

Advice on How to Present Your Work for Portfolio Reviews

Excerpts from "How To Reach The Tastemakers," September 26, 2007,
www.pdnonline.com.

I. Laura M. Wzorek, Program Director of Center, Santa Fe, NM

PDN: How should the work be presented?

What works best for many reviewers is 20 images from a body of work, no slip sheets, no glare from portfolio book pages; matted, mounted or even straight prints in a nice portfolio box that are easy to move around. If the work is part of an installation, bring images of the installation as well as a little maquette if available. If the photographer's work is really large scale, bring just one example of the large format print with a portfolio of smaller prints and avoid bringing the 40x50" crate.

If the photographer has more than body of work we recommend having a second portfolio available for viewing only upon request. Trying to squeeze in both presentations into the 20 minutes can be challenging.

The key is not to spend time getting the work out of the box and setting up. If the photographer prefers not to have the work touched by others then move the images from one side of the portfolio box to the other (while talking about the work) and opt not to present the reviewer with white gloves as several reviewers don't like that. Practice the presentation and remember to leave time for the reviewer to respond.

PDN: When reviewing portfolios, are they looking at the quality of individual images or a whole body of work?

Different reviewers look at different things. Art directors, Mary Maurer of Sony and Richard Aquan from Harper Collins [for example] will likely be looking for the one image that would be great for their CD or book cover. I think almost everyone else, curators, book publishers, gallerists, are concerned with the whole body of work.

PDN: What are some mistakes you've seen photographers make when showing their work at a portfolio review? Are there any no-no's?

Making demands of the reviewers, such as, "Tell me the three best pieces," or "Are we working together or not?" is a no-no. Getting defensive is a no-no. It's important to walk in with an open mind and leave the ego at the door.

The other mistake is when photographers don't research the reviewers. The reviews are most going to benefit those who do their homework on the reviewers and then choose the professionals according to who may be most interested in the work.

Spending too much time on the presentation and not allowing a natural dialogue about the work at some point during the review process should be avoided.

PDN: After a review, what kind of follow up should photographers do with their reviewers?

Send a thank you card with an image that the reviewer saw during the review. If the reviewer asked for something specific, such as an email with a link to the photographers web site, definitely send that at the requested time.

PDN: What advice would you give a photographer who is about to go to a portfolio review? How can they make the most of the experience?

Do your homework. That means research the reviewers, their institutions or businesses and assess if its a good match. Many galleries don't take on new work, or if they do, it will likely be in adherence to a certain aesthetic.

Ask for advice and recommendations of professionals who may be interested in this kind of work.

Finally, go in with the attitude "I'm here to introduce my work and myself to the reviewers and begin a relationship," and perhaps in a year or two after the reviews, an exhibition, a book, or an editorial of your work will begin to come to fruition.

II. Christopher Rauschenberg, board chair and member of the exhibition committee for 32 years at Blue Sky Gallery in Portland, Oregon, a non-profit gallery recommended by several commercial gallery owners and curators on our list of Tastemakers as a place they find new work.

PDN: When someone's showing you their work at a portfolio review, how do you like to see the work presented?

Ideally I'd like to see that the photographer has thought about the work enough that it is in a coherent group that 's been edited and sequenced, and when you look at it you can see what they're trying to do right away. Sometimes you don't see that, you see people who have made good individual pictures but they're like beads that haven't strung together in a necklace. And that's not very effective when we have have 20 minutes.

I've had the experience where I start looking at a portfolio and half way through I say, "Wait, let me start over. Now I see what you're doing."

The worst mistake someone can make in a portfolio review is to bring 20 different pictures from 20 different stories, because there's no way to grab onto that. I don't think it's a bad idea, if you're shoulder can stand it, to bring more than one body of work. Some photographers will say, "I have portraits of the Dalai Lama, pictures of my daughter's birthday party, and a series on economics. Which one do you want to see?" Being something of a voracious looker, I often say I want to see all of them, but I also know from having shown my work that many reviewers don't want to see more than 20 pictures.

At Blue Sky we do all solo shows pretty much, not group shows. We have a new space, and we're about to step up to doing 36 solo shows a year. That's one reason I'm such an intrepid reviewer. We're not a commercial gallery and we're not showing the same people over and over. We're looking for something new, and a portfolio review is a pretty good way to do that.

III. Frish Brandt, director, Frankel Gallery, San Francisco

PDN: When you are reviewing a portfolio, how do you like to see the work presented?

I don't have any preconceptions on this. It should be the right-est presentation for the work, and it shouldn't require a balancing act or a three ring circle. But it can be really almost any size, any format. I've viewed work on computer screens, in hand, standing on chairs.

PDN: Are you looking for single strong images, or a body of work, or several accomplished bodies of work?

It's best if it is a body of work comprised of strong images that are each individual, not redundant or reiterations of one another. Artists' Statements help, but they should be a footnote, not the headlining act. They should add, not subtract and certainly not be the thing one remembers most.

PDN: What advice do you have for a photographer who is trying to get feedback from gallery directors?

They should know what the gallery shows and have a sense as to why their work would have any interest to the people they are approaching. There are parts of our medium which do not fit our sensibility. Find a gallery where you really LIKE the work, where you feel your work would make sense, and make new sense.

Secondly, be sensitive that the person you are approaching is probably busy. This can make for awkwardness, because as earnest as a photographer is, the gallerist is probably pre-occupied with a myriad of details that are the very reason why the photographer aspires to associate with that gallery. I don't have an answer, but thinking outside of one's self is always a good approach.

Mary Virginia Swanson has literally and figuratively written the book on all of this. I've known Swannie for a very long time. I've known this field for an even longer time. When I was in Pasadena last May for the Silver Conference, I thought I'd sit in on a few minutes of Swannie's presentation. The subject of getting one's work out isn't something that I thought I needed to now more about. And yet I was entirely spellbound. Her handbook is available for a mere \$45 plus shipping.

IV. Anne Wilkes Tucker, photography curator, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

PDN: When you are doing a portfolio review, how do you like to see the work presented?

A professional portfolio is 20 to 40 prints that present no more than two developed series. I look for the ability to sustain ideas, develop them, make them clear through choice of subject and craft decisions. While I enjoy talking to artists about their work, their explanations are not a factor in my decisions. They may help me clarify my thoughts, but won't initiate interest. About presenting and organizing their work: they have to show respect for their own work if they expect me to respect it. Someone who drops an unorganized stack of 100 8 x 10 prints on the table is challenging me to find something in their work to like, which I rarely do. They have not done the work of making intelligent choices in the presentation of their work.

PDN: What advice would you give a photographer who is about show a body of work to, say, a museum curator?

If possible, relax. Let the work present itself. Don't tell the curator what they are seeing. It is more generous to let him/her discover what she/he thinks and feels about the work. Answer questions but don't hesitate to think before answering or to ask questions of the curator. Maybe think in advance about questions you would like to ask the curator --- other than "Do you like it?" Do some homework on the curator. Think about the shows they have curated and how your work relates to what they have shown. The same holds for presentations to galleries. If they only show avant-garde and you prefer documentary, that may not be a match.

PDN: After a review, what kind of follow up do you welcome from photographers you've met?

If I give the photographer my card, they are welcome to send gallery invitations, notification of publications or articles, etc. I ask that no one send work without checking with me first as there are long periods when I wouldn't have time to look at work sent to the museum.