

April Education Night: Portfolio Reviews

A reminder to all that April's Education Night is a portfolio review of YOUR work. We will have as our guests a group of accomplished photographers that will individually review your work. Each portfolio review will last about 15-20 minutes so you can get individual quality time with each reviewer.

Each photographer that was chosen to review specializes in a different genre such as architecture, portraiture, photojournalism or boudoir. This review format is different than most portfolio reviews where the person being reviewed picks the reviewer. We will not have that luxury. But, the advantage of having a review our way is you will be exposed to different perspectives and viewpoints. So, don't despair, if you're a surrealist infrared astro-landscape photographer, the portrait photographer that reviews your work will still have something intelligent to say about your aesthetic and presentation! A good picture is a good picture, no matter the genre or style.

To keep things running smoothly and to maximize the time for reviews there are some important things to know.

I covered this information during the March Education Night but a little more detail may be helpful.

Set a goal and have a purpose for each review and communicate that purpose to the reviewer when you sit down.

Typical goals for a standard portfolio review could be to secure a show, get gallery representation or sign a book deal. None of our reviewers will be in a position to offer this kind of deal. Instead, your goals for this Education Night portfolio review could be to get feedback on your work and gain confidence about your artistic efforts or with your skills as a photographer. Feel free to ask for feedback regarding editing of the portfolio, presentation, your theme or even ideas on expanding your work in a different direction. Remember, each reviewer specializes in a specific genre; even if their genre's not your primary interest the different perspective and thoughts towards your work can be very beneficial. Listen to the reviewers for common observations and suggestions to build on for the future.

A thought from a blog called [circles of CONFUSION](#). The post was titled: Adventures at the New England Portfolio Review by Randall Armor. Mr. Armor is a University level educator that has reviewed thousands of images from his students. He decided to subject himself to the same type of review they experience, below is one of his observations:

“Listening to Akemi Hiatt, an independent curator from New York, brought to mind something that Helmut Newton once said- “Look, I’m not an intellectual, I just take pictures!” She saw deeper meaning and messages in some of the images that, frankly, had never even occurred to me, and she made me wonder whether I’m actually smart enough to be as good at what I do as I think I am. Her unexpected but welcomed insights proved the point that we make with students all the time: it takes two people to complete a photograph: the photographer and the viewer.”

Prepare a list of questions you want to ask the reviewer.

This is similar to the first tip of setting goals but this tip is a little more specific so you can get specific answers. The questions should be the same for each reviewer so you can see if there are common threads. For example, if during a typical portfolio review your goal is to obtain a gallery show you should be sure to ask the reviewers if your personal project is ready for a gallery and what needs improvement. In our case questions to ask the reviewers could be to ask them to pick the top three images and the bottom three. You could ask for feedback regarding the effectiveness of the presentation or thoughts on the theme you have chosen.

Bring what you would show a client.

Each portfolio reviewer is a potential client. After all, normally they’re the people that are acting as talent scouts for a gallery, publication or publisher. You want to bring the actual portfolio that you intend to show. Don’t bring something you know is subpar that you intend to make better later on. It’s perfectly okay to make something better later based on new insight, a better skill set or from advice and comments from those you trust. But showing less than your best at the time of the review is a disservice to you because any comments you receive are not valid to the work you can produce. The whole point of the portfolio review is to get feedback on your work, a reviewer can’t give you good feedback if what they are looking at isn’t what you actually intend to show.

Prints should be the best possible.

Always present your absolute best work. Edit carefully and think about the whole image. You are responsible for everything within the borders of your image, an element either adds to the image or subtracts.

Don’t make excuses

If you need to make an excuse you shouldn’t be showing it. If during the review process the reviewer criticizes some of your work don’t say things such as, “I didn’t bring my strongest work.” “I didn’t have time to put together more.” or “I just found out about this event.” Remember, this should be the best work you have available at that time and you should listen and learn

from criticism.

Take notes

By the end of a review session all the reviews and comments will start to blend together. Take notes during and after each review before you forget important details. Write down everything both good and bad. It's often helpful to note which images each reviewer liked the best and what they liked the least.

I suggest using a new notebook for the portfolio review event and make a separate page for each reviewer. Paperclip or tape their business card to the top of the page and take notes on which images they liked, disliked, questions they had and feedback concerning your work.

Image Size

The general rule of thumb is the bigger the better because a larger print generally has more visual impact. The downside is that very large prints are harder to carry and much more expensive to produce. Unless your images are meant to be seen only in small sizes such as instant prints or Instagram photos, make them as big as you can reasonably handle and afford. For example, show 11x14 prints mounted on 16x20 mats.

Print your images similarly on the same size/paper. This means you can have different size images but the size of the paper the image is printed on should be the same. So, on an 11x14 piece of paper it's okay to have an 8x10 image size or an 8x12, or a 10x13, or whatever other size you prefer. However, be aware of too many image size changes. This could cause the look of the portfolio to appear disjointed. It could be visually jarring for a reviewer to see a 5x7 then an 11x14, and then back to 5x7. A best practice is to keep the image size generally the same but they should always be on the same size paper.

Number of images

Your portfolio should be a complete body of work with a solid vision of about 15-20 prints. Edit so that the work is part of a consistent series, a little of this and a little of that is not advisable. Mixing portraits, still life and landscapes may show your versatility as a photographer but a portfolio review's purpose is usually to secure a gallery show, book project or a job within a specific genre.

A common mistake is having too many images. You only have a limited amount of time with a reviewer to talk about yourself, review the pictures

and get meaningful feedback. Too many pictures may cause the reviewer to skip through very quickly and not see the true meaning of your work.

Don't have similar images

Shooting pictures is fun, editing not so much! It's necessary to take a hard look at the multiple images taken of a scene and select the one best image. Similar images in a portfolio, usually of the same scene shot at the same time and slightly different will dilute the impact of the presentation.

Packaging your prints

Package your portfolio such that you can carry it, open it, show it, and put it away with minimum fuss. There are three common presentation methods, portfolio binders, mounted prints, and loose prints.

Binders look like large notebooks that hold loose prints in plastic sleeves. Mounted prints and loose prints can be easily carried in a simple clamshell portfolio box or a zippered portfolio case. Binders and cases can be found at any arts/crafts store such as Michaels.

Talk about your work and the concepts

Have a very short oral biography of yourself prepared. Be ready to talk about your work, education and life experiences as they relate to your photography. Having a script of sorts will make things easier when you are under pressure or feeling nervous. The script can be rehearsed so that when you finally speak it feels natural and genuine. Remember, most portfolio reviews are job interviews with talent scouts.

The reviewer may ask questions about the concepts that hold your work together so be set to talk about this and explain those concepts. You should have a practiced and concise description of your work that you can comfortably give at any time.

Don't argue

Duh! I realize this may not need saying under normal circumstances but for some a portfolio review can be stressful. You will be showing your artistic work one on one to a stranger while you firmly believe in the quality of your work and vision. Hearing an opinion that you do not agree with can change your normal emotional state. Don't argue with constructive criticism. The reviewers looking at your work know photography in general and specialize within a genre so they may all have different opinions. This is okay and intentional because the visual arts are very subjective. You may not agree with someone, but don't argue or tell them they are wrong.

Be polite. Be professional. Be patient

Don't fumble with apps

So far, mention of digital display of your images such as on an iPad has been conspicuously absent from this list of tips. Prints have been around for ages and are a tried and true method of displaying your images. However, convenience and cost could compel a photographer to display their work on an iPad. (I'm using iPad generically for any tablet style device; it just has fewer letters to type!) Before attending any review be sure to check the rules and requirements to make sure iPad display is allowed.

Be aware that lighting conditions can be unpredictable in review rooms so there are no guarantees as to how the work will represent. Unless you have access to the review room in advance of the event, you will have no way of knowing the lighting conditions, glare and layout and how that could impact the touch screen experience of the iPad. Even if you do have access ahead of time conditions could change for many different reasons.

The iPad's built in photo app within iOS is not ideal for presentation of multiple images with starts and stops common to reviews. Therefore an iPad also requires that you use a third party app designed for portfolio presentation for a seamless viewing experience. The entire viewing experience needs to be bug-free and idiot-proof so you can control the user experience in advance as fully as possible. Having a reviewer handle an iPad and not know where to begin or which app to launch is not a good start to a potential job interview and not conducive to a good introduction.

Know and have control of the iPad. It should be set to airplane mode so no calls, text messages and emails can come in during the review. Also lock the auto rotate to off and lock the brightness to a comfortable viewing level.

Don't look for technical advice

You should not participate in a portfolio review if you are only looking for advice on technical issues. A portfolio review is not the time to ask about such techniques as HDR, focus stacking, reducing noise or the best methods to approach strangers during street portraits.

The review should be all about displaying and discussing your creative vision in about 20 prints and hopefully landing a photo related job.

Have Fun!

Don't let this list of tips discourage you from attending Education Night this April. All the reviewers are super friendly and this is a perfect opportunity to show your work and get honest feedback. If your prints are all different sizes on different paper it doesn't matter, come anyway. Remember, the reviewers

are doing this to help the photographers of our Club and have only the best intentions.

I hope to see all of you there – Michael

Questions? Email me at middlingsort-sscethirdthursday@yahoo.com