

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

May 29, 2007

Portfolio Review

Filed under: [Magnum, psa](#) — alecsothblog @ 4:39 pm

There is nothing more valuable for emerging artists than getting an honest and in-depth reaction from established professionals. But it isn't easy. Professionals normally don't have time to be teachers.

Every week I get numerous emails asking me to review work online. Even if I had time, I don't feel capable of sinking my teeth into jpegs. Moreover, it seems impossible to give a worthwhile reaction without having a face-to-face discussion.

This is why I'm a big believer in portfolio reviews. These reviews provide a time and place for genuine exchange. As I've [previously mentioned](#) on this blog, I'm a fan of Review Santa Fe. It is a great place to get the opinions of editors, publishers and galleries. But the one thing Santa Fe doesn't offer is the opinions of established working photographers.

Magnum Photos is helping to fill this gap with its first Portfolio Review event. On Sunday, June 17th, visitors can meet with three of the following photographers in New York City:

- Larry Towell
- Alec Soth
- Susan Meiselas
- Trent Parke
- David Alan Harvey
- Jim Goldberg
- Mark Power

School can be great, but there is so much filler. For tens of thousands of dollars, you sit in circles and talk in circles. Here, for \$250, you can cut to the chase with both up-and-comers and established legends.

This is going to fill up quickly. So if you are interested, click [here](#) for details and an application.

35 Comments

1. I sense that this event might be somewhat popular. Just a wee bit.

Review Santa Fe is truly great. I just went as a reviewer and thought it was tops. (And I just got started [posting about the experience](#) over on Personism.)

I am a big fan of mentorship, so the angle of the Magnum reviews is really appealing to me. You're a mensch for participating.

Comment by [Jen Bekman](#) — May 29, 2007 @ [5:02 pm](#)

2. I hope this becomes an annual event! I'm not ready for it yet, but in a couple years, I'll be all over this. . . .

Comment by [Liz](#) — May 29, 2007 @ [7:44 pm](#)

3. the problem being that a lot of people don't reside in NY or in america, in fact the other side of the world... the internet is the only option for a lot of people, though i'd agree that jpegs suck.

Comment by [pj](#) — May 29, 2007 @ [8:31 pm](#)

4. PJ, I appreciate where you are coming from. But sometimes I think the internet is too easy. With the click of a mouse you can email countless people around the world. But with so little effort invested into the exchange, why should the recipient respond with any more effort?

One of the special things about Review Santa Fe is that almost none of the participants, photographers or reviews, lives there. Everyone is making an effort to get together.

For the record, only two of the Magnum reviewers live in New York. (Trent lives in Australia, Larry in Canada, Mark in England, Jim in California and I live in Minnesota).

If this review goes well, we hope to do more in other locations. It is being held in New York because all of the photographers will be in town for the Magnum Annual Meeting. Future meetings will be held in London and Paris. And I know that Trent is anxious to get us all down to Australia.

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — May 29, 2007 @ [10:01 pm](#)

5. Hi Alec –

This sounds like a great development for Magnum – I am sure it will be both greatly appreciated by the participants and also be a great experience for the Magnum photographers.

Living in London I look forward to when you all come to town – and hope you will make that trip.

As for going to Australia – I don't know if you have ever been but if you do you should try to make sure you fit in a side trip to Tasmania. I think you would like the place a lot and it would suit your photographic vision very well. It's a real frontier.

Slightly off-topic, I remember coming across Trent Parke's work in the <http://www.in-public.com> site and being really bowled over. I was also sure I had heard of him, though didn't recognise the pictures at all. This puzzled me until my girlfriend pointed out that I have played golf a couple of times at a course in N London, called Trent Park. I wonder if he knows he has a golf course namesake ?

Robert

Comment by [Robert Phillips](#) — May 30, 2007 @ [6:24 am](#)

6. This is spectacular! Santa Fe was amazing this year because it was a meeting ground for people from all over the world. Who doesn't want to go to NY? Magnum Photographers? No brainer, plus it's not too sticky on the train yet. London sounds great too.....

Comment by [Karolina Karlic](#) — May 30, 2007 @ [7:42 am](#)

7. It is good that Magnum are offering portfolio reviews and de-mystifying some of the myths of the agency by making their photographers into more public figures. Unfortunately New York is the other side of the Atlantic for me but out of curiosity could you explain how photographers will be assigned to potential candidates and what the outcome of the reviews may be?

cheers

ross

Comment by [ross](#) — May 30, 2007 @ [9:36 am](#)

8. Ross, I'm not sure about the logistics of the reviews. You can contact Melissa Haile at 212 929 6000 or reviews@magnumphotos.com

As for outcome, portfolio reviews are no different than any other kind of educational experience. You get out of it what you put into it.

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — May 30, 2007 @ [10:33 am](#)

9. Hi Ross,

Reviewees will be assigned to Magnum Photographers based on the interests they indicated on their registration form. We will try our best to match the candidates with the photographers who closely reflect their work and goals.

Comment by [Melissa from Magnum](#) — May 30, 2007 @ [10:46 am](#)

10. Totally excited. Just faxed in my form. It really is a great thing, for someone emerging like me, to have an opportunity to hear feedback and commentary on the work. So often it feels like you are shooting "alone" if you will.

Barring location issues, I actually think this is quite an accessible event. I would have expected initial applications and then selected photographers for review, not first come first serve in order to have time with this group.

Now I've got to edit

Comment by [Alison Grippio](#) — May 30, 2007 @ [11:26 am](#)

11. I think this is wonderful. It would be good to hear what it takes to move on from being an emerging photographer (even at my age). If I lived in the area I would sign on. Sort of a short fuse to get airline tickets etc.

I personally look at reviewing work over the internet as I do the film/digital debate. Reminds me of fast food as compared to a gourmet dinner. There is a loss of sensibility in this digital world. No one seems to lament over Tri-x and a well done silver gel print. Well...ok. Im sure that new HP printer is pretty fine too.

Best wishes
Paul

Comment by Paul Rigas — May 30, 2007 @ [1:34 pm](#)

12. I'm not so sure there is a loss between the digital and the printed world. I shoot 100% digital (i know i know the horror), but it's a laborious process for me to get the image to look the way it needs to look (and often, i go back and keep working). Printing, well printing sort of sucks. I used to print black and white in the darkroom and knew what i was getting into with what paper, with different filters, dodging, blah blah – now everything has to be done with inks, and then inks to paper, and the permutations are much larger (to me it seems). not to mention the calibration so what you see on screen is what you see in print, and of course the added layer of black and white as so many printers have problems dealing with the tones and everything often comes out like a gray blob.

Point being: creating this portfolio is going to be a process and a half beyond just editing the selection. But that's the price of the two worlds I think, if you choose to be digital, you should know how your work will look in print, just like if you choose film, you should be prepared to labor over getting the best scan – it seems, for today's photographer it's critical to know both sides of the fence.

Comment by [Alison Grippo](#) — May 30, 2007 @ [1:45 pm](#)

13. Alison

You're lamenting digital. :)))

Just enjoy whatever process you choose. If you find a way to get blacker blacks and whiter whites on an inkjet, then pass it on to all of us. I struggle with this also.

P/

Comment by Paul Rigas — May 30, 2007 @ [2:32 pm](#)

14. Please, please, please don't turn this into a film vs. digital debate. That wasn't my point. Digital is dreamy. I'm just saying that I appreciate the effort that goes into making a thing (however it is made) and meeting the maker face to face.

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — May 30, 2007 @ [2:51 pm](#)

15. I'm very interested in this review. I've been working as painter, and teaching, so my jump to photography has been a little bumpy. I've recently completed a documentary photo project and wanted some feedback. What is the typical size for printing for this type of review? Is 16x20 too large?

Comment by John — May 30, 2007 @ [2:52 pm](#)

16. whoops, didn't mean it that way – no debate – to your point – making and meeting is the cool factor.

Comment by [Alison Grippo](#) — May 30, 2007 @ [3:17 pm](#)

17. Indeed Alec, much like life itself. Any murmurings about possible dates for a London Review? Maybe Melissa can field that if she's still reading...

Comment by ross — May 30, 2007 @ [3:19 pm](#)

18. Alison, no problem.

John, 16×20 seems fine.

Ross, it is too early to know how these reviews will develop. But based on the reaction (we are on the way to being sold-out after 24 hours), I wouldn't be surprised to see more in the future.

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — May 30, 2007 @ [3:46 pm](#)

19. Oh nuts. You guys scheduled it for Father's Day!

Comment by [Joe Holmes](#) — May 30, 2007 @ [6:56 pm](#)

20. wow sounds great. unfortunately i cant swing the date. will this happen again or on an annual or bi annual basis?? same or different magnum photographers??

same thing with sane fe. i need to get out there next year.

Comment by [stewart](#) — May 30, 2007 @ [7:27 pm](#)

21. I have no dog in this fight since I am not a photographer; but I think it is truly terrific for established professionals to take time to offer advice to those who hope soon to be nipping at their heels! It happens nearly not at all in my line of work. I encountered Larry Towell here in Rochester last fall and he seemed terrifically interesting and straightforward. And Alec, I always appreciate how you speak your mind in a similarly direct but decent way. If the rest of your compatriots are at all like you the kids will get their two-fifty worth and more. I admire this immensely.

Comment by [Jim Johnson](#) — May 30, 2007 @ [10:19 pm](#)

22. opps, sorry Alec, guess you already addressed my questions. I should have read before i wrote..but im glad to see i'm not alone in hoping there are more reviews to come!

Comment by [stewart](#) — May 30, 2007 @ [11:51 pm](#)

23. Alec,

I just participated as a reviewer at Review Santa Fe and this is exactly what I thought. Why aren't there any artists reviewing? Glad to know that there is an opportunity.

Dan

Comment by [Dan Cooney](#) — May 31, 2007 @ [4:22 pm](#)

24. Bangalore, where I live, is somewhere between NYC and Australia. The event fees itself isn't a problem but the logistical cost is too high. I wish, really wish, there was some way for us in south Asia to participate in this event. Maybe an online portfolio review wouldn't be such a bad idea.

Comment by [Mahesh Shantaram](#) — June 1, 2007 @ [1:31 pm](#)

25. We'd like to wait until this Portfolio Review happens before we plan the next one.

Ideally, your print size should be at least 11×14, but as budget and time will determine that, print your images in whichever format you think is best for your work. You are also welcome to bring a laptop with your images.

Comment by [Melissa from Magnum](#) — June 1, 2007 @ [3:40 pm](#)

26. Hi Alec and Friends!

I'm very please to announce that as of today Jonas Bendiksen and Chris Anderson have also committed to the review.

Thanks!
Song

Comment by [Song from Magnum](#) — June 1, 2007 @ [3:51 pm](#)

27. Just curious – where or whom does the \$250 go to?

Comment by [Thomas Pickard](#) — June 2, 2007 @ [5:05 am](#)

28. The \$250 investment goes towards the logistical expenses incurred to host this kind of event.

Comment by [Melissa from Magnum](#) — June 4, 2007 @ [2:48 pm](#)

29. I happen to be fortunate enough (at least as far as the portfolio review goes) to live in NYC, but unfortunately I'll be out of town during the reviews, so I really hope that it's a great success and that I'll have another opportunity to participate. Sadly, I'll miss out on many of the Magnum events this month—the one month I'm not in the city!!....but this, in particular, does seem like a great opportunity for those who are able to take advantage of it.

Comment by [Aaron](#) — June 6, 2007 @ [3:26 pm](#)

30. Regarding your May 29, 2007 post:

"Professionals normally don't have time to be teachers."

What a strange and loaded thing to say. While that comment may be, at times, circumstantially substantive, when were artists ever "professionals", other than in the commercial sense (that is to say, in the realms of editorial—magazines and newspapers— and print advertising)? Were the terms "professional painter", "professional sculptor", or perhaps "professional artist" ever to be put to use, it would likely be in the context of ridicule.

Miriam Webster's definition of professional:

Main Entry: 1pro·fes·sion·al

Function: adjective

1 a : of, relating to, or characteristic of a profession b : engaged in one of the learned professions

c (1) : characterized by or conforming to the technical or ethical standards of a profession (2) : exhibiting a courteous, conscientious, and generally businesslike manner in the workplace

2 a : participating for gain or livelihood in an activity or field of endeavor often engaged in by amateurs b : having a particular profession as a permanent career c : engaged in by persons receiving financial return

3 : following a line of conduct as though it were a profession

– pro·fes·sion·al·ly adverb

And Miriam Webster's definition of profession:

Main Entry: pro·fes·sion

Function: noun

Etymology: Middle English *professioun*, from Anglo-French *profession*, from Late Latin & Latin; Late Latin *profession-*, *professio*, from Latin, public declaration, from *profitari*

1 : the act of taking the vows of a religious community

2 : an act of openly declaring or publicly claiming a belief, faith, or opinion : PROTESTATION
3 : an avowed religious faith
4 a : a calling requiring specialized knowledge and often long and intensive academic preparation
b : a principal calling, vocation, or employment c : the whole body of persons engaged in a calling

“Professional photographer” really means “commercial photographer”, an apt term for most photojournalists, documentary photographers, and editorial / advertising photographers, whose livelihoods depend on the sale of their photographs to commercial entities and / or being hired to take photos for the very same.

Many great artists have made the practice of teaching an integral part of who they are, and as a result, either directly or indirectly an aspect of their own artistic practices. Plenty of educators are great artists and many artists are great educators, in many disciplines. Photographers Stephen Shore, Joel Sternfeld, and William Christenberry, have all had long and esteemed careers as artists and educators. Your Magnum colleague Jim Goldberg also comes to mind. They have time to be a teachers, and they have time to be great artists. With only a cursory consideration of musicians, writers, dancers, painters, and sculptors, etc. etc., and this list would extend well beyond a single blog page.

“... you sit in circles and talk in circles.”

We'll just leave that one alone.

Comment by Rodney Finister — June 11, 2007 @ [9:02 am](#)

31. Relax Rodney. I just mean photographers who shoot for money. Teachers normally don't have time for commercial/editorial work. Commercial/editorial photographers normally don't have time to teach.

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — June 11, 2007 @ [9:11 am](#)

32. It is not about words- professional, commercial or artist.

For me, living here in stupid Russia, with all this nationalism and criminal-capitalism, it looks so strange that MAGNUM PHOTOGRAPHERS asked 250\$ from their young colleagues not for teaching them for a day or week, just for get look at 20-30 pictures. Just for advise.

I hope that I haven't understood something with my poor English and Soviet culture... But, I can't imagine that W. Eugene Smith or Capa ever did it. Something going wrong with it.

Comment by [Sergei Isakov](#) — June 12, 2007 @ [1:11 pm](#)

33. I find this expensive too. \$250 is a lot : it represents almost 30 hours of work, here in France...

Comment by pierre yves — June 15, 2007 @ [10:31 am](#)

34. Hi there... Yes, it is great that experts in photo area review portfolios, but I think is too expensive the charge of 250 dlls for 20 minutes. In Mexico city I took a work shop for a whole week with Charles Harbutt ex-magnum photographer, it cost me 100 dlls. Then in Tijuana I took another work shop with Maya Goded, magnum photographer as well, that it last two weeks, and it cost me about 30 dlls. So it is a big difference.
thanks and best regards.

Comment by alex cossio — June 24, 2007 @ [1:25 am](#)

35. In life and in your work, you will make a number of investments – of your time and money, that you hope will steer you closer towards your goals. As individuals, we must decide for ourselves the value of such investments, thereby defining our own worth.

For some of you, the investment to meet with Magnum's Photographers may not have been worth it, or perhaps just not in your budget at this time. Whatever the case, create meaning in your life, shoot with integrity, and focus on being the best photographer you know how to be.

Comment by [Melissa from Magnum](#) — July 9, 2007 @ [10:25 am](#)