

lensculture

BUILD YOUR PHOTOGRAPHY PRACTICE

LensCulture's Guide for Creative
& Professional Development

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© DOROTHEE THOMSON

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED IN 20 YEARS

For two decades, LensCulture has been on an extraordinary journey **celebrating the universal language of photography**—a language that transcends borders, cultures, and spoken words. Together with our vibrant community we’ve discovered hundreds of remarkable photographers who have shared their unique perspectives, told powerful stories, and helped us all **see the world through different lenses**. Along the way, we have learned a lot.

Today, **the LensCulture community spans over 140 countries**. We share our discoveries online, through exhibitions, events, and books, reaching an audience of over 3 million worldwide. Throughout each year we host competitions that recognize and award photography talent, and we have a Review Program that gives valuable feedback on projects, helping photographers of all levels move forward creatively and professionally.

In the past 20 years, **we have learned a lot about how to develop and sustain a photographic practice** and how to reach a wider audience. Some photographers maintain active professional lives in unrelated fields and devote spare time to their photography. Others make photography the primary focus of their professional livelihoods. Similarly, some artists show their work in galleries, museums and publish books to engage in the larger discourse within the field. Others have a more personal practice with a limited audience. In short, **there isn’t a “right way” to be a photographer**.

We hope you learn a lot from these pages, and most importantly, get out there and use your photography to engage with the world.



**VISION &
PRACTICE**



At the core of any photography practice are bodies of work — projects — that you develop over time. But, before you think about making a complete project, here are some basic needs for people who are serious about photography:

Get to know your equipment. When you are out making pictures, your camera should be like an appendage: you should be able to manually adjust shutter speed and depth-of-field to get the effects you want. Camera settings, lenses, lighting, should all be second nature to you.

Make images every day, if you can, and analyze your photos — do they all work together? What succeeds and what doesn't work so well — what can be improved?

Understand how to use post-production tools. Master the software (Photoshop, LightRoom) or developing techniques (darkroom) so that you produce consistent results. There are many excellent video tutorials along with in-person and online classes to hone these skills and your camera technique.

CREATING PROJECTS

A project, or a “body of work” refers to a group of photographs that work well together to explore a specific concept, narrative, or mood/atmosphere.

Starting a project can be a daunting task, and there isn’t a “right way” to do this. Some photographers pick up their camera and start making pictures. Others thoroughly research their topic, make contacts and plan their photographic time well in advance. Here are some things to think about as you embark on your next project.



© STEPHANIE O’CONNOR
Under the weight of the flowers

Research what other photographers are doing now and what has been done in the past. Stay abreast of new styles, techniques and visual approaches via platforms like LensCulture which feature a wide range of contemporary photography from cultures around the world.

Stay active and connected with local and global photography events. Subscribe to photography magazines. Attend photo festivals and fairs. Go to gallery shows and museum exhibitions. Get on mailing lists from photography organizations that you like, so you won't miss out on new events and new discoveries. Look at a lot of photobooks — there is a wonderful wide range of photography in books — from mainstream publishers, to small presses dedicated to photography books, to a multitude of self-published books and zines. Join local groups and workshops and be an active participant. You can also learn a lot by assisting other photographers in their shoots and in their business practices.



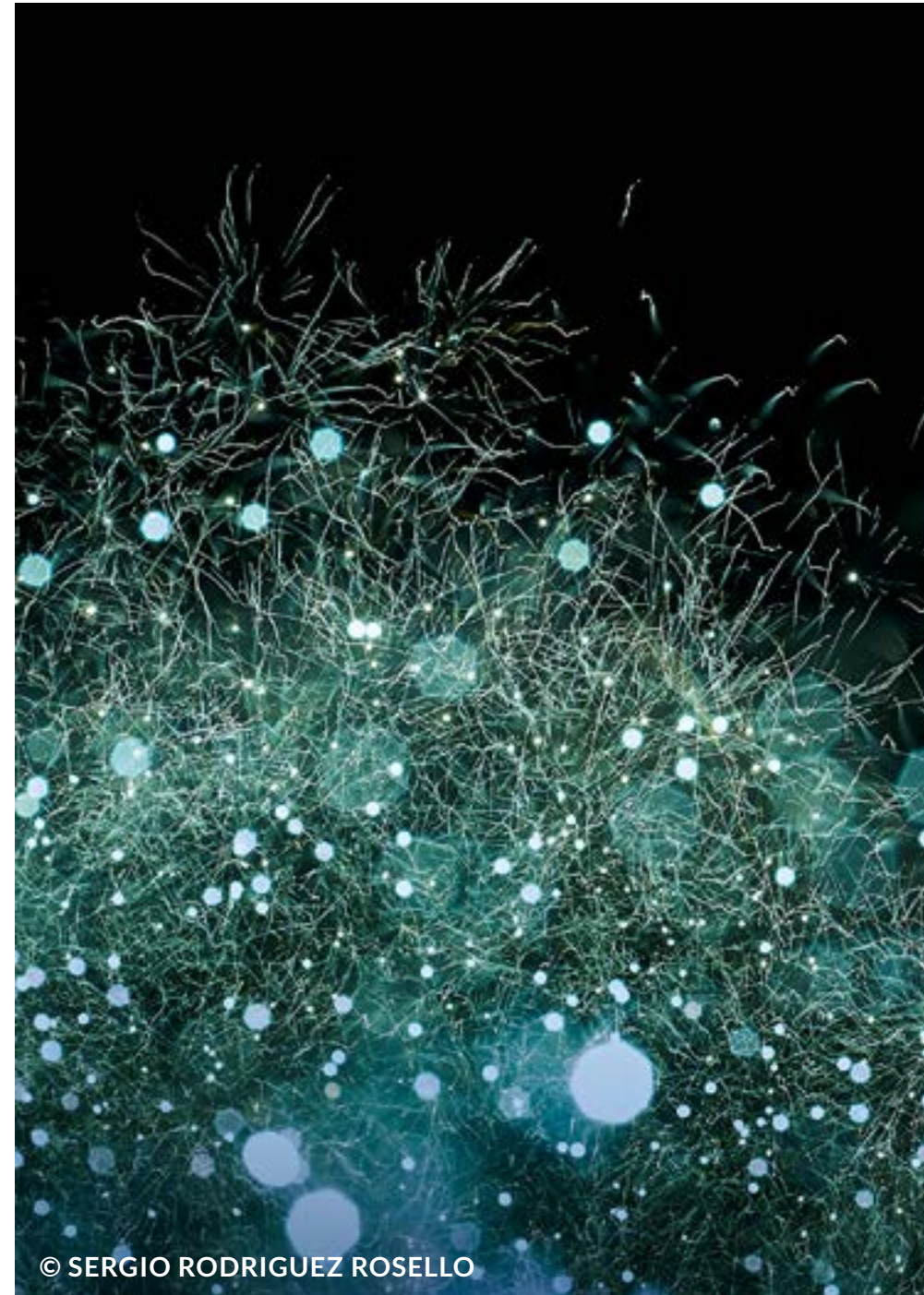
Develop, reflect and refine. Instead of scattering your efforts, focus on projects where you fully explore a subject or concept by spending time with the subject matter. Demonstrate your unique artistic voice through your formal choices, sequencing, and other aspects of presentation. When selecting images for the final sequence, make sure that each photograph contributes to the larger whole.

During the flow of creating images, regularly take time to reflect on your work and to evaluate if your images align with your initial intentions. And if they don't, have you discovered new paths worth exploring? Can you refine your approach to better achieve your vision? Have you struck the right balance of formal strengths and valuable content?

Images look different when printed on paper compared to viewing on a bright digital screen. Print some of your favorite images and tape them up on your walls so you can see them and think about them repeatedly — you'll notice things at different times of day or night, and when you are in a good mood or a bad mood. Which images have staying power? Printing your work regularly, and evaluating the print quality, will help you become a better photographer, too.



© STEFANIE LANGENHOVEN



© SERGIO RODRIGUEZ ROSELLO

Solicit feedback from others. Show your work to other photographers (not just your family members and friends) and ask for honest feedback. Attend portfolio reviews. Participate in workshops. Find a mentor if you can. Take some classes. Share a curated selection of your photos on social media and your website.

Knowing when a project is done. Knowing when a project is done can be difficult. When you think you are near completion, take a few weeks away from looking at it. Distance is invaluable towards gaining perspective. When you return, ask yourself whether all the images contribute to the story? Are there any redundancies? Can you track the narrative or feel the mood of the project in all the photos?



**GET YOUR
WORK OUT
INTO THE
WORLD**

**“ONCE YOU’VE STARTED TO
TAKE YOUR OWN PHOTOGRAPHY
SERIOUSLY, IT’S IMPORTANT TO
GET IT OUT INTO THE WORLD”**

JIM CASPER, LensCulture

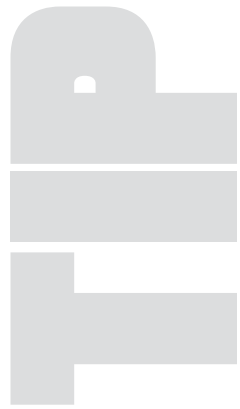
PREPARE TO BE SEEN

The task of marketing yourself takes time and is the product of consistent and cumulative effort as your career develops.

Research your market carefully. Find the outlets—specific galleries, magazines, curators, etc.—you want to work with and learn about them. Who have they worked with in the past? What are their specialties? Who are their clients/audiences? What are their submission policies? Knowing this in advance will help you meet your objectives quicker.

In addition to an outstanding set of photographs, you should have a project statement for each body of work in your portfolio and a CV or a resume. Over time, you can update and change these documents so they remain current and relevant as you and your career grow.





Make your writing concise and easy to understand. Avoid “art speak” or obscure references. And when the situation calls for it, be personal in your writing — let your own voice come through.



Project Statement. Your project statement provides context for a specific body of work, and you’ll need one for each project in your portfolio. Project statements should be both informative and engaging; they function as an invitation for the reader to look at the work in nuanced ways and to understand your intentions. A good statement can help distinguish aspects of your photography that may look similar to other artists’ work and place a spotlight on your unique value. Project statements come in many shapes and forms. Some are practical and straightforward, others are more poetic and allude to the emotions or atmosphere that is present in the photographs. 300 words is a good starting point.

Elevator Pitch. When you are done with your project statement, consolidate your thoughts into an even shorter, spoken “elevator pitch.” An elevator pitch is a summary that outlines your project idea in under a minute. The purpose is to pique the listener’s curiosity and get them to look at your project within the framework you define. Some advice — practice saying it out loud. You can continue to refine it so it sounds natural and engaging in conversation.

CV & Resume. Your CV is an exhaustive document that lists information relevant to your artistic career history. It is an important component in your suite of professional materials, and is the document gallerists and curators rely on to find out about your experience and achievements to date. Keep it simple and factual. Your resume is a summarized version of your CV and only includes the most important information.

MAINTAIN AN ACTIVE PUBLIC PRESENCE

Website. Create a website dedicated to your photography. Make sure your website is visually clean, well organized and easy to navigate. Seek inspiration from other photographers' websites. Keep your website up to date, too, with your latest projects, and even consider sharing new work in progress.

Post regularly to social media. Instagram is the default social media platform for serious photographers. It's a way to remain on the radar of editors, curators, gallery owners, art collectors, and other photographers. Be "social" on social media, too — comment on other people's posts, and interact in a positive way with people who comment on your work. Make sure to establish a separate account for your professional versus personal posting.

Newsletters. Offer to keep people up to date by sending out email newsletters on a regular basis — quarterly or monthly. Make sure people can sign up for your mailing list from your website and your social platforms.





**GET YOUR
WORK SEEN**



A part of developing one's photography career involves finding ways to get your work seen.

When you are starting out, knowing how to negotiate the ins and outs of the gallery world, editorial outlets, photography awards, portfolio reviews, residencies and grant applications can feel overwhelming at times. And just like the process of creating a photographic project, **there isn't a single right way to make connections and get your work out there.**



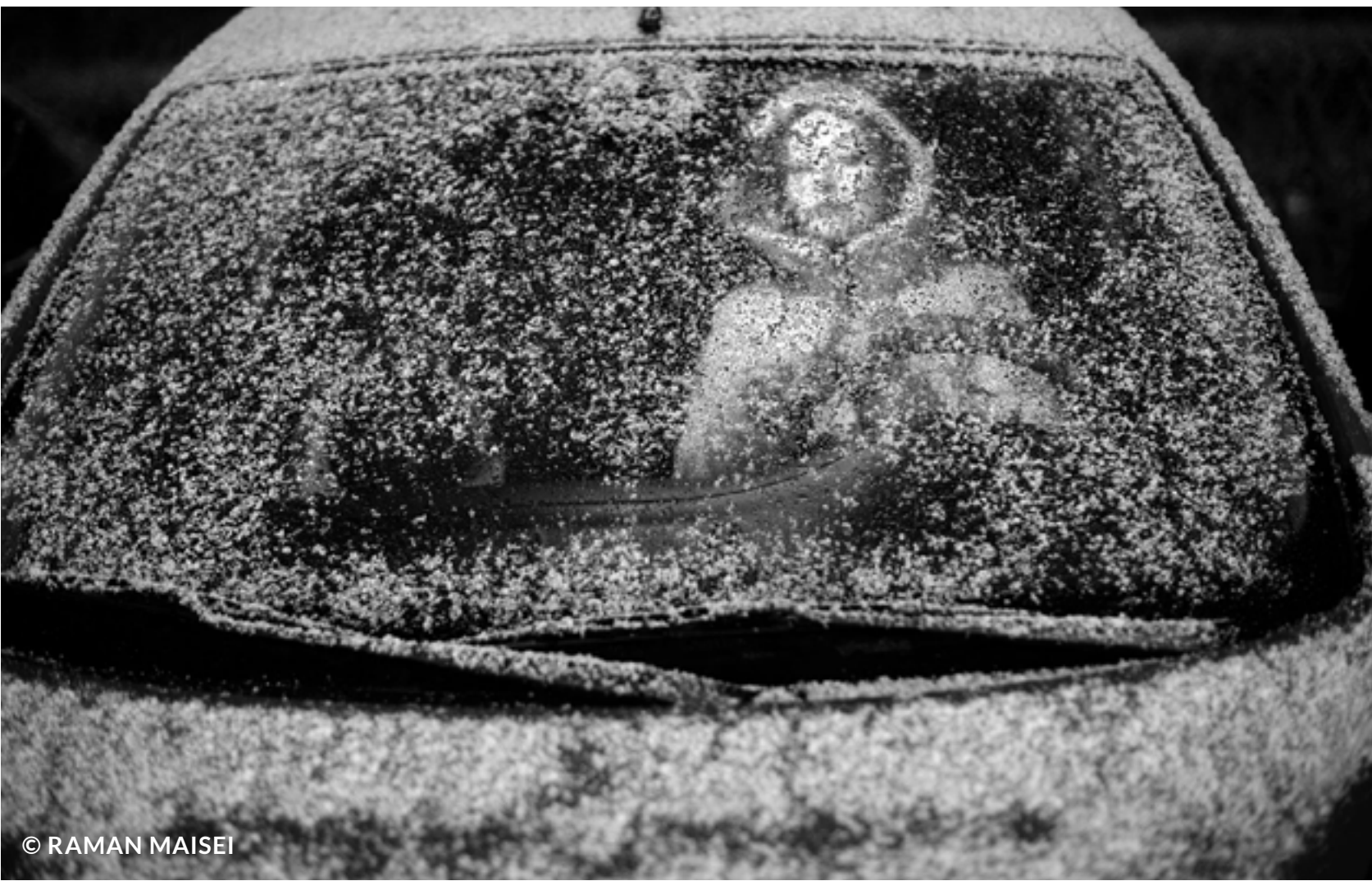
Juried exhibitions and photography competitions

are great for your CV and can help to legitimize you in the photography community. They are a way to be a part of the larger dialogue happening in the art world.

Photo competitions are an excellent way to get your work in front of the people who matter—influential jury members who can have a career-building impact. Look for organizations that are well-known and well-respected in the international photography world. And research the jury members to see whether their organizations and/or previous involvement with photographers interests you. Even if your work isn't awarded, individual jurors can often provide promising photographers with meaningful exposure that can lead to career-building opportunities. And if you don't receive recognition on one occasion, there's a chance another juror will recognize and award your work in a future submission to a different competition.

© TANIA FRANCO KLEIN

Portfolio reviews are tremendously valuable ways to meet key people in the industry and present your work in a one-on-one setting, in person, or online. They offer the opportunity to get direct feedback, criticism and advice from experts. Formal portfolio reviews can be part of long and intense days, and there are significant costs involved, so if you sign up, prepare yourself to stand out from the crowd.



Before A Portfolio Review

Get to know the reviewers. Nearly all the experts we asked said doing a little research to get to know the personality and taste of your reviewers is a vital step in preparing for a portfolio review.

Edit your portfolio smartly. Take the time to edit your portfolio carefully and organize it for easy viewing. In total, you want to show somewhere between 15-25 images. If you are in the fine art market, prints are standards. For the editorial market, prints or a clean digital presentation may be equally acceptable. Also, make sure to focus on one particular project (or two) instead of showing scattered, general examples of the work you do.

Presentation. Keep your presentation materials clean, organized and up to your highest standards.

Rehearse your “elevator pitch” for each project you are presenting. Include ideas about how your work fits into the reviewer’s expertise/interests.

Prepare your materials. In addition to bringing along your portfolio, a common recommendation is to prepare materials to leave behind for your reviewers. Your “leave-behinds” should be small enough to fit in a pocket and include an image that makes it easy for your reviewer to remember your project.



During A Portfolio Review

Keep track of time. Most portfolio reviews are limited to around 20 minutes, so make sure you leave time after your presentation for your reviewers to speak and give you feedback.

Be open to feedback. Remember that you attend portfolio reviews to get valuable feedback from people in the industry, so keep an open mind! Negotiating how to integrate or reject criticism is one of the many skills you gain through personal experience.

Take notes. It's a good idea to bring a pencil and pad of paper so that you can take notes from the feedback your reviewers give you. You can also record the conversation (with permission), which will allow you to focus more clearly on what the reviewer is saying.



After A Portfolio Review

Follow up with your reviewers. You should always send a thank you note, when possible, and follow up with any additional materials your reviewers requested.

Edit your work. Take the feedback you received and use it as an opportunity to re-edit your work with a fresh set of eyes and a new perspective.

Stay active in the community. Remember that meeting experts and photographers in the industry is a chance to grow your network and stay connected. Those connections you make are meaningful!

WRITTEN REVIEWS

from LensCulture

Here at LensCulture, we believe that every photographer deserves thoughtful feedback on their work. That's why we designed our Submission Review service (as part of our competitions) to help you be more successful with your photography projects. This is a service for you to receive critical and constructive feedback on your photography from top gallerists, curators, photo editors, publishers, educators, critics, consultants, seasoned photographers and other industry professionals. This continues to be one of the most valuable services we offer for photographers.

© MIKO OKADA



Here's what photographers say about our written reviews:



© MACKENZIE CALLE

“I really have to say thank you (BIG TIME!) to the LensCulture team: first of all, for the submission review I received after the LensCulture Award — it really **helped me to re-edit the 8 pictures for the World Press Photo Award submission, where I then won 2nd prize!** Second, for the publication of this story on the front page of LensCulture gave my story broad exposure. Keep up the great work at LensCulture, you do an amazing job for photographers and the photography world!”

—CHRISTIAN BOBST, LensCulture Visual Storytelling Finalist

“Not in my wildest dreams did I expect such a positive response! Thank you! **It gives me validation to continue on my photographic journey,** always being honest and true to what I see and feel. Besides this, it was also very encouraging and thorough in critique of each image. Also noted and appreciated were all the relevant and further reading links. Thanks so much.”

—JAMES NIVEN, Photographer

[Learn more about LensCulture's Project Reviews >>](#)



**GALLERIES,
PHOTOBOOKS
& EDITORIAL**

After you have completed a few series and earned some recognition through competitions and shows, explore other possibilities to get your work out there.





© CHRISTINA YAO



© PATRICIA RIVEROLL

Galleries are the vehicle through which many artists find their way to major institutions and collections, or in the homes of people who love their work. Galleries come in all shapes and sizes, each one with a different goal and function, suitable for specific types of artists and photographers.

The ability to articulate the purpose of your work for you and/or your audience is important for finding a gallery that is the right match. There are co-op/artist run galleries, non-profit galleries, institutional galleries, vanity galleries, and commercial galleries. In order to help align your career objectives with your work, it's helpful to understand what distinguishes one type of gallery from the next.

We at LensCulture know that for many photographers, having a gallery show, or getting gallery representation is top of mind. That's why we have developed an in-depth Guide to address this important topic. It's a big topic and too much for this Guide, so if you'd like to know more about the world of Galleries, download our [**Photographers' Guide to Working with Galleries.**](#)



Photo book publishing. Today, there are more opportunities than ever to publish a beautiful book of your photography. Photographers are creating everything from commercially hardbound coffee-table books, to zines, to hand-sewn artist books. Options for producing your book range from self-publishing through an on-demand service, to working with an established publisher who will provide a designer, editing and creative input. For a deep dive into the ins and outs of this process, check out the excellent guide book by Mary Virginia Swanson and Darius Himes: “[Publish Your Photography Book.](#)”

Most book publishing today requires some form of financial contribution on your part. So, be prepared to understand the associated costs.

A beautifully produced book is not only a way to bring closure to an important body of work, but it’s also another way to raise your profile within the photography community. Books allow you the freedom to present your projects exactly as you want them to be seen — which photos are included, the sequence, the supporting texts. Well designed books can open opportunities for future exhibitions, print sales, and new commissions. Books keep your projects alive for years and years.



Magazines, newspapers and online media. Getting your photos published in magazines, newspapers and online media is a great way to get large audiences to see your work and to appreciate the topics of your projects. So, for example, if you are working on a photo-essay about underfunded pet shelters, publishing in a high-circulation magazine is a great way to draw attention to the pressing issues you are working on. And this sort of attention often draws valuable input and reactions (donations and/or advocacy) to the topic.

Just like the gallery world, the magazine and newspaper market caters to a variety of genres. There are

publications for travel, editorial, fashion, business, sports, entertainment, art... and much more. Each of these publications hires photographers to make portraits/studio images, documentary-style images, still life, lifestyle and just about every type of photography that's out there. Typically, the hiring is done by a photo-editor or art director. If you want to work for a magazine or newspaper, research who is responsible for hiring photographers and find out what their submission policies are. When you prepare your portfolio, tailor your selection to each client you contact.

The magazine and newspaper market has changed over

the years. There are fewer funded opportunities to do long-form essay documentary projects. And publications are shifting away from hiring photographers while often opting to use wire service content and/or stock photography. So, like everything else that you do as a photographer, research the market and make sure that you can see a future for yourself in it. This could include seeking out positions for wire services and/or building a stock photography business.

ONWARD!

Excited? Great! Overwhelmed? It's okay.

As you continue on your journey, remember that almost every photographer finds their level of success through a unique path. While nearly everybody makes photographs today, the challenge is to distinguish your work from the crowds.

Show the world your unique voice. And in the midst of your successes and difficulties, don't lose sight of why you choose to make photographs. If the going gets tough, reconnect to the magic that photography offers you.

Have fun, and we look forward to seeing how you see the world!



© MARTIN TESSLER



© BLANDINE SOULAGE



About LensCulture

LensCulture is one of the largest destinations for discovering the best in contemporary photography around the world. We believe that recognition and exposure are key for photographers of all levels to move forward creatively and professionally. Our mission is to help photographers succeed and, after more than 20 years, we're proud to offer career-changing opportunities alongside advice, inspiration and recommendations through our awards, online magazine and free guides like the one you've just read.

Discover the best of
contemporary photography

Photographers featured in this Guide are all winners or finalists of LensCulture awards over the years

Matt Sav, Dorothee Thomson, Michael Magers, Max Sturgeon, Stephanie O'Connor, Svitlana Zarytska, Madoka Takei, Anna Reivilä, Stefanie Langenhoven, Sergio Rodriguez Rosello, Benoit Paillé, Neil Johansson, Miloš Nejezcheleb, Alfie White, Olga Steinepreis, Yijun Liao, Barry Crosthwaite, Peter Hinsmann, Tania Franco Klein, Raman Maisei, Alyona Nikolaeva, Gui Christ, Andriana Nativio, Miko Okada, Mackenzie Calle, Maria Abranches, Maroesjka Lavigne, Christina Yao, Patricia Riveroll, Dimitar Karanikolov, Marta Blue, Monse Guajardo, Martin Tessler, Blandine Soulage, Photographer Hal.

**GO ON, GET OUT THERE AND
MAKE REMARKABLE IMAGES.**