

An Assessor Looks at a Successful Portfolio

The portfolio distinction program began when the PSA Board voted to adopt it at the Fall 2015 West Yellowstone Board meeting. It was first described in an article by **Jill Sneesby, APSA, MFIAP, ESFIAP**, and **Anne Sutcliffe, PPSA, FRPS, EFIAP**, in the January 2016 issue of the *PSA Journal*. The first assessment occurred in June 2016 and the second in January 2017. I had the privilege of serving as one of five assessors for the third assessment held June 8-11, 2017, at the Greater Lynn Photographic Association building in Lynn, MA.

Many PSA members and photographers who are members of other photographic organizations around the World exhibit their photographs in international salons and other types of competitions. In these competitions individual images are judged and the best receive awards. Exhibition images must stand alone, may be expected to follow “rules” of composition, and must have instant impact to win medals, ribbons, or acceptances.

There are other photographic programs where images are only one part of the evaluation. Instead of evaluating a single image, three components are important: story, a group of images, and presentation. Five PSA Divisions (Projected Image, Photo Travel, Photojournalism, Pictorial Print, and 3D) have essay or story competitions incorporating these three components. Portfolios are the most recent addition to this group of projects. The images included in these projects are likely to differ greatly from the images submitted to exhibitions. Individual images in three-component projects often will not stand alone, but instead each helps to tell part of a story.

Storyteller’s Imagination

During the June 2017 assessment a few portfolios stood out and impressed the five assessors. One of these was *Storyteller’s Imagination* by **Scott Fowler, PPSA, SPSA**, from New Zealand. As we looked at the overview image (see *Figure 1*) and listened to his statement of intent

we knew we were seeing something different. The statement of intent was:

“These images are ideas/stories that reach out to me from the visual circus called my subconscious; exploding into my conscious mind, a black and white image, demanding to be assembled in my digital darkroom. They originate in the world of an adult-child’s mind, where time and imagination are my consistent companions developing and constructing images that could only exist in a story telling imagination. The clocks are set at 3 o’clock—playtime.”

The photographer created all the images the same size, gave them a common black-and-white look, and placed a small group of symbols in multiple images. The background in the overview image is dark gray so the fifteen images, each surrounded by a white stroke, stand out. These attributes give the portfolio cohesiveness, important for a successful submission.

As we looked at the individual images on a large flat-screen television, we could see additional detail. Two example images are shown in *Figures 2* and *3*. The complete portfolio is posted on the PSA website at <https://psa-photo.org/index.php?spsa-scott-fowler#ad-image-0>. Every image contains one or more distorted clock faces set to 3 o’clock, the photographer’s playtime. Most of the images contain black umbrellas that act as helium balloons instead of shielding someone from rain. Flowing water is present in a majority of the images as are women in long black dresses. Several of the images contain a tiger, a lion, a building with columns, birds, a man with tattoos, railroad tracks and a couple with broom and shovel. The longer I examined these images the more I saw.

When assessing the portfolios the five assessors voted “in” or “out” on the statement of intent/overview image combination and on each image in the portfolio. Three “in” votes were required for the statement of intent/overview image combination to



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Figure 1.
Overview image
for the *Storyteller’s
Imagination* portfolio
by **Scott Fowler**.





Figure 2. Image number 8 from the *Storyteller's Imagination* portfolio by **Scott Fowler**.

pass. It also took three “in” votes for each image to pass. When something received two or three “in” votes we stopped and discussed why we voted the way we did. After that discussion one or more assessors sometimes changed their votes. In the case of *Storyteller's Imagination* the statement of intent/overview image combination and the fifteen images all received four or five “in” votes (mostly five) so no discussion was needed. However, we frequently stopped so the assessors could admire the images because they were so well executed and unusual.

This portfolio contained fifteen images for a silver level distinction (SPSA). The author had received a bronze level distinction (BPSA) at the January 2017 assessment (see his bronze level portfolio at <https://psa-photo.org/index.php?bpsa-scott-fowler#ad-image-0>). It is suggested that all photographers begin with a bronze level portfolio (10 images) before attempting a silver level portfolio (15 images). It certainly paid off for Scott. Note that Scott's silver level portfolio was very different from his bronze level portfolio in terms of subject matter and photographic treatment.

Scott included 15 images in his portfolio. These and additional images can be viewed on his web site at <http://www.scoiwi.com>. It is clear looking at his website that he is a talented photographer creating a variety of image types.

After the assessment I showed the statement of intent, overview image, and the 15 images to several friends, both photographers and other artists. They described the portfolio using words such as surreal, unusual, mystical, dystopian, bizarre, and disturbing. Everyone looking at the images noticed different symbols and had different reactions. Many images have elements of non-

reality. Several viewers noted that the images contain elements from the work of famous artists such as Salvador Dali and M.C. Escher.

Some Final Words

The portfolio distinction program provides an opportunity for PSA members to try something different from the popular exhibitions and camera club competitions. The program allows your imagination to run wild into places that may not be appropriate for exhibitions. This program requires combining a story (statement of intent), a set of related images, and thoughtful presentation. Challenge yourself to try something different. ■

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Figure 3. Image number 13 from the *Storyteller's Imagination* portfolio by **Scott Fowler**.