

Text and photos by Rico Besserdich

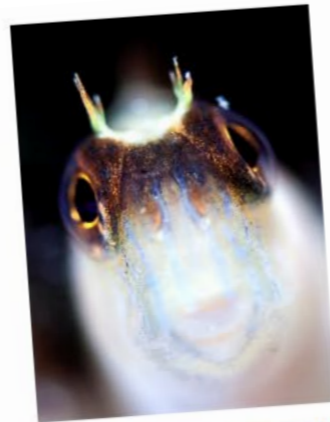
The portfolio is the personal visual flagship of a photographer, and in some sense, the final step in presenting one's own photographic work. Success and expressiveness of a portfolio depends on many factors. Rico Besserdich provides tips and suggestions on how to approach the difficult task of compiling a good portfolio.

Before it is possible to find the right solution, the question needs to be clearly understood. For that reason, the first step is to shed light on the question: What is a portfolio?

The term *portfolio* (from the Latin: *portare*, meaning 'carry', and *folium*, meaning 'sheet') generally describes a collection of objects of a specific type. Neither the nature, nor the type is generally predetermined, which makes it a relatively general term.

This delights bankers, sales specialists and artists alike, as the term portfolio is used in the financial world, marketing, sales, education, information technology, production management and also art and design. However, we would not expect that an investment consultant of a bank will present us with artistic pictures when we ask to see a portfolio.

In the world of arts, in which we boldly see ourselves as underwater photographers for now, the portfolio is a compilation of the best and most relevant work and projects in which we have been involved. The purpose of a



Portfolios

Presenting Your Work

Wrong: Something of everything... and still nothing. Every single picture is good, but the picture sequence and the overall concept of the portfolio are inconsistent.

portfolio is self-promotion and job application, or, to say it bluntly—to show what you can do.

Already in the Renaissance, artists and architects presented their portfolios to apply for new commissions but also to show how they had developed their

skills over time. Carrying all these sheets of paper was preferably done in a folder.

Portfolios in the form of folders, with printed or drawn content, still belong to good form these days, but digital data

carriers (CD, DVD, USB stick) and even the Internet (portfolio website) have found their place—at least as additional alternatives.

For photographers, the portfolio, whether stored on DVD or displayed on a website, is the final selection that



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represents the essence of one's own photographic work. Only the best pictures are presented—at least, that is what is said. Of course, it is never really final, as good portfolios will change over time. They can grow, sometimes shrink or their content can even take completely new forms. In short, a good portfolio is never finished and never perfect. But this should not be an excuse to not even start thinking about the compilation of a portfolio.

When it comes to making a "best of the best" choice of images, many photographers, no matter if they are amateurs or experts, find themselves confronted with the major difficulty of being spoilt for choice. This agony can be decreased with some preparatory thoughts and a few small tricks.

The best place to start is the availability of good picture material—underwater pictures in this case—and following my article, "Image Selection," in the last issue, you should now have a selection of good photographs. This selection is by far not yet your portfolio; the portfolio will be the ultimate essence of the selection. And just as for the art of liquor distillation, there are several important steps of work to do and things to take care of to prevent everything from blowing up in your face and making you go blind.

Number of images

Can it be a bit more than 20? No, it can't. A portfolio with 100 pictures, or even more, tests the patience and the attention span of the viewer. Instead of letting pictures make their own impres-

sion in the way they deserve, so the viewer can enjoy them and develop his or her own thoughts about them, such a monster portfolio would be too much to digest and would most likely not even be viewed halfway. Our best underwater pictures certainly deserve better.

Please always remember: With your portfolio, you, as a photographer, must show the viewer through your images, "This is me", and this presentation is used to evaluate your photographic, and perhaps, artistic performance.

There are people who can formu-

late the nature of something clearly, understandably, and in an appealing way, with a few words or sentences, and then there are others who talk for three days and still have not said anything meaningful. The same applies to photography: Less is more. Quality over quantity. Eloquence over sensory overload. Therefore, 12 to 20 pictures is enough for a portfolio. As I said, we are talking about the essence of your work, not its totality.

The ones who are still left with a couple of hundred pictures after intensive photo selection might see a seemingly insurmountable challenge in choosing only 20 out of all these. It is indeed not an easy task, but nevertheless an important step in defining yourself as a photographer—not only to the public, but also to yourself.

What should you show?

Beginners often tend to overload their portfolios. There are super-macro pictures next to wreck images, color explosions next to black and white images, photos of slightly dressed underwater models next to images of heavily laden tech divers, night diving photos next to shallow water images flooded with light, and a whale shark followed by a skeleton shrimp a millimeter in size.

The completely comprehensive approach of "a lot of everything" portfolios is the effort of the photographer to show



Portfolios

Fish portraits. A relatively simple concept for a portfolio, which can still work.



Goliath Grouper Photo Competition 2015

In an effort to increase awareness on the plight of [Atlantic Goliath Grouper \(*Epinephelus itajara*\)](#) and to further their Federally protected status, the [South Florida Underwater Photography Society \(SFUPS\)](#) is holding the first international photo competition in support of the species.

Atlantic Goliath Groupers were on a fast track to extinction but thanks to conservation efforts they thrive in South Florida waters. Every year from August through October hundreds return to local waters off West Palm Beach County for a mating ritual of collective spawning. Start planning your underwater photographic expedition to swim with one of the friendliest fish in South Florida.

THE PHOTO CONTEST:

- Categories:** 4 Photo and 1 Video
- Dates:** August 1 - October 31, 2015
- Location:** Palm Beach County, Florida
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a diverse spectrum of subject matter, situations and sometimes even techniques all in one portfolio. There is nothing generally wrong about this approach, but using it depends on the audience for whom the portfolio is made. More about this later.

Artistic license (or obstinacy!) aside, the classical school and craft of photography has certain basic principles that deter-



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Light plays. A (demo) portfolio that is solely dedicated to natural sunlight under water. Such portfolios need time to evolve, but it is also a pleasure to follow a specific photographic concept during dives.

mine how the content of a photographic portfolio is supposed to be realized. Although none of it is set in stone, the knowledge of these basic principles facilitates the job of setting the theoretical and conceptual structure of the portfolio in the right direction.

The basic idea is to have a concept, a common ground, a red line, a theme, which shows the viewer the intention (and the ability) of the photographer, without long explanations.

Here are some standard thematic emphases for inspiration:

Specific photographic technique

Pan-photography, panorama photography, high key, low key, composite, long exposure (just to

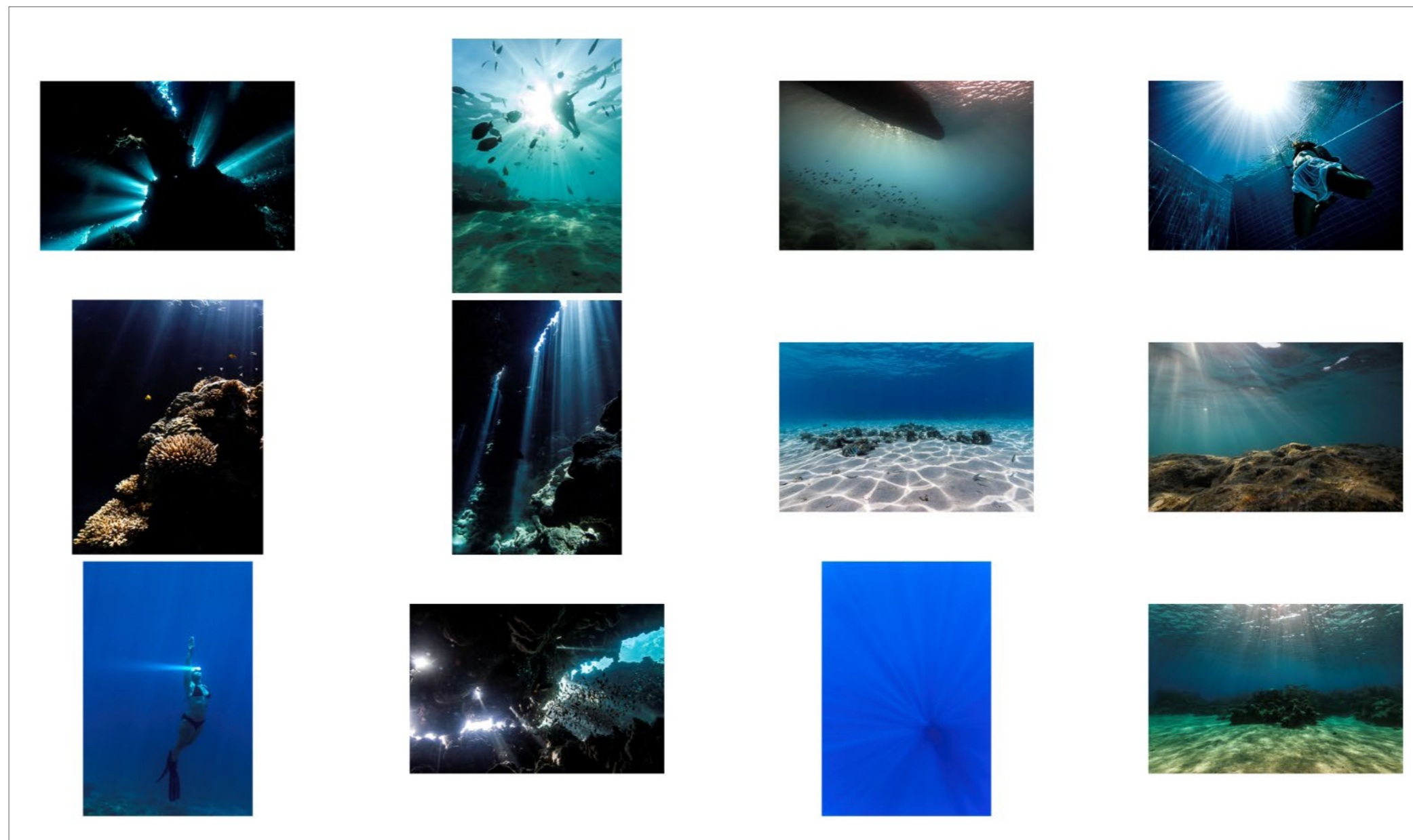
name a few) are photographic techniques, which each can form the basic theme of a portfolio (but not all together).

Photographic style or field

Landscape photography, portrait photography, black and white photography, macro photography, abstract photography, photojournalism and nude photography are a few examples that are perfectly suited as portfolio concepts. This list does not mention underwater photography as a theme. More about this in a moment.

Compositional concept

Special compositional concepts are also suitable as a red line that guides and leads the eye of the



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viewer of a portfolio. Employing the rule of thirds is fundamental to the craft of photography in general, but compositional (and intentional!) use of color contrasts, shapes and structures, or even following the Chiaroscuro concept, can each be strong themes for a portfolio, which will also be appreciated by experts.

A specific message

War, love, emotions and special events, but also unusual and unexpected situations, are very well-known in the world of photojournalism. But nature photography (including underwater photography) can also have strong visual messages, which can offer

a special value to a portfolio. For inspiration, have a look at the portfolios of the MAGNUM photographers (www.magnumphotos.com). You will see that every single portfolio has a strong message, which does not need further explanation in words. Meaning and message explain themselves to the viewer visually, and there is absolutely no reason not to try the same in underwater photography.

Special equipment

Maybe the word 'unusual' suits this category better than the word 'special'; otherwise, any underwater equipment could be defined as special, making it unnecessary to do anything more to make a

portfolio unique. But just as the tilt-shift lens is a relatively common tool for architectural photographers, the same is true for underwater photo equipment used by underwater photographer.

What would be considered unusual (or very unique) photo gear today, would be specific cameras such as large format or 3D cameras, as well as certain lighting equipment or very exotic lenses such as magnifier lenses. Examples of super-niche photography include infrared photography, molecular photography or fluorescence photography.

Whether this makes sense or not cannot be answered here. What is certain is that the use of unusual

equipment is suitable as a concept for a portfolio.

Underwater imagery as a theme

Is underwater photography a photographic discipline that can serve as the only concept of a portfolio? This question, which is critical to the creation of a successful portfolio, cannot be answered generally. However, there are two different points of view on the topic.

Regarding requirements, subject matter, techniques and equipment needed, underwater photography these days can certainly be considered its own photographic discipline. This should not be interpreted in any way that



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Photographic red lionfish studies as portfolio. A very specific subject and its interpretation in diverse ways.

"everything possible under water" is an accolade for a successful portfolio. Thousands of quite similarly looking portfolios of underwater pictures illustrate this point.

Anyone who wants to define himself or herself as an underwater photographer, stand out from the crowd and receive recognition from photography experts may consider a second thought: Underwater photography is and remains a small niche in the world of photography itself. Even if the medium of water creates special optical conditions, photography is still photography, and as such, follows certain principles, and in some ways, even rules.

All in all, underwater imagery, as a theme, or as the only concept of a portfolio, is no longer sufficient these days.

Subcategories

In addition to the basic thematic concepts of portfolios mentioned above, underwater photography has developed a diverse range of subcategories as well. Whether it is macro, super-macro, underwater models, sharks or wrecks, there are specialties everywhere. And even if an expert underwater photographer can move through these categories with confidence, the most successful ones still have something in common: They have specialised in a very specific area and developed their own, recognizable style through several years

of consolidation of the topic. Of course, such a unique style does not have to be within the classic subcategories of underwater photography.

Skill and depth

Photographic skill is not necessarily the only quality feature of a portfolio. At a certain level, it is just

expected that a photographer understands his or her craft and knows how to handle the tools. Not many laurels can be reaped in that way.

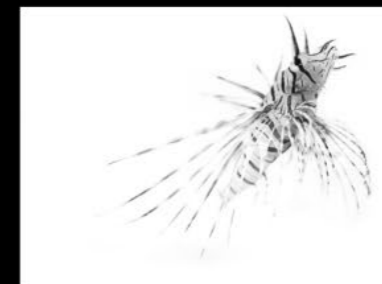
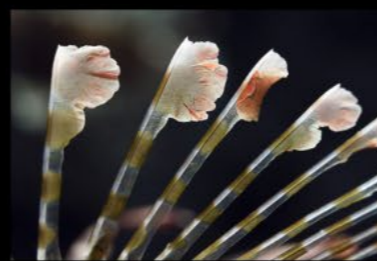
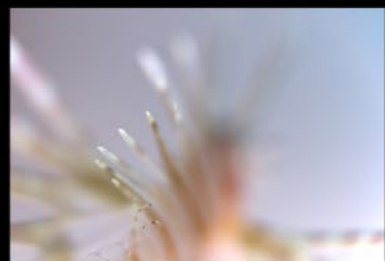
Successful portfolios often are the ones that demonstrate the photographer's deep understanding of the topic and that he or she knows how to combine the result

of conceptual planning, profound thinking, preparation, execution and refinement. It is the extra effort and the intense, self-reflective analysis of the topic over an extended period of time that makes the difference. You can trust me—these efforts are recognized and rewarded.

Define your target group

Here, we talk about the important questions regarding the audience for whom the portfolio is made, who will see it, and what your purpose is (what is all of it for).

Photographers who want to do more than just archive nice memories and perhaps have more specific interests (to publish, sell, or



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exhibit images) should think clearly about their target group when building their portfolios.

An editor of a dive magazine will have different expectations and requirements than, for example, a friend at a dive club. The curator of an art gallery or of an illustrated art book will not be keen on working with classical photojournalism (e.g. documentation of marine life). Animal welfare and wildlife conservation organizations may miss the connection to the topic if you present them with images of colorful fish. On the contrary, colorful fish can be a great way to attract private customers as buyers who want to put the pictures on the walls of their homes.

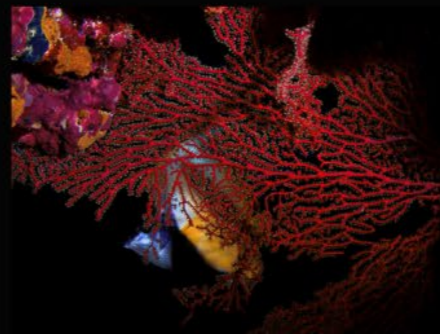
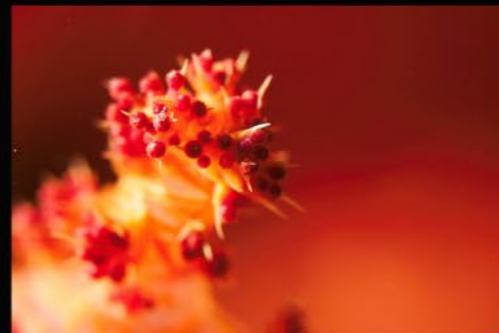
And friends in your social networks may like the unique shark picture from the Caribbean just as much as kittens on a couch, but they will not buy any.

What you can see here is that it is somewhat impossible to make one portfolio to fit everybody. Therefore, the important question is: Who is your target group?

You cannot get this right with explanations. Please remember: A photographer is evaluated upon his or her photos, not upon written explanations. This leads us to the next point—text descriptions.

Text description

A short introductory text for the portfolio is acceptable, commonly employed and appropriate in order to let the viewer pick up the red line or theme you are creating. Two to three short sentences in



Portfolios

The color red as portfolio theme. There are endless possibilities and ideas for interesting concepts.

dive-and-survive-with-friedl.com—it's great!) I could finally take my long-desired pictures [#picsaregreat] with my Wakromax FZ7000 [#wakromaxmanagesit] camera and my Troll-90 flash [#lightinthedark]. Many thanks also to Maxi, Seppl, Bee and Kalle! I will be back soon and then we can take even more great pictures! Please click on my sponsors' links and order my calendar!!!

Beginnings and endings

—Sequencing pictures
The portfolio, as a whole, also represents a composition—at least, that is how it should be. This can be achieved through the arrangement and sequence of the single images in the portfolio.

The sequence of pictures has a significant effect on how the viewer perceives and evaluates your work as a whole.

Your portfolio tells a story and leads (i.e. the red line!) the eyes and the mind of the viewer through the photographic world you have created. This can be realized through real statements

(photojournalism) or more abstract ways, e.g. colors, objects, harmonies and disharmonies.

You are the composer and the conductor; it is all in your hands. But no matter if it is marching music or a solo for piccolo flute in D major, it all starts with a flourish!

Your best or most important picture should not be hiding in the middle but be the first one in the portfolio. Start with a

Here are two examples:

Right: *Joe Bloggs
The Four Seasons
The four seasons at Lake Constance. A photographic underwater journey over time, created 2012-2015. 16 photographs in 4:3 format.*

Joe Bloggs is a photographer who

specializes in the underwater world of domestic lakes in Germany. His unique photographic passion is dedicated to the changes of the underwater realm during the different seasons.

Wrong: *Underwater pictures of my last Red Sea tour. Woah, what an extreme current, but thanks to the help of Friedl (visit his diving school, Friedl-Diver, at*

regards to the content (title, topic, concept) and a short biography of yourself is sufficient. The pictures should tell everything else that might be said.

Technical details about the camera, underwater housing, strobes or even camera settings are just as inappropriate in a portfolio as explanations about how extremely complicated it was to take this or that shot. Also, extensive naming of sponsors should be handled with care.





photo & video

Nearly always part of a dive, but hardly ever (photographically) considered are other underwater photographers. The documentation and creative interpretation of the topic of underwater photographers can be fun during work and offers material for a portfolio that stands out from the masses.



bang. In addition to some ringing in the ears, the viewer immediately gets curious about the following pictures. Portfolios that start weak are often not even viewed to the end.

Then the other pictures follow. As in music or literature, you can build tension or tell short stories. However, one should try to prevent overly extreme changes. Therefore, pictures that have color harmonies as a motif should not suddenly be interrupted with a wreck photo, high in black and white contrast, for example. Nor should an image series on the underwater worlds of coastal regions be interrupted with a dark blue picture of deep sea diving.

Get the picture? It is not only the single image, but also the entire portfolio as well as the arrangement of its contents that require thought in regards to harmony, rhythm, tension and compositional aesthetics. The effort is worth it, and you will grow as a photographer with the task.

End with a bang

Your second best picture (or what you think is the second most important) should come at the end, as it creates the crowning glory of your portfolio. And if the viewer then screams for more, then the portfolio is a good one. Because with a portfolio, you are not showing everything you've got (or are able to do), but only the essence of your work—an essence that leaves the viewer longing for

more. It comes in handy here that in addition to the 12 to 20 pictures in your portfolio, you have another few hundred or more fantastic shots available in your archive.

The goal should be to awaken interest in people for your photographic work and to receive the recognition one is due.

Get an outside opinion

It is not a secret that even the most expert and renowned photographers have difficulties in extracting a portfolio from their vast photo collections. That is aggravated by the fact that the creators themselves (in this case the photographers) are often not the best judges to evaluate the works neutrally and objectively.

There have been many cases in which masterworks were hidden from public view for a long time by the photographer, as the images were not considered worth showing, and only got discovered decades later by coincidence, and unfortunately, often after the photographer had already passed away.

If you are really serious about publishing your work, show your portfolio, or a shortlist of your pictures, to one or more people



whom you trust and get their opinions and feedback—before the publication date, of course. These people could be experts in the field, but it is not necessary. Even the opinion of relatives, neighbors and friends can be valuable in seeing things from a new perspective, maybe rethinking things, and finally reaching your personal photographic “This is me” statement.

The art of presentation

Once all the work is done, the next step is to think about a way to present the portfolio. What is commonly used, as it is technically easy to do, is an online portfolio—either on one's own website, or on a specialized internet photo platform such as PhotoShelter, 500px, Wix, and Flickr.

These portals often promote images to large audiences, pro-

viding one the chance to reach millions of users. What they usually do not tell you is that most of the users are also hopeful photographers with their own goals. This does not have to be a negative, but whether or not you use these portals depends on who you want to reach with your photographic work. In terms of outreach, quality counts over quantity as well. Promises that these photo plat-

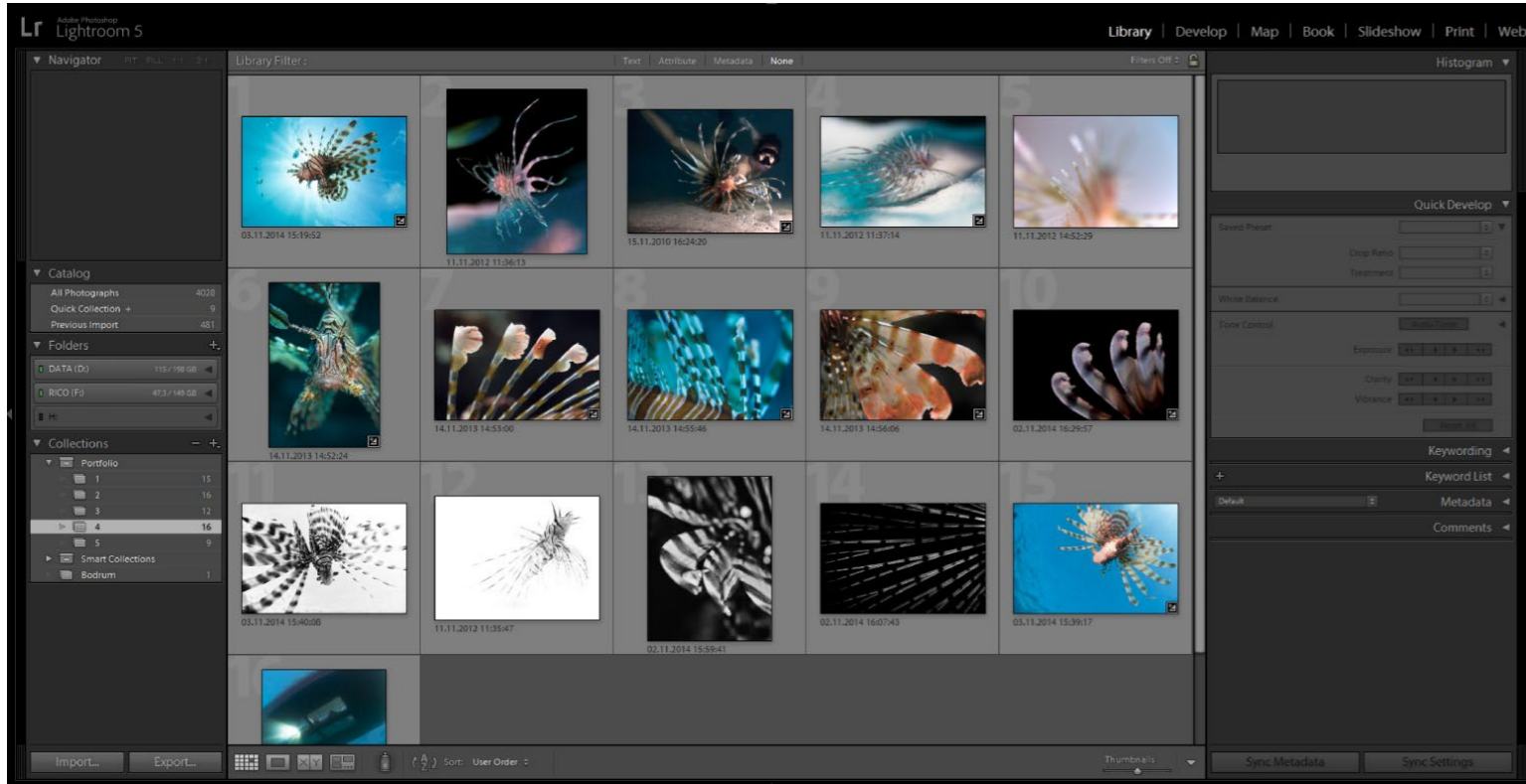
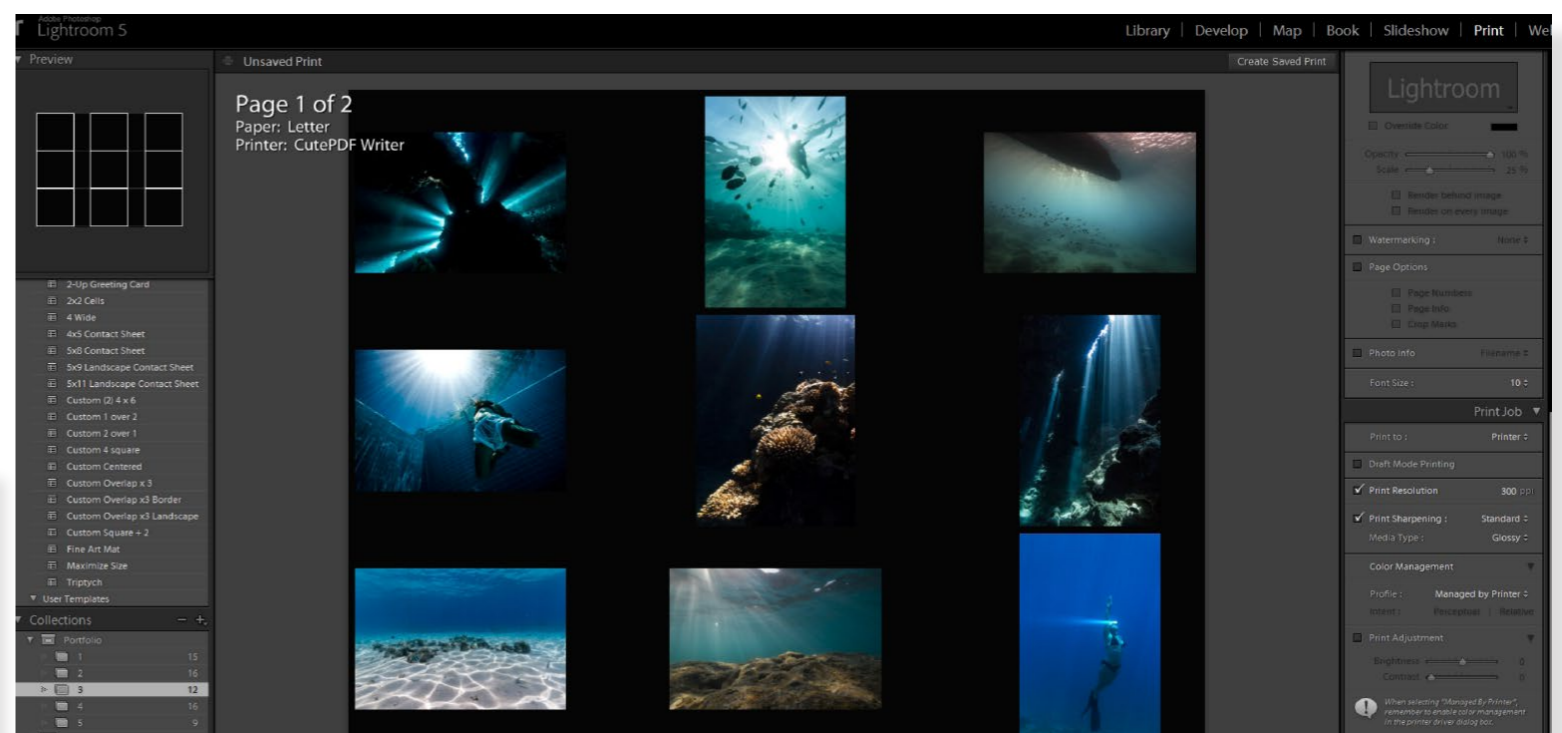
forms will attract endless numbers of magazine editors, art curators, gallery directors, and even art collectors, should be viewed with skepticism.

It is not possible to completely forego the Internet anymore, as this medium has already significantly shaped the way people view and perceive pictures and will keep on changing how people see images in the future. Like





The print module of Lightroom offers the option to summarise picture selections as contact prints. They can be printed directly or exported as a graphics file.



Adobe Photoshop Lightroom offers several useful tools for the compilation of a portfolio. For example, selections can be summarised in so-called collections. Picture sequences can be changed and of course all editing functions are still available. You can create any number of collections (without moving or removing original pictures from their storage location). Practical for the development of different portfolio themes.

it or not, a standard has been created, and one has to join the game in some way—in the very least, with your own website, which should also include your portfolio.

One possible step to take in order help your portfolio presentation stand out from the crowd, is to take a step backwards, and go old school. Compile high-quality prints of your images in archival sleeves into a quality art folder or portfolio case. Folders can come in many different colors, formats

and materials, and the “good old way” offers many creative possibilities in presenting your portfolio in an effective way. In the end, nothing, and I mean really *nothing*, can compete with high-quality prints.

Consider how much effort, dedication and also costs you have incurred in presenting your work in a fine portfolio. And, indeed, you are convinced it is a really good portfolio. At the end of this long street, do you want to see bored people on a couch, in the metro,

or in an office, skipping through the essence of your photographic work in seconds, and acknowledging your passion with a “Like” on Facebook, at most, and then move on to the cute kitten pictures? Your work deserves more. You deserve more.

Anyone who wants to go far as a photographer may be well-advised to appreciate the good old folder (a photo book or album is also good) and not show it to the masses, but rather to the right people. The ones who make this

effort will receive appreciation and acknowledgement for it—given that the portfolio is good.

After the flourish

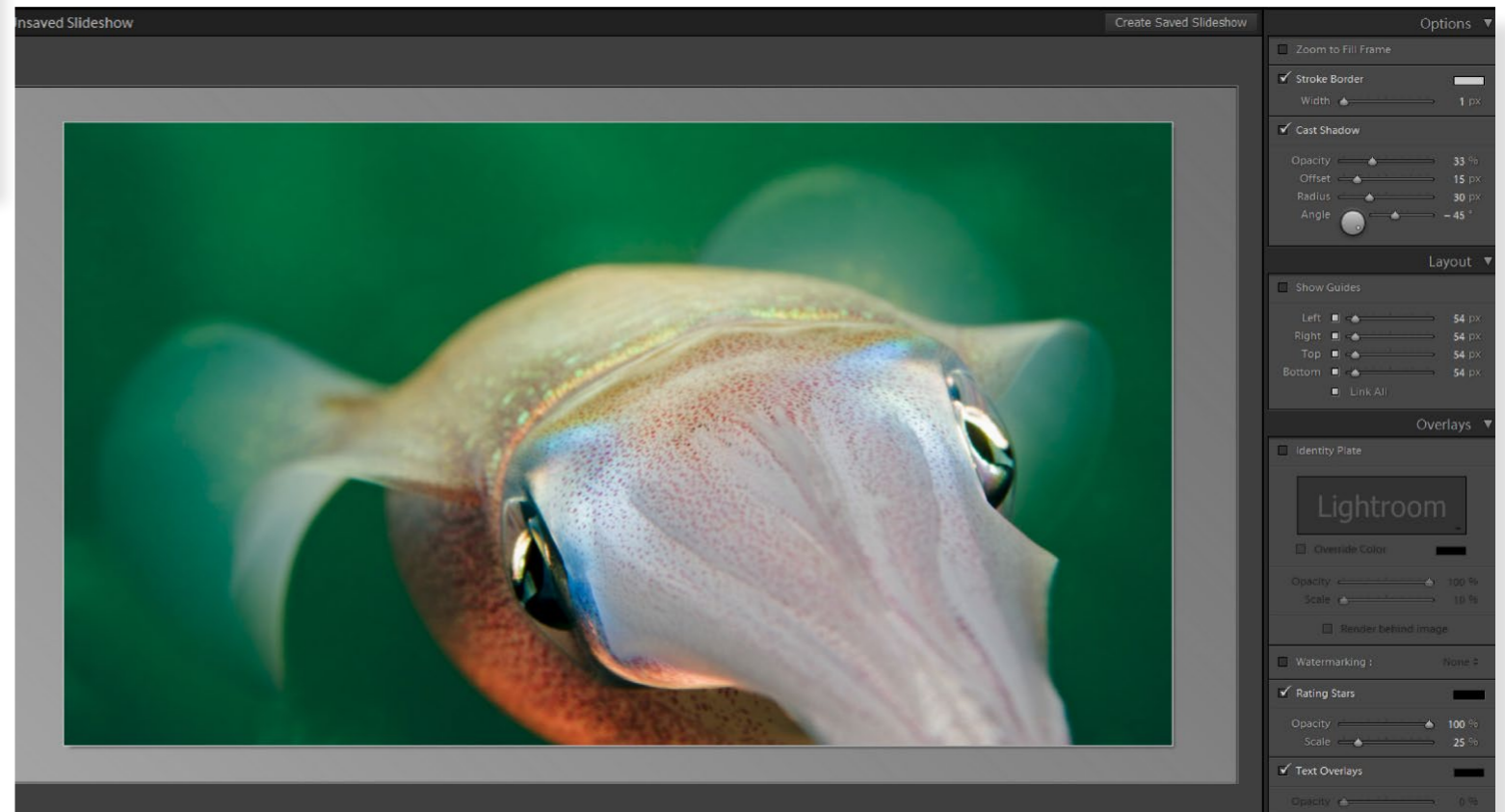
As I have already mentioned, a portfolio is never really finished and never perfect. It can and

must be developed further, just as your own photographic expression is developed further.

Photographers with a wide range of interests may see certain predefined basic thematic structures of portfolios as restrictive to their own artistic license, but

nowhere is it written that a photographer should only have one portfolio. ■

Rico Besserdich is a widely published German photographer, journalist and artist based in Turkey. See: www.maviphoto.com.



Lightroom's slideshow module is useful to test picture sequences as simulation. The slideshow can be played directly in the program and provides important insights about which sequences are good or where a certain picture might be better placed in another position.



Ikelite 5DS & 5DS R Housing

Ikelite has released their new housing for the Canon EOS 5DS and 5DS R cameras. While both cameras are identical to the EOS 5D Mk III Canon, the new 5DS models use a new and different TTL protocol, which causes Ikelite DS strobes to overexpose by about two stops when used in TTL mode. Ikelite has released the new housing with modified internal TTL circuitry to correct the overexposure and are offering an upgrade for owners of existing 5D Mk III housings who want to use the new 5DS models. The Ikelite 5DS housing is available now at a retail price of US\$1,800.

Recsea Sony AX Housings

Recsea has announced the release of two new housings for the Sony AX series 4K camcorders. One version of the new housing features a window that allows the use of the LCD screens on the AX30/AX33/AXP33/AXP35 camcorders when framing. The other version uses the viewfinder on the AX33/AXP33/AXP35 models and features a 45-degree magnifying viewfinder on the rear of the housing. Both versions are available now.



Sea&Sea EM5 II Housing

Sea&Sea has released its new housing for the Olympus OM-D E-M5 MII mirrorless Micro 4/3 camera. The MDX-EM5 MkII housing is made from marine-grade aluminium and is compatible with Sea&Sea's ML and NX ports (when used with an adaptor). The housing features an external port lock and a leak detector is available as an optional extra. The NA-EM5II housing is available now.



GoPro HERO4 Session

GoPro has released its new HERO4 Session camera. GoPro states that the new HERO4 Session is 50 percent smaller and 40 percent lighter than the standard HERO4 Silver and Black units, and is waterproof to 33ft (10m) without an extra housing. The HERO4 Session will record video at 1080p60, 720p100, and 1440p30, plus still images at 8MP, with burst and timelapse features. Controlled using a single button, expanded controls are also available via the GoPro app or smart remote. The HERO4 Session is available now at a retail price of US\$400.



Ikelite RX100 IV Housing

Ikelite has released its new housing for the Sony RX100 IV compact camera. The housing features a slide-in camera tray that is front loading, plus a redesigned spring-loaded rear dial control. Ikelite's standard polycarbonate construction means that the camera's Wi-Fi function can be used to download images at the surface without having to open the housing.



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Sealux HDF57 Housing

German housing manufacturer Sealux has announced its new unit for the Sony PXW-FS7 4K Super 35mm XDCAM camcorder. The Sealux HDF57 housing is compatible with the Sony's built-in LCD monitor or can be used with an external monitor. The HDF57 housing provides full manual control of all the Sony camcorders functions and also provides access to its right hand keypad.



Sea&Sea YS-D2 Strobe

Sea&Sea has released its new YS-D2 strobe, which features a guide number of 32, which reduces to 24 with 100-degree diffusers and 20 with 120-degree diffusers, and DS-TTLII, slave TTL and slave manual modes. The YS-D2 is rated with colour temperature of 5,250°K, a recycle time of 1.5sec and up to 200 flashes from a set of four NiMh batteries. The strobe can be triggered by either a Nikonos cable or through fiber optics. The rear control dials now glow to make them easier to see underwater, plus the YS0D2 provides an audible confirmation when a TTL exposure has been successfully made. The YS-D2 strobe is available now at a retail price of US\$720.



Nauticam NA-RX100 IV

Nauticam has announced the release of its new housing for the Sony RX100 IV compact camera. The new housing is made from marine-grade aluminum and provides access to all of the RX100 IV's controls, plus it features a mechanical shutter release extension to allow the housing to be used with gloves. The flat front port is provided with a 67mm thread and strobe triggering is enabled using dual fiber-optic bulkheads. The NA-RX100IV is available now at a retail price of US\$995.

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