

# The Portfolio Review

by Amadou Diallo

Fine art photography, like writing a book or composing a string quartet, is essentially a solitary endeavor. Yet the purpose of committing an image to paper is to communicate your vision to others. But without regular opportunities to share work with peers or colleagues, let alone art world professionals, most photographers are limited to receiving feedback from family and friends. This is hardly a source of unbiased or in-depth critique. Hearing “nice work” or “I like it” over and over may be comforting but offers little insight into whether your vision is being communicated successfully. And, unless your significant other is an art dealer or critic, their comments will do little to help you understand your work in the context of contemporary photography.

It is into this void that portfolio reviews have emerged over the years as the primary means for photographers to show their work, collect feedback, and network with industry players as well as other photographers. Portfolio reviews provide an opportunity for face to face discussions focused exclusively on your work. In this article I’ll take a look at how portfolio reviews work. I’ll also explore ways you can prepare to take full advantage of the opportunities they offer for refining your personal vision and exposing your work to an influential audience.

## Who Should Attend?

The portfolio review is not for everyone. Attending these events is not a magic potion for fame and stardom in the art world. It requires a substantial commitment of both time and money. By and large, you get out of it what you put into it. We’ll talk in just a bit about ways to prepare for a successful outcome, but you should ask yourself the following questions before considering a portfolio review.

*Are you and your work ready for an honest critique?* No one likes to hear negative feedback. So it’s very important to be brutally honest with yourself when selecting the images for the portfolio. If you have doubts about the quality or content of your work, you’ll likely hear those same comments echoed again and again by reviewers.

*Do you have a cohesive body of work?* Art and publishing professionals are not impressed by one-hit wonders. Anyone can get lucky and make one great

image. They are interested in photographers who can consistently create compelling images. They respond to artists who devote themselves to exploring a single concept, subject, or theme. You’ll be expected to bring 15-20 very strong images from your collection that work in concert to create a compelling narrative. This is not easy. A successful portfolio is often the result of years of dedication. Unless you have purposefully been shooting over a long period of time with a specific project in mind, the effort and expense involved in attending a portfolio review could be better spent planning and executing just such a body of work.

*Are you in this for the long haul?* Attending a portfolio review is one step in a long process of cultivating relationships in the industry. When you return from a portfolio review you will likely have more, not less work on your plate. There are mundane things like adding new contacts to your mailing list. And crucial tasks such as incorporating the feedback you’ve received into new and existing work.

If you’ve answered the questions above in the affirmative, then a portfolio review can offer many benefits. People to whom you may otherwise never have access will be looking at and commenting on your images. You’ll get practice talking about your work, an overlooked but necessary skill to develop. Perhaps most importantly, you’ll come away with a clear sense of how others respond to your photographic vision.

## The Process

There are numerous portfolio review opportunities around the country and internationally. Some are open to photographers of all levels and abilities. Some are juried, meaning a selection panel chooses among applicants based on samples of their work.

At their core these events offer photographers the opportunity to present their work in one-on-one settings to gallery owners, curators, collectors, and publishers. There is almost always a registration fee involved to participate. The sponsoring organization has quite a bit of overhead, including planning the event, bringing in the reviewers, and booking the space. Depending on the size of the event, the registration fee can be anywhere from \$150 to over \$500. And of course you must factor in travel and accommodations if you’re coming in from out of town.

At the start of the registration process, a list of reviewers is usually already available. For the larger portfolio reviews where it is not practical (or desirable) for every participant to meet with every reviewer, you are generally asked to specify 4-5 people from the list to whom you would like to show your work. A bit of research on your part is crucial so that you can match your interests with appropriate reviewers. If you're seeking gallery representation for example, you will obviously want to target gallery owners who are predisposed to exhibiting the type of work you create. You'll also want to identify galleries that are in the business of nurturing new and emerging artists. Time spent talking to someone who can actually help you reach your goals is much more productive than seeking out the most famous reviewer on the list.

When you arrive at the portfolio review you are given a schedule listing the times you are booked to speak with each reviewer. You'll meet at a table where you can lay out your work and then it's show time. You have 20 minutes or so with each reviewer. You will briefly explain relevant details about your work and/or process, show your images, and then listen to feedback. This time goes by very quickly and this process gets repeated many times over the course of the day. So it pays to have a concise presentation that allows for maximum feedback and also time for specific questions you may have for the reviewer.

### Prepare for Success

In my book, *Mastering Digital Black and White*, noted marketing expert Mary Virginia Swanson refers to the portfolio review as an investment. And she's not just talking about the entrance fee. Filling out a registration form and sending in your payment are not even the first steps you should take if you are committed to making the most of the portfolio review opportunity.

Once you begin to entertain the notion of attending a portfolio review it's time to do some homework. Your two biggest challenges are deciding on a body of work to show and determining specific goals for the portfolio review. Photographers at different stages of their careers will obviously have different needs. A photographer seeking gallery representation will have different needs than someone looking to publish a retrospective of their work. Someone else may want guidance on marketing their images for editorial or commercial use. Most portfolio reviews try to accommodate these different needs by bringing in a wide range of reviewers with different areas of expertise.

As I mentioned earlier, one big task is identifying the reviewers who can actually help you meet your

goals. Keep in mind that each reviewer comes to your work with a different set of expectations and preferences. A book publisher may comment that you need a wider range of subject matter for a marketable book, for instance, while a gallery owner could look at the same portfolio and feel you should focus more narrowly on just one particular type of imagery. The advice you choose to follow will depend largely on which of these two markets you are seeking to enter.

We all have different aesthetics and gravitate towards certain types of images over others. As you're looking over the bios of reviewers you should be able to identify those most likely to respond to your style of work. If a gallery owner's collection is centered around contemporary large scale color photographs, she may not be the best choice to evaluate your contact print black and white landscapes. But make no mistake about it, everyone appreciates well-crafted and professionally presented work. You'll want the pieces in your portfolio to reflect the highest quality prints that you can make. A portfolio review is not the place for work prints with noticeable flaws or defects.

The prints do need to be accessible and presented in a way that allows reviewers to quickly move from one image to the next. If your finished prints are beyond 24 inches in either dimension, you'll need to make smaller reproductions for the portfolio review. A simple clamshell case that allows prints to be slid back and forth is a worthwhile purchase. Larger prints can be mounted and/or over-matted for easier handling as well. Presentation is important! Dirty mats, smudged prints, or a box that's coming apart signal that you cannot adhere to professional standards. And if you don't care enough about the work, why should anyone else?

You should go into each review session with a packet of promotional materials—like a bio, image thumbnails, and artist statement—that goes home with the reviewer. Make it easy for reviewers to keep your information on file for future reference.

Over the course of a day you may visit with five or more different reviewers. Keeping their comments and suggestions in your head is impossible. So don't be shy about taking notes during your sessions. Nothing so elaborate or detailed that it prohibits conversation, but it's very helpful to take note of images to which they respond favorably. This does two things. First it gives you a sampling to compare after the day is complete. Given the subjective nature of critiques, if every single reviewer is attracted to the same image(s), you may want to analyze what makes them so compelling and then apply those attributes to future work.

In addition, you must cultivate these relationships by staying in contact with those who give you permission to do so. And placing an image they responded to on future correspondence, whether it's a postcard or email helps them to remember both you and your work.

### The Art of Networking

While your focus is necessarily on those reviewing your work, don't lose sight of the fact that the portfolio review is your biggest chance to network with your peers. In a large conference room full of strangers waiting to show and talk about their work, you don't need much of an icebreaker to start up a conversation. Talking to another photographer can be a great way to practice elements of your presentation and represents another chance to gauge reaction to your work.

During session breaks you have ample opportunity to view interesting work, share tips and experiences, and develop relationships that over time can grow very strong. You'll meet photographers at many levels of success. Learn from those who have achieved goals you are striving towards. Offer advice and encouragement to photographers with less experience. Talk shop about equipment and imaging techniques. A portfolio review is an instant community of photographers. Take advantage of it.

### It's Just The Beginning

It takes time, effort, and money to get through the portfolio review process. And the event itself can be exhausting. Once it's all over, the last thing you may

feel like doing is devoting even more effort, but if you want the portfolio review to actually advance your career goals, there is crucial work still to be done.

First and foremost is evaluating the various comments you received on your work. Have they validated your artistic direction? Or did they point to a need to rethink your approach or technique? Are there comments that were consistent from reviewer to reviewer? Did people understand your work in a way that's consistent with what you are trying to communicate? The answers to these questions can effect how you approach your work from here on out.

Keep in touch! One question you should ask everyone who sees your work is whether you can keep them up to date on your progress. If they say yes, make sure to do it. It's a great way to build up your mailing list. Even if there is no immediate news to share, you can send an email thanking them for their time. This reminds them of who you are and sets the stage for future correspondence.

Portfolio reviews are a lot of work. You have to be prepared with a strong body of work, do your research on the reviewers, and learn to speak confidently about your work. The reward is a unique opportunity to present your work to the people who can help advance your career. You'll receive honest feedback and engage with a larger community of like-minded photographers. If you're prepared to put in the effort the benefits can be long lasting. □

Organization	Frequency	Available Slots	Registration	Web site
Center For Photography At Woodstock	Biannual	12	\$220	www.cpw.org
Photolucida	Biennial	160	\$600	www.photolucida.org
FotoFest	Biennial	>150	\$765	www.fotofest.org
Center	Annual	80	\$595	www.visitcenter.org
ACP	Annual	60	\$150	www.acpinfo.org

Above is a small sampling of portfolio reviews that occur on a regular basis. These events have become very popular with photographers so slots tend to fill up very quickly. Once you find an event of interest, make sure to submit your application on the earliest possible date.

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