Common Portfolio Mistakes

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The PSA Portfolio Distinctions program gives members who do not want to enter PSA Recognized Exhibitions another way to present their work and learn at the same time. The program is about the learning experience and developing your own photographic vision. Do not think of it as a competition. The only one you are competing against is yourself. PSA wants to maximize success with this exciting program and minimize the number of mistakes shown to the assessors.

Portfolios are previewed by a trained assessor to assist you once your portfolio is finalized. You can make changes to the portfolio up until the time it has been finalized. The previewer can only download finalized portfolios for this preview. This assessor will not be part of the assessor panel for the actual assessment session.

The previewer looks for two types of problems:

- Objective mistakes where elements of the portfolio do not conform to the requirements published on the PSA website. The portfolio will not be successful if these mistakes are not corrected. Correcting them will not guarantee success, depending on subjective considerations of other elements of the portfolio, but the chances of success are greater.
- Subjective mistakes where elements of the portfolio have historically caused portfolios not to be successful. Sometimes a subjective mistake could be considered a mistake by one assessor but not a mistake by other assessors. In this case, the majority rules. This article only covers those subjective mistakes that have consistently resulted in failure.

The previewer will email you a notice of what mistakes and other potential problems were found. At the same time, the previewer will ask for your permission to un-finalize the submittal so you can make the necessary or desired changes. The previewer will not un-finalize your submission without permission. When permission is received the previewer will un-finalize the submittal so you can make the corrections. If the previewer does not receive permission to un-finalize the submittal, it will be presented to the assessors with the mistakes intact.

The biggest source of mistakes is the Overview Panel and the associated Statement of Intent. This Overview Panel shows several of the common mistakes, both objective and subjective. Please note that this Overview Panel was created for this article so no members would be embarrassed. All of these mistakes may not occur on a single Overview Panel but one or more has occurred on multiple submittals. Objective mistakes are marked in red, subjective mistakes are marked in blue.

1. Including the Portfolio Title on the Overview Panel. Even when not on the Overview Panel a title longer than 5 words is an objective mistake.
2. Including the Statement of Intent on the Overview Panel. Even when not on the Overview Panel a statement longer than 75 words is an objective mistake.
3. Including your name on the Overview Panel. This also includes listing any copyrights on the individual images, both on the Overview Panel thumbnails and the actual individual images. This encompasses chops or logos that can identify a specific person.
4. Including identification of the individual images on the Overview Panel. This identification can be a sequence number as shown here or the title of the image and/or the filename of the image and/or the pixel dimensions of the image.
5. Including your portrait on the Overview Panel.
6. This is a subjective Statement of Intent mistake but I am taking this opportunity to point it out thanks to Mistake 2 above. On the surface the Statement of Intent appears reasonable. But look at the statement and at the images. The last sentence of the Statement mentions insects but no image shows an insect. It is a mistake to raise the assessors' expectations in the Statement of Intent but not deliver on those expectations with the images in the portfolio.
7. Uneven spacing between images on the Overview Panel. This is a subjective mistake that generally causes the Overview Panel to fail because it shows sloppy workmanship on your part.
8. The biggest Overview Panel objective mistake is not having a valid Overview Panel in the first place.
   i. Some candidates have uploaded a version of one of the single images

NAMAQUALAND SPLENDOR

THE NAMAQUALAND REGION OF SOUTH AFRICA BECOMES A RIOT OF FLOWERS EACH SPRING. DUE TO THE SHORT GROWING SEASON PLANTS SPROUT AND BLOSSOM ON ALL AVAILABLE LAND. PLANTS EVEN TAKE ADVANTAGE OF ANY DIRT FILLED CRACKS IN THE CHEMICALLY STAINED ROCKS OF THE KOPJIES. INSECTS HAVE A FIELD DAY POLLINATING THE FLOWERS TO BRING NEXT SPRING'S SPLENDOR

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within the portfolio instead of a composite of all individual images.

ii. Some candidates have uploaded all the individual images into the Overview Panel area of the application.

iii. Some candidates have uploaded an additional single image as the Overview Panel.

9 Some mistakes cannot be shown with the Overview Panel alone but they will equally cause the portfolio to fail. These are based on the relationship between the image thumbnails in the Overview Panel and the individual images.

i. The individual images are not in the same order as in the Overview Panel. This is an objective mistake that will cause the portfolio to fail. The assessors do not need to rely on memory from when the Overview Panel was displayed and the Statement of Intent read aloud. When an assessor feels an image is out of order, the assessor will refer to an IPad that displays the Overview Panel to confirm the mistake.

ii. The image thumbnails in the Overview Panel are not the same as the individual images. The difference can be due for several reasons.

a. You decided to change out one of the images for better image quality or for better flow from one image to the next.

b. You flipped one of the images horizontal for better composition. This makes the orientation of the image in the Overview Panel different from the actual image.

c. The aspect ratios of an image and its thumbnail in the Overview Panel are different. This happens when you distort an image to better fit in the Overview Panel. While it may look good, it makes the two versions different. There is no problem with resizing an image using transform but be sure the horizontal and vertical dimensions are linked before scaling.

iii. An individual image was not included on the Overview Panel. For example: Silver requires 15 thumbnails on the Overview Panel. Some panels have only had 14 thumbnails.

iv. The individual images have strokes, borders, or mats (for prints) that are not indicated on the thumbnails on the Overview Panel. The assessors are expecting the two versions of a particular image to be the same and consistent. This is borderline between objective and subjective depending on how the assessors evaluate the strength of the individual images but in most cases it will be considered a mistake and cause the image(s) to fail.

v. The opposite is not always a mistake. Borders outside the thumbnail image areas on the Overview Panel can be taken as tools to enhance the desired artistic arrangement of the Overview Panel. This is similar to the use of drop shadows on the Overview Panel thumbnails like the one on the sample in this article. The previewer will bring this up in the notice to you but the final decision rests with you and on whether the assessors will realize your intent. The technique has worked successfully with past portfolios but not with absolute success.

10. The background for the Overview Panel is highly subjective. There is no requirement for a specific color or pattern. The background can be a solid color, a graduated color, or even a mildly textured pattern. Yes, any colors other than white or grey will initially draw the assessors' attention but not necessarily in a bad way. Something different will cause a reaction but can still be successful. If it holds the assessors attention at the expense of the thumbnails then it is a mistake.

11. The background of the individual images is a potentially subjective problem for digital portfolios. The images are shown with a black background. Dark or black image backgrounds can merge into this background. That could be your intent to emphasize the subject but frequently the image merging into the background is considered a mistake. Look at your images using a black background in your photo editor. If you like what you see and feel the assessors will as well, no problem. If you do not like it, add a thin stroke to separate the image from the background but be consistent and use that same stroke on all images.

12. The maximum allowed dimensions for uploaded images is 1920 pixels wide by 1080 pixels high. The upload software will prevent you from entering anything larger. At least one dimension should be the maximum allowed. Some candidates have used a broad black border on their images. That looks fine against your normal grey background in your photo editor but when projected for assessing that broad black background just makes your image look smaller. Size matters so this is another reason to check out your images against a black background in your editor.

My final recommendation is to go to the portfolio pages on the PSA Website. Take advantage of the resources on that page for guidance in putting together your own successful portfolio. ∎