

Portfolio Pitfalls?

Photographers have produced portfolios thematically since the beginning. Any number of examples are available with a simple search on the Internet. The first one that comes to mind is Peter Henry Emerson. His early work, just after the middle of the 19th century, is available to us today by searching, “Life and Landscape on the Norfolk Broads.”

This example might be a bit extreme, as this work is largely Mr. Emerson’s life. A thematic portfolio need not be gleaned from a lifetime of work, but rather may be a simple project over a short period of time.

If you will study Mr. Emerson’s work, I think you may find, beyond the individual images, a common thread that leads to the theme. After seeing his work, you may feel you know the people, what they do, how they do it, how they dress, and maybe even what they feel about life. This is not an easy task for a photographer but one that makes a portfolio work.

Making the viewer feel your theme may be the single most difficult task when attempting to create a portfolio. In teaching, I repeat over and over, “Don’t show me pretty pictures, everyone in PSA makes pretty pictures. Show me pictures that make me feel what you felt when you made them or at the very least how you felt while creating the portfolio. And just as important; what have you done to make me feel all this?”

The portfolio process is not easy, and it shouldn’t be. We all know how difficult it is to have 700

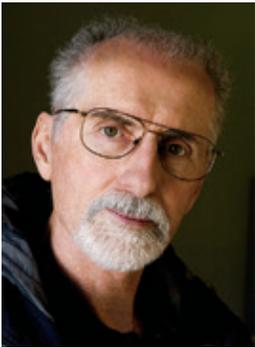
or more single images accepted in international competition, and the judges only see the image for a few seconds. In the portfolio process the assessors do not have a restriction on the length of time a single image may be examined. This puts a burden on the maker; not only to adhere to all of the hackneyed rules for individual images, but an entirely new set of rules around the portfolio process.

Let me give an example of several pitfalls. Let’s say the portfolio title and subsequent theme, is *Abandoned Garages*, and one of the images selected by the maker appears as *Figure 1*. Now for some reason the layout of the overview image is such that the larger mass of the thumbnail will look better on the left. Now we all know this is very easy; just flip the image horizontally, or as in the day, just turn over the negative. Problem solved in *Figure 2*. Not necessarily. There’s a small issue on the door in *Figure 3*. I bet you can see it now.

This problem might not even be seen on an individual image sent to international competition, but I’m sure assessors would see it in the portfolio process.

Here is another very common, yet devastating error that can be caught in the assessment process.

Say you perceive a small skew problem in *Figure 1* and correct it. Subsequently, you need to crop the image inside the skew line. Depending on your background color you may not see that you have not completely removed the cropped area as in *Figure 4*. I can almost promise one or more assessors will catch it.



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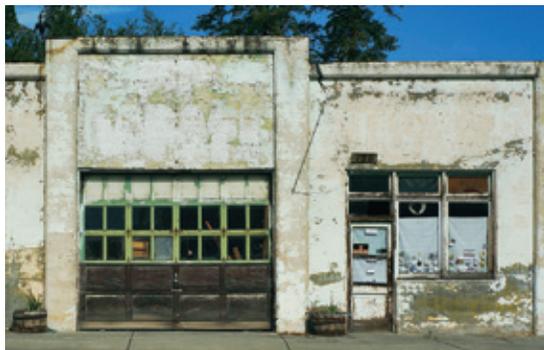


Figure 1

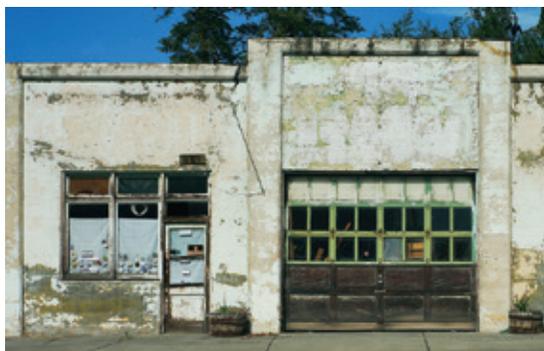


Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

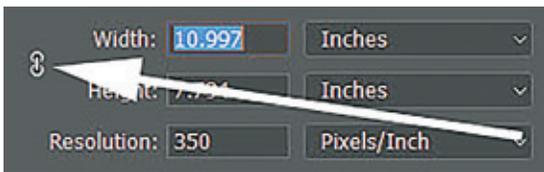


Figure 5

One of the requirements in applying for a distinction in the portfolio process is the need for an overview image; a single composite of all the images in the portfolio. This is a peculiar request for most competitors in PSA. It is also one of the most difficult requirements of the application process. Most of these requirements have been discussed in previous articles. I will discuss an ongoing problem that continually arises in the requirement for an overview image.

Figure 1 has an aspect ratio of 1/1.57. This means that for every single vertical inch the horizontal is 1.57 inches. This is the aspect ratio. We all know what that looks like in Photoshop®. It is the little chain links just to the left of the images size on the image size window, Figure 5. If the aspect ratio is set, changing either the vertical or horizontal size will not affect the ratio of 1/1.57.

There are two images to consider in the assessment process. One is the original file that will be used for projection, or the original portfolio print mailed for assessment. The second image is the thumbnail image created from the original file, that will be used for the overview image in both the print portfolio as well as the digital. Both the original file image and the thumbnail image must have the same aspect ratio.

Let me give you an example:

Say you are creating an overview image and you have determined that Figure 1 is an image you wish to use. Although the vertical is good, it is a bit too wide horizontally and does not fit the composition of the overview image. The temptation might be to resize the image horizontally and leave the vertical alone, as in Figure 6. After all, it is just a building and no one will notice. Wrong. Assessors have the luxury of holding a copy of the overview image in their hands while viewing the original projected image or the print. This may stand out like a sore thumb as it clearly shows in Figure 7.

The aspect ratio of the original file sent for projection or used to make a print, must be the same as the overview thumbnail created from that same file.

If you are going to use images of different aspect ratios, the pitfall is the composition of the overview image becomes a challenge. Chaotic aspect ratios have a tendency to distract the assessor.

Another possible issue, and one of which I think everyone is familiar, is the pitfall of the viewing process. I think it is a good idea to view the portfolio multiple ways before sending it. As an example; project the portfolio if you can, view

it on a television, and of course be very careful to calibrate your monitor. If you are making a print portfolio have many friends examine it. Look at each individual print on the lightbox if possible, as that is the way they will be examined by the assessor.

Taking these precautions is no guarantee the medium used for viewing at the assessment will match your expectation, however being very careful with the details may reduce the possibility of a mismatch in tonality, contrast, or color between what you think you sent and what the assessors are seeing.

The process is not easy and attention to detail is paramount. It is an entirely different way to experience photography and the competitive environment. Along the way, you might even have some fun. ■



Figure 6



Figure 7