on the cover of *AOPA Pilot*, my appendages seem to reflexively respond with a faint push, pull and twist, as if I'm actually engaging its flight controls. No need to purchase a desktop simulator to experience flight here. Just visit your mailbox once a month.

Perhaps it's called "still" photography because, unlike the medium of video, a photograph quiets the mind. It's the silence that inspires moments of reverie for things that will be, and nostalgia for things that were. A compelling photograph takes you places without the need to move.

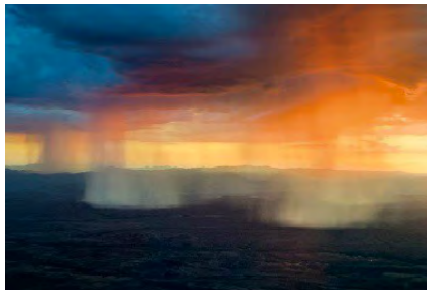
Take, for instance, author, *Flight Training* columnist, and fine art photographer Greg Brown's (www.gregbrownflyingcarpet.com) stunning photo *Sunset Rains*. The distant sun setting over rocky terrain, seen through a veil of scattered rain shafts, simply knocked my socks off the first time I saw it. Given that I was barefoot at the time, I'm lucky my feet still have their epidermis. Greg's photos have me reminiscing about those moments aloft when I've spied a beautiful element of nature, enhanced by the unique perspective of the cockpit.

One of my book covers hosts an amazing in-flight photo, taken by aviation photographer Eric Hildebrandt, of aerobatic pilot Mike Goulian. Mike's handsome, smiling face shines from the cockpit through the blurred prop arc of his Extra. Up close, personal, in-your-face, and action-packed are apt descriptions of this picture. Goulian's spinner appears so close to the camera that Eric either had to push it away with his foot, or accept a haircut by default. No one can deny that Eric's photographic style involves full frontal "nose cone" realism.

Fizer's, Brown's, and Hildebrandt's aviation photography, along with the work of many other aviation photographers of great skill, provides grist for our daydream mills. They inspire a type of reverie that helps us shuck the moorings tethering us to the ground. This is why a good aviation photograph can compel us to fly, or at least think passionately about flying. Call that what you will, but to me this is how aviation photography as art elevates us (no pun intended. Darn).

Better to be swept away by the art than to have the art swept away.

AOPA



WACO COCKPIT, photographed by Mike Fizer (top), *Sunset Rains* by Greg Brown (above).

ROD MACHADO is an aviation humorist, active CFI, and a member of the Aviation Speakers Bureau.

+ **WEB** www.rodmachado.com

TOP: MIKE FIZER BOTTOM: GREG BROWN