

Jen Beckman's

Portfolio Review Do's and Don'ts (One Reviewer's Opinions)

After a recent conversation with Youngna Park of [Hey Hot Shot!](#) on the topic of reviewing portfolios, and my recent experience reviewing portfolios at last week's [New York Photo Festival](#), we thought it might be helpful to write a few tips for reviews from the reviewer's perspective. These are, of course, only my opinions and I can only share my own my experience—but hopefully this offers some insight into what we, as reviewers, look for.

Let me start by saying I love (love, love) doing reviews and studio visits (studio visits being a different beast). I relish spending time with artists and working with them on projects. Working *with* them, however, is the key phrase here. As someone from the gallery world I get a lot of pre-planned presentations by artists who hope to exhibit at the gallery. Ideally, the review is primarily a dialogue; the artist should have questions for the reviewer, and also be able to—and want to—discuss their process and work. While wanting to exhibit your work is a great end-goal to have—an essential part of the review process is being open to—and wanting to hear both positive and negative feedback.

What to bring: I like to first suggest that artists bring at least two bodies of work for review, and even a third if the work spans a large breadth. One body should be work that they feel is finished; a second should be work-in-progress with specific questions or challenges they'd like to address. The third can be a looser and less-formed body of work, and is often a way to observe how the artist formulates a new project. I'm primarily talking about photographers and artists making works on paper here, which can be printed and carried to a review.

How to present your work: If you have a book of your work, i'd love to see it. But, make sure you also still bring in prints. It's much harder to work with a bound book than it is to move prints around—and often editing and moving images around can drastically change how you, or I, see your work. Books and exhibitions are also laid out very differently, and as a curator of a gallery, it's important to be able to see work both individually and in various pairings. So, if you do not have prints made and are planning to attend a review—make them!

How much work to bring: As I mentioned earlier, I recommend bringing three bodies of work, if you have three series or projects. But, that doesn't mean we'll have time to look at, or discuss, 80 prints. The best thing you can do before coming is edit the work down—even within each project.

Start off with a series of no more than twenty images. Order the prints as you want the reviewer to look at them, and have questions ready for when you arrive at prints you definitely want feedback about. Explain your statement while going through the work to save time. By explaining what you were trying to achieve in making the work it can help guide the conversation, and whether you are or are not achieving what you intended. If the reviewer doesn't know where the work is coming from, it's hard

to give feedback beyond pace, color and basic technique—and the review, at best, should be about both about the prints you bring, how you present them, and the idea behind the work.

You can always bring extra prints in case we have more time (that third body of work I mentioned earlier), but make sure each series is well-edited before you arrive.

What I'm looking for: As a reviewer, I'm looking to be a soundboard for ideas, and also to impart some of my experience from the gallery world to you. Most reviewers have worked with many, many artists, whether they are editors, artists themselves or other gallery directors. When I (and other reviewers) meet with you, we're not expecting to see a perfectly executed concept that can be explained in a short review. We're looking, instead, to be excited by projects—even if they are not a perfect fit for our galleries, publications or institutions. The majority of us are there to help, through experience and critique, and want to feel like we can offer feedback beyond connecting your work directly to gallery walls.

Connecting you to institutions and galleries: On that note, while I (and other reviewers) cannot give out the names of specific galleries you should submit your work to, I can try to steer you in directions for the appropriate types of venues for your work. A lot of artists ask for introductions to other galleries and art institutions, but out of respect to my fellow associates, who are often flooded with artists, I do not offer direct contacts. That said, the web can be a very handy tool. Galleries usually have submission policies and contact information online, which is a good place to start your research.

Too often, artists come to me looking for a contact (or a chance at an exhibition) rather than being open to critique. By doing this, you leave out the chance for your work to excel through critical examination. Be open, but question what we say—ask why?

Lastly, make sure you get the most out of the review by giving your reviewer the tools to best help you. Stay upbeat, bring work you're excited about, make a list of questions, prepare prints to the best of your ability and have an open mind. The more open you are, the more you have to gain, and won't feel discouraged if someone says the work is not right for them, but is able to help the project, or your artistic process, in another way.

I hope you'll share your experience attending reviews in the comments, or other tips if you too have been a reviewer of other people's portfolios!