

The PSA Portfolio Project: A New Challenge by Marie Rakoczy, BPSA



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In the January *PSA Journal*, a new PSA challenge was announced: the PSA Portfolio. I read about it with interest, but felt a little intimidated by the project. Not only did it require submitting ten excellent images from my body of work, but those images had to be presented in a cohesive panel with a

statement of intent. There was more than one challenge involved in this project, in my view, and I put it on the back burner.

In March, I came back to it after receiving another communication from PSA. I reconsidered and thought that even though I might not have time to enter this year, maybe I would see what I could put together just for fun.

My first challenge was selecting the ten images. We had just returned from a trip to Yellowstone in February, and I had been working on my images from the trip for a couple of weeks, so my first instinct was to select ten images from the trip. However, after reviewing the PSA article, I felt I had to toss that idea aside because the example that they used to illustrate the portfolio panel unfortunately contained all Yellowstone photos, and I didn't want the judges to think I lacked originality in selecting a topic. Back to the drawing board!

I reflected on what I consider my best work. I have always scored higher and achieved more success with my monochrome images, so I went through my image library and filtered out monochromes. My husband Joe and I do a great deal of winter photography, so I selected my best winter images, narrowing down my focus to about twenty shots that I thought would be somewhat cohesive. When I viewed them on a single screen in Bridge, I realized that an even narrower topic that would make my photo selection tighter was their locale, so I filtered out only the monochrome images of winter in Door County. It really hurt to have to leave out some of my favorite winter images. These winter photos were on the cutting room floor because they weren't taken in Door County:



After excluding photos without a similar monochrome tone (my sepias had to go), and eliminating a few of my ice photos so that the portfolio would have enough variety, I had my ten images. Here were the last three to go (and it was again painful!):



I felt that my ten selected images were unified in theme, consistent in tone, and would tell a good story. The next challenge was arranging the images in the panel. The article in the *PSA Journal* emphasized that the panel is extremely important in the presentation of your portfolio images. They need to be placed so that nothing is facing out of the panel, the color and tonal range needs to be consistent, and darker images should usually be placed in the bottom row. The “flow” of the images from left to right also must correspond to the statement of intent. I knew immediately that the photo of Northport Road had to either come first or last – leading into or out of my story.

Over the course of several days of revisiting my panel and reconsidering the placement of the images, I had what I considered to be a good panel. I debated over and over whether to leave the photo of the fishing boat in or not; its vertical format did not balance with the other photos in the row. I finally elected to leave it in rather than replace it with a horizontal photo, because I thought that the layout might actually be a little *too* balanced with another horizontal shot. Besides it being one of my favorite images in the panel, its placement seemed to me like a little exclamation point at the rule of thirds. I hoped that the judges would see it that way, too.

Now came the third challenge: writing the statement of intent. I started by listing ideas about the images. After I had what I thought was a pretty thorough list, I started refining and ordering my ideas.

I was aware that the people looking at my portfolio might have never even heard of Door County, so I started with an explanatory introduction: ***Door County, Wisconsin, is a peninsula that juts out into Lake Michigan.*** Then, something in general about what the viewer is about to see: ***My favorite time to photograph here is winter, and monochrome images best capture the detail of ice and snow.*** Now that the groundwork was established, I began to describe the photos: ***In Door County, photographic adventures await around every bend of the road.*** That took care of the image of Northport Road. ***Nature shows winter’s power and beauty with mighty shoves of ice and delicate arrangements of icicles.*** Check off the ice shoves at Porcupine Bay and the tree icicles, and segue into the next section. ***The lakeside marinas wear coats of ice and the fishing boats are sidelined for the season...*** That covers the iced house, the fishing boat, the ice covered dock and pier, and the overview of Weborg Dock. ... ***while in the countryside, the quaint buildings are enhanced by a covering of snow.*** That pretty much says it for the stave church, the chairs at The Clearing, and the barn. Summing it all up: ***Winter is Door County at its most beautiful.***

This did *not* all flow automatically, but took several revisions of both the arrangement of images and the text before I thought I had done my best. I always find that revisiting a project, be it a photographic or writing project, over several days (or weeks) helps me to be more objective about my work, which usually also helps to improve it.

I sent my ten portfolio images, statement of intent, and image panel to PSA and crossed my fingers.

According to the January PSA article, five judges would be shown the panel, the statement of intent would be read, and then they would assess the images for technical quality. They would be looking for cohesion and variety in the panel. In the statement of intent, they wanted to see nothing technical, but within the allowed 150 words (shorter, though, was better, it was emphasized – mine came in at 99 words) they wanted a good, positive statement of purpose. The PSA portfolio fee was \$90.00. If a

portfolio is not accepted, a critique that spells out which images in the panel need more work is provided. If you only miss by two images you are invited to resubmit them at a later date.

In July, I heard that my Door County in Winter portfolio was among the first accepted in the new program, and it earned me my first PSA distinction: BPSA. It was an exciting moment when I heard of the portfolio acceptance - it gave me a sense of accomplishment and affirmation. But it wasn't just the end result that was satisfying: the experience of creating the portfolio entry and the learning processes that it involved were their own reward.

I encourage everyone to challenge yourself to the portfolio project for several reasons: it forces you to consider what your best work is; it helps you to confirm your identity as a photographer and to articulate it in words and images; it challenges you to consider your work not just as individual images, but as a true body of work; it helps you to become better at critiquing your work – its strengths and weaknesses – and improving it. And, ultimately, it's fun!