

Portfolio Review Tips

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CoPA portfolio reviews are valuable opportunities to have your work seen by important people in the Wisconsin art community. It is important that you be well prepared.

Should I do a portfolio review?

Consider the following;

1. The review will allow you to get high quality criticism of your work.
2. You can get advice on how and where to market your work.
3. The opportunity to meet, and have your work seen by the local movers and shakers who get people into shows and/or galleries. While you should not do the review expecting to be asked into a show or gallery it has happened in the past.
4. You should not participate if you are only looking for advice on technical issues.

You are ready if you have a coherent portfolio! That sounds simple but what does it mean? Often we think of work that is all of the same subject matter as being coherent. But it is not that simple. A collection of images of one subject may lack coherence and another collection of images of unrelated subjects may have it. Your work is coherent when it has a distinct style or voice. The best advice we can offer to those who are not sure if they are ready is to ask some of the more accomplished members of CoPA for their opinions.

Image size

The general rule is the bigger the better. The larger the print the more impact it has. Very large prints though, are hard to carry and expensive to produce. The best advice, unless the images are meant to be seen only in small sizes (e.g. 4x5 contact prints) make them as big as you can reasonably handle and afford. For example, show 11" x 14" prints mounted on 16" x 20" mats. Many photographers show even larger work.

Presentation

There are three common presentation methods, portfolio binders, mounted prints, and loose prints. Whichever method is used all prints should be of the finest possible quality and printed on the same size paper.

1. Portfolio binders are available at any art supply store and are economical and practical ways to show your work. They do have several drawbacks. The plastic sleeves produce reflections which can hide important print detail. It is often

that fine print detail that separates the very good print from the exceptional print. It is also more difficult to show prints in a binder to multiple reviewers since the glare from the plastic sleeves makes it difficult to find an angle to hold the image at which will allow all of the reviewers to see it clearly. Lastly unless the images are easily removable it is difficult to compare two or more images to each other.

2. Mounted Prints. This is a preferred method. Prints are mounted exactly as they are when offered for sale. This shows off the print to its best advantage. The drawbacks are that it is expensive and the prints become much bulkier and heavier.

3. Loose prints. Showing loose prints is the cheapest option and it does not have the reflection problems of the portfolio binder. The disadvantage is that it tends to look cheap and the prints are easily damaged. If you are going to show loose prints print them all on the same size paper and use extra wide margins, one inch or more so that the reviewers can handle them without leaving fingerprints on the image area. Loose prints should be carried in a portfolio box that is the correct size for the prints shown. The worst possible presentation is to show a group of loose prints which are of different sizes with stains and bent corners. It will look like you just pulled them out of a shoe box.

Be prepared!

All of the reviewers tend to agree that the people who get the most out of the reviews are the ones who come the most prepared. Spend some time thinking about what questions the reviewers are most likely to ask and be ready with answers. (Hint: they will ask questions about the aesthetics of your work. They are generally not concerned about technical issues.) Prepare a list of questions you want to ask the panelists. If you ask specific question you are likely to get specific answers. For example, if you are considering doing art fairs be sure to ask the panel to pick out the four or five images that they think will make the best jury slides. The panelists will be the same sort of people that art fairs will hire to do their jurying.

Know what you want to get out of the review. There are two good reasons for doing a review. The first is to get high quality criticism of the aesthetics of your work. The second is to advance your career by getting advice on how and where to market your work.

Have a very short oral biography of yourself prepared. Be prepared to talk about your work, education and life experiences as they relate to your photography.

Remember, if you want to be treated as a professional you must present yourself as a professional.