

Taking the next step

In review in Paris

Ewen Bell experienced firsthand the humbling and challenging world of international portfolio reviews by attending Fotofest at Paris Photo 2011. Here he reports back with some invaluable advice for photographers looking for their next big break.

Every year a handful of festivals coordinate some of the leading institutions and publications around the world to meet with photographers and review their work. It costs serious money to participate, and the level of critique can range from belligerent to brutal. What's at stake for the photographers is more than just getting your pride hurt, but a chance to open doors to new opportunities and take a step forward with your career development.

Deciding what you want to achieve from these review sessions is the most important step toward getting the most value from the process.



■ Eiffel Tower by night
Canon TDMk IV; 1/8 sec;
f/6.3; ISO 3200

Hard advice

Often you're meeting with someone who has decades of photographic experience behind them – established photographers in their own right. Understanding where your work lies across the spectrum of photographic genres is important if you want to make the most of your time face-to-face with these reviewers. One person told me, "I've seen some terrible works this morning; I hope you've got something good to show me."

I made life difficult for myself by choosing a range of reviewers that cover the full spectrum, instead of narrowing down to either galleries, publishers, editors or festivals. Worse, I packed just one set of images – when what I really needed were two or three collections to cover the diversity of interests reflected in my list of reviewers. If your photography is limited to a single interest, you'll already be choosing a narrow field of reviewers and hence a narrow collection is suitable.

At the heart of my mistake was presenting a body of work that demonstrated my range of skills, instead of presenting a mature body of work ready to be snapped up by a gallery. If you have an idea for a book, show them the book. If you have an idea for an exhibition, show them the exhibition.

Some of my colleagues made a similar mistake by playing it safe instead of being bold and confident. You're trying to put forward work that represents your future, not your past. Your aspirations and inspiration is what will get you over the line, and will also be the easiest to talk about in a confident manner. It also means you're getting critique on those aspects of your work that are most personal, and perhaps most challenging.

Some reviewers will be more direct than others. Those who are the most brutal will be the most valuable.

Getting a result

Over lunch with other photographers, there was much talk of whether or not people had "got a result". That meant getting a book deal from one meeting and a gallery exhibition from another, and these photographers were dead clear on what they wanted to achieve from their trip to Paris. After the first day of reviews, I felt a long way from books and exhibitions. I was still trying to figure out what this event was all about and what my goals were.

What I had in abundance was career advice. One photo editor explained the value of choosing keywords for stock images, suggesting that you start by picking the right image instead of the right keywords. A frame with clear elements that suggests unambiguous keywords will likely do better in an agency library than a complex scene that fits too many categories. Another photo editor outlined where the magazines are heading first to pull out a set of images for publication, and hence where I need to consider having my work registered.

Much of my time at the review tables revolved around philosophical discussions about the category of Fine Art versus Reportage. One reviewer expressed himself nicely when drawing the line between the two: "If the story in the picture is too obvious, then it won't be ready for a gallery."



■ Reviews in progress
The process is long, and oftentimes confronting. (BYO thick skin.)



■ Photography has a place in popular culture around Paris
Canon 1DMkIV; 1/20sec;
f/2.8; ISO 1600



■ On display to the city
Photographers share their work with the public of Paris for one night only

B+W & ANTARCTICA IMAGES BY EWEN BELL; ALL OTHERS COURTESY OF LENS CULTURE FOTOFEST PARIS 2011

**PARIS REVIEW PRIMER No.1
COMPOSING YOUR PORTFOLIO**

Make sure you can quickly and clearly articulate the concept behind your work, and make sure the images you present match your words to perfection.



Colours of ice in Commonwealth Bay
Canon 5DMkII; 1/200sec; f/13; ISO 200



Natural history under natural light
Canon 1DMkIV; 1/800sec; f/13; ISO 800



His comments referred to the editorial nature of an image. He wanted to see a concept on a canvas, not merely subjects in a story. At this stage of the program, I'd given up on my reportage prints from Asia and pulled out my laptop to share some more stylised images taken in Antarctica. He flicked through them one by one and gave each a yes or no as to their Fine Art potential.

Another reviewer put things in very simple terms: "The art world is looking for ART". You might have some cracker shots of penguins to share, but if you can tell it's a penguin, then you're probably not looking at Fine Art. Unless the "penguins" are presented in a conceptual framework, then you're looking at a story – and that's editorial. As a travel photographer, I've spent my career trying to capture the story; in the esoteric world of Fine Art, the objective of narrative occurs in discussion as much as in the photo.

Rejection and knowledge

These review sessions are all about discovering new horizons and broader networks. Most photographers are limited in their awareness of contemporary photographic communities, but the reviewers in these events are people who are deeply immersed in it. Their knowledge of publications, galleries, collectors and rock star photographers is unparalleled. These people know people. »

A big attraction for attending photographers is to tap into the expanded networks of the reviewers. If your work speaks to them, this can be a fast track to meeting people in the industry who can advance your career.

Rejection, however, is essential to the process. And if there isn't something in your folio that people don't like, then you might be playing it too safe. Remember, when a curator tells you why he doesn't think your folio will work on his walls, he is in fact inviting you to return next year with something that will. Being told "no thank you" is only "no" for now. Longer themes are really important when presenting your work to the Fine Art community. If your folio is a broad collection of elements or a few stunning moments, then you're on the back foot. Galleries and publishers are looking for "projects", work based on many years of dedicated effort around a unified concept. There's a limit to how important the technical quality need be. Competent is required; intent is essential.

In many ways the concept is more important than the execution, as your technical abilities with a camera are assumed long before you sit down at the table. Being able to gabble on for 20 minutes non-stop about your concept is a definite asset. When fronting up to share your work, an effective articulation of the "artist's statement" is absolutely crucial. If you don't have that clear in your mind, you probably don't have a conceptual framework behind the work either.

It's not enough to let your work speak for itself. You have to sell your work and sell hard, plus you have to sell yourself. Potential publishers want to know if you're a good candidate to work with and whether you have a little personality to back the images. The story of the photographer is very important.

Galleries are particularly sensitive to the character of the photographer because clients who buy Fine Art photography typically purchase with their ears instead of their eyes. The potential for your reputation is part of the assessment.

Public impressions

One evening is put aside during Fotofest to share your work with the public. Everybody gets a bit of table space to present their folio while students, photographers, artists and reviewers wander through the collection en masse. It's a chance for the participants to see everybody else's work, but also a chance to get some feedback from a different audience.

Many photographers are well prepared for the social evening, with books to accompany images, or iPads rolling through slideshows to enhance the appeal of their presentation. It's a good way to distribute a few extra business cards, too.

Meeting other photographers in this setting isn't so much competitive as comparative. »



Paris is full of old books, musicians and tourists
Canon 1DMkIV; 1/50sec; f/2.8; ISO 3200

"Twenty percent of your time is for shooting. The rest is for selling"



**PARIS REVIEW PRIMER No.2
THE BIGGER PICTURE**

Review schedules for Fotofest take place in a bigger picture of photographic exhibitions all over Paris. Around St Germaine, The Marais and the Grand Palais you find immense quantities of work on display. The scale and breadth of inspiration is impressive. As one expects from Paris, the use of B+W dominates the collections, but there are plenty of contemporary examples of these traditional elements. Check out parisphoto.fr



The truth hurts
Honest opinions await photographers under the spotlight



■ Making the grade
Reviewers are looking for talent, not just pretty photos



**PARIS REVIEW PRIMER No.3
THE BASICS**

What's the format?

For three or four days, the organisers arrange a team of reviewers who sit at a table and meet one-on-one with photographers. It's an intense experience for the photographers sharing their work, and even more intense for the reviewers. You get 20 minutes with each reviewer, then you get kicked out. In between reviews, time moves slowly – and you'll have a chance to make new friends with other photographers.

Who participates?

A wide range of photographic talent, experienced photographers who are working professionally in some capacity. Some are paying their bills with weddings or commercial work, but want to move into more artistic realms. Others are advanced in their careers and may have already published books, but want to establish connections with galleries to exhibit their work.

What might you gain from the experience?

Most photographers are looking for more than critical feedback. They want to open doors in publications and galleries or advance themselves into new career directions. If all you want is to know how to improve your photography, then you might be better to register for a Master Class rather than roll through these review sessions.

You can't look over someone else's folio without discovering some new potential for your own inspiration, let alone 100 or more folios.

Away from the review sessions, the participating photographers are all keen to share their work and enjoy the diversity of talent and influences. This isn't like browsing through a publication of your favourite masters, either – because the photographer is standing right next to you... and they're just a regular person like yourself. The distance between where you are and where they are is much less than you might imagine, which adds greatly to the sense of what you can achieve.

These review events are about taking another step forward. That step may be faltering, or it may be a confident stride. Either way, it's still a step forward. And you will walk away from the process much wiser than before.

Checklist for participating

- **KEEP YOUR FOLIOS** physically modest. Unless you have a confident purpose for exhibition-scale presentation, don't go for fragile or super-sized prints that are hard to carry around and take up too much space on the tables; 16x20 is a good size.
- **HAVE A CLEAR IDEA** of what you want from the experience, and let that guide your

presentations. You no doubt have a lot of content to share, perhaps covering many themes and styles, but you want to focus your folio on a strong message and clear concept.

- **AVOID BLACK AND WHITE** unless that format is critical to your style. The most impressive works in these reviews are confident enough to use colour – sparingly but effectively.
- **DON'T JUST BRING BUSINESS CARDS;** print up some additional material you can leave with the reviewers that feature some reminders of your style and any key messages about your work you wish to emphasise. Consider a small booklet or a well-designed A5 presentation card.
- **GET TO KNOW** the other presenting photographers during the event and join a few people for social lunch or coffee. Their experiences are worth learning from and are always inspiring.

Paris, Houston, Ballarat

Fotofest is run every year as part of the Paris Photo event. There is a partner program in Houston, Texas, each year where the emphasis is a little different and draws a bigger list of reviewers based in North America. Australia also boasts the Ballarat International Foto Biennale, which includes a notable portfolio review program. Check out fotofest-paris.com; fotofest.org; and ballaratfoto.org

merci beaucoup!

EWEN BELL was sponsored to attend Fotofest Paris after winning the Fringe Prize at the Ballarat International Foto Biennale (BIFB). He wishes to recognise the generosity of the CAL Cultural Fund in supporting this award, as well as their ongoing support of artists in Australia. The next BIFB will be held in August 2013. **Check out ballaratfoto.org; and copyright.com.au**

**PARIS REVIEW PRIMER No.4
THE NUMBERS GAME**

The word on the streets from Paris and Fotofest.

- "One in a thousand photographers can find a place in Fine Art."
- "Twenty percent of your time is for shooting. The rest is for selling."
- "Out of 14 reviews today, I've liked everything except one. Just one wasn't of the quality we expect to see."
- "We've got 160 people wandering around Paris with fantastic folios under their arms. It's a ready made exhibition and we just need them in one hall at the same time."
- "You can't fill a book from three weeks of work. Three years, maybe."
- "Ninety percent of my work is fighting. Ten percent is despair."

"Review events are about taking another step forward. And you'll walk away from the process much wiser than before"



■ Paris is all about style, and photography is all about your style
Canon 1DMkIV;
1/160sec; f/13; ISO800