RICPA Juror's statement - Spotlight Members' Exhibition - David Helfer Wells

Over four decades as a visual storyteller, I have spent a lot of nervous time as a person whose work was being reviewed by a juror, and at other times I have been the person jurying work. With that in mind, I wanted to explain my process of jurying the work sent in response to the call for entries. That way, those who submitted can understand what I did as I reviewed the work and maybe take a lesson from that to apply to future submissions.

My professional background is in documentary-derived image-making. Having studied the diversity of genres of image-making within the history of photography in college (and since then), I work hard at being open to all sorts of visual storytelling. That is why I am pleased to say how impressed I was by the breadth and depth of the submitted work. Clearly, some of it was what I think of as documentary-derived, but much of it was much more personal, narrative, autobiographical, or constructive/collaged imagery, etc. As a newspaper photographer, magazine photographer, and most recently a filmmaker, I've always worked with multiple image stories. The challenges stories present and the opportunity for in-depth storytelling that stories offer are what draw me to them. Those challenges and opportunities were also the ideas behind this exhibition and why I was chosen as the Juror.

As for the work that was submitted that was not juried in, that work missed the mark on one or more levels. The most basic criteria were whether the submission followed the call's requirement of a set of five images to tell a story or present a unified idea. I know that seems obvious, but it's sometimes surprising how often I see how some of the submitted work does not meet this essential requirement when jurying things like this.

Creating a set of images to tell a story or present a unified idea is a challenge. The process is kind of alchemy and is much more complex than taking a set of images, putting them together, and assuming they make a story. The unifying idea or story could be linear, as in having a beginning, a middle, and an end. It could be more thematic in terms of a common visual approach to one subject that's being repeatedly photographed. Or, it could be taking a consistent visual storytelling approach to a set of different subjects that share some storytelling commonality. Or it could be some combination of those approaches.

Whenever I assemble any kind of visual narrative, I am looking for the visual thread that I described above, such as a linear narrative, a unified visual style, a consistency of

subject matter, or some combination of all of those. The one other thing that I'm looking for when creating a visual narrative is a personal point of view. If you think about it, whenever you are experiencing the storytelling of another person, whether in prose or poetry, via music, through visuals, or any other storytelling medium, what makes the story we are experiencing the most interesting is when there's a personal point of view. The best narratives (in any medium) have that extra element, and that is what I was looking for when I was jurying the show.

If your work was selected for inclusion, congratulations, you overcame all those many hurdles. If your work was not selected, and you want to learn from the experience, try as hard as you can to step back, look at the work with clear eyes, and see which elements noted above, those which make for a great visual narrative, which was your work lacking? I know from personal experience (having worked with some gifted editors/ curators) that the way that a set of works is edited can make or break the success of a visually told story. Sometimes it also means you need to photograph more for that project, ideally with some of these points in mind to fill out the body of work. And occasionally, as I know from personal experience, it means giving up on a project. Some projects do not lend themselves to a strong personal point of view, and in other projects, you may not be able to get access to tell the story the way it should be told. There's certainly no hard and fast rule in terms of when that kind of "up or out" decision-making point is, but looking at the work with a clear eye and gathering feedback from people you respect (and who will give you honest feedback) that's probably the best way to know whether to give up or keep going.

Though I've been successful over the years in creating visual narratives, I've realized (after the fact) that I learned the most from the many projects that failed. Those mistakes are seared into my consciousness as I go forward. So for me, in a way, there are no failed projects. Some projects look successful by the conventional measures of publication and exhibition. Others taught me lessons of equal value even if the learning was accomplished the hard way.

- David H Wells