

Exhibition Submission Comments by Kristen Scholfield-Sweet

As Chairperson of the Exhibition Selection Committee for the Campbell River Art Gallery, I look at fifty to seventy exhibition proposals, or more, a year. Those artists, of all levels of experience and professionalism, are vying for seven to ten exhibition spaces on the Gallery's yearly calendar. Although I try to fairly consider all the applications we review, some proposals cause me to pause, and focus, and think "this one's got my full attention." This article is about what that special something is, and how to put it in your proposal.

A proposal is made of four basic parts, in the order of their importance: photo documentation of your work, a description of the actual exhibition you are proposing to the gallery, curriculum vitae, and an artist's statement. Here are my thoughts about what makes each of these special.

Photo documentation: Good images of your work are the single most important ingredient in a successful proposal. Take the time to make, or hire someone else to make, images that are clear and accurate. Do not save money or time by taking pictures of your work leaning against the sofa, or through its glass frames, or in overexposed or underexposed conditions. The gallery currently accepts digital images (CD/DVD format with a maximum of 20 JPEG's), photographs and/or slides. If you are proposing an exhibition for work that is not yet created, please include images that are in a similar vein to those proposed, and/or sketches, diagrams, etc. that will give the committee a sense of the work, especially if you are presenting an installation.

Slides are still the best way to showcase your work because of their scale and colour in relation to the image presented. The economics and ease of the digital image makes it a much more common, and acceptable, alternative. JPEG's are requested, so please don't send power point presentations or any other program specific images. It makes them inaccessible to some computers and may not be reviewed as such. In general, I notice that photographs of work do not create a good impression of your art. The exception seems to be proposals of photography, which often create good visual impressions in a portfolio format. Perhaps we are more used to viewing art photography in book form than on the wall.

Regardless of the media being presented, creating a professional looking, well organized portfolio with a clear layout of documents makes an excellent first impression. In this business, first impressions matter—it is how your work gets selected to move to the next round of consideration.

Exhibition proposal: Describe how you want your work to be seen in the gallery in as simple and brief a manner as possible. Have a theme or title for the exhibition and relate all the work to it.

Connect your proposal directly to the actual space where it will be seen. For example, the Gallery in Campbell River has three different kinds of exhibition space to apply for. Research on the web, or better yet—visit the gallery, before selecting the most appropriate site for your work. Whatever the size of gallery space you are proposing to use, engage that entire space in your plans. If this is not possible, ask the Selection Committee to consider combining your work with other artists. Many otherwise excellent proposals are not chosen because in the final consideration, the work "will not hold the gallery."

Include images of your work in previous or related exhibitions if you have them. I have seen polite attention turn to positive enthusiasm for a proposal when the Committee was able to experience the work in a gallery setting.

If you are proposing a group show, be sure that all the work, as a whole, reflects your theme or title for the show. The Committee needs to know why you are together and wanting to be seen as one visual unit. Otherwise you are asking the gallery to create an exhibition of a group of individuals that apparently just happen to be on the wall together.

Curriculum Vitae: The CV and the exhibition proposal are closely related. One is about what you presently want to do at this gallery and the other tells the Committee your history of determination and success when doing it elsewhere.

I most often am looking for a consistency across time of exhibitions and involvements in the arts community, rather than flashy exhibitions in prestigious galleries. I'm hoping to see some public presence of your work every few years in a variety of group and solo situations, and some regular engagement of your time and effort with colleagues and art interest groups.

Your art education is important to include, as are contributions to art-related organizations. The listing of awards and grants tells the Selection Committee that other organizations and agencies are acknowledging and supportive of your work.

Artist's statement: This is where your unique perspective and sensibilities get to shine. My suggestion is that you polish your statement until it shines with a brightly focused, rather than diffused light. Why you do what you do is important for the Committee to consider, but even the most respectful attention flags after two pages of single spaced personal narrative. Challenge yourself to describe your artistic intent in one sentence to someone who doesn't know your work. Then write your artist's statement based on that exchange.

On being told "no thanks": It's difficult to not be chosen, especially when it's our creative effort that is being appraised as lacking in some manner. Remember that many unpredictable factors are influencing the gallery's calendar besides the exhibition proposals that are being considered. The number of solo or group exhibitions recently shown, a guest curator's interest in presenting a specific media or way of working, a touring show or fundraising event that needs to be scheduled—all can change the selection emphasis of the Committee.

Ask the Chair of the Committee or gallery curator to write, email or call you with feedback about your proposal. Such a request is not about re-negotiating the Committee's decision, but rather is an opportunity to go to the most difficult art school of all: the school of self-education.