

Fine art vs commercial

Words of wisdom from those at the top of their game – Claire Gillo finds out what it takes to be a fine art or commercial photographer



◀ MIRRORS – MARIEKE

David Kretschmer's Mirrors series shows a contradictory view to society's perception of perfection. **Shot details:** Canon EOS 400D with 18-45mm lens at 30mm and f18, 1/125sec, ISO 200
© David Kretschmer – courtesy Sony World Photography Awards 2011

Whatever style of photography takes your interest, being a professional photographer is a hard practice and a tough way to make a sustained living. There is not one simple solution to getting your foot in the door, and sometimes even knowing what is expected of you at the start is confusing. So, before you begin trying to embark on a photographic career, you need to decide which route you want to take. Do you want to take the commercial route or conduct a fine art practice?

To coincide with the 2011 Sony Photography Awards, **Digital Photographer** was lucky enough to interview four successful fine art and commercial photographers who have all been shortlisted. They've all made their own way into the industry and all offer different advice; however, they have one element that unites them, and that is they're all passionate about what they're doing.

Fine art

A fine art practice is often a tough route to go down, and it's a difficult way to make a steady income. But for those who want complete control over their work then this may be a better option over a commercial practice. Only a handful of photographers really succeed in making it to the top, but if you have the determination and talent then the rewards at this level are worth it.

Frank Hallam Day (<http://frankday.us>) is a US-based fine art photographer from Washington DC, and has been making a living from his work for the past 25 years. He is able to survive almost entirely from his fine art practice and has exhibited his work eight times in the past year and a half. "It's been okay for me," he explains. "I've been lucky, but for most people it's near impossible. Not many people actually make it, and most have to teach or do something else alongside it."

There is a vast difference between a fine art and commercial practice, as Frank explains: "Most fine art photographers don't do commercial work – they do something different because the whole career structure for commercial work is different. You need to know other contacts.

"You have to be sleeping with different people," he jokes, "and going out for dinner with different people. I used to be a painter and my first shows were just paintings; however, I then began to see photography as the more complex, intellectual and philosophical medium that it is."

Complete creative control is one of the most appealing aspects of a fine art practice, and Frank finds that he never works from the standpoint of the client. Instead he works from what's going to be interesting. "I might have a curator in mind for the project who thinks that's interesting, but in terms of what the client is going to like that is near

▶▶ SUNSPORT-RED-WINDOWS

Taken from Frank Day's project, *RV Night*, which captures RVs deep in the Florida jungle. Frank ended up stalking and hunting the wild RV for months!
Shot details: Canon EOS 5D Mark II with 18-45mm lens at 30mm and f18, 1/125sec, ISO 200
© Frank Day – courtesy Sony World Photography Awards 2011

Top tips from the professionals

Frank Day – "Be aware of what has gone before you. There's absolutely no excuse for ignorance. A lot of the time people are focused of their own needs and they don't pay attention, so their work is duplicative."

Adam Hinton – "Your portfolio needs to be different. Don't try to be a jack-of-all-trades and do something that stands out. Remember to be true to what you want to do."

Andreas Bommert – "Don't do it unless you are mad! No, no wait... don't do it unless you are passionate and bordering obsessive about photography!"

David Kretschmer – "Try to figure out what are the best competitions to enter for your work and don't just enter them all."

impossible to know." In Frank's most recent photography project he found himself surrounded by the Florida jungle while stalking RVs, but when creating these projects he knows the importance of doing his research carefully beforehand. "Be hyper-aware of what has gone before," he states. "A lot of people simply do the same thing that was being done 50 years ago and they're not aware of that – but there's no excuse for ignorance. When I was doing my RV project with the lights I was very aware that Richard Misrach did that in the Seventies and I wanted to make it different. I couldn't be aware

"You don't work six days a week in advertising. I mean, if you did you would be minted. If you're lucky you might work six days a month"

of the need to avoid that trap if I didn't know about his work."

Frank also offers advice when it comes to approaching dealers and getting your work represented. "Go to a lot of openings and get to know a lot of dealers. Make sure your work is absolutely first rate before you bother anyone with it. You should be confident of its quality and show it to other people first to get feedback."

Your portfolio is also a vital component to your practice, and a material and online presence is crucial. "I just went to a portfolio review in New York and it was very good," Frank continues. "I've probably got an art gallery and a publisher out of that. With a large physical portfolio, it's important for people to see the physical things."

David Kretschmer (www.davidkretschmer.com) is fresh into the fine art industry and is slowly building up his contacts. Unlike Frank, he cannot make a sustained living from his practice, however this doesn't stop him from making challenging and interesting work. In his most recent project, 'Mirrors', David was funded to create the body of work. He explains the process: "It was a competition where

you could send in your concept of a series of work and then a jury would decide who they are going to give the funding to." However, for those thinking this is a quick-fix solution, it's not an easy way to receive money. There are often a lot of photographers to compete against and it's a long process to go through to get the rewards.

For young photographers, funding and competitions are essential aspects to be aware of, and to even stand a chance at conducting a successful practice you need to be applying and entering as many as you can that suit your style. "For people starting out, competitions are quite important," Frank explains. "I think my first one was in 1987. It is very validating to get shown if you've never been shown before and it's encouraging as you get feedback. As you become more established in your career you do that less and you become more picky about what you enter." David also considers this point as he tries to figure out what are the best competitions to fit to his work, as this will give him a much greater chance in getting recognition.

As for being new to a fine art practice, David knows the pressures and harsh reality of what it entails. ▶▶



▶▶ **SONY NEX-5** This campaign image was shot by commercial photographer Andreas Bommert in Australia for ad agency Saatchi & Saatchi, for the Sony NEX-5 camera. The shoot took place over three days with a full production crew
Shot details: Canon EOS 400D with 18-45mm lens at 30mm and f18, 1/125sec, ISO 200
© Andreas Bommert courtesy Sony World Photography Awards 2011



▶▶ **MANFROTTO** Photographer Adam Hinton shot these two images for the Manfrotto Imagine More Campaign. The advertising image has been taken in a reportage black-and-white style.
Shot details: Canon EOS 400D with 18-45mm lens at 30mm and f18, 1/125sec, ISO 200
© Adam Hinton / Wyatt Clark Jones Agency courtesy Sony World Photography Awards 2011



“Go to a lot of openings and get to know a lot of dealers. Make sure your work is absolutely first rate before you bother anyone with it”

Q&A Sony Awards Judge and London Photography agent, Terri Manduca

Terri Manduca runs a photography agency in London that represents commercial photographers. Terri set up her business 22 years ago and represents 15 professionals.

DP: How does a photography agency work?

TM: There are two sets of clients. There are the photographers who we, the agency, work for and the client base, which we try to get the photographers into.

DP: How do you choose what photographers you are going to represent?

TM: The quality of work is key. It has to appeal to me visually and I also need to have the confidence that I would be able to market them in the UK because I am UK-based. I am not global, although that doesn't mean that I wouldn't deal with clients abroad – it just means we don't have offices anywhere [other than London].

I get inundated with emails and people's websites, which we have difficulty in going through and from all over the place. We do filter people out. We only want to take on a certain number of photographers so we can represent them properly.

Who we choose to represent comes down to personal taste. If I were to take somebody on they would

have to fit artistically within the style of photography that appeals to me. They cannot be a copy or encroaching on the style of another photographer I am already representing. Experience is not always necessary as it's the quality of work that appeals to me more. I would be keen to find someone even if they only had a small body of work.

DP: How has digital technology changed the commercial industry?

TM: The digital change has opened up the industry to clients and the majority of work we do is for clients so they want to instantly see what they are getting. It's a good thing and a bad thing – it does mean you can have approval on a shoot and the client knows what they are getting. However, there is quite a learning curve explaining to clients what digital photography is and how it operates. They don't understand processing and how much it costs. They don't understand the time involved.

All the photographers I represent shoot digitally. And a lot of the photographers shoot moving images also, so they do still and moving at the same time. Digital photography has really moved on and I wouldn't say it is expected that a photographer has to shoot film, however it's to a photographer's advantage.

▶▶ “It's a very difficult career and it is much easier to earn money with advertising; however, for me I think the fine art photography is more interesting and fits into how I want to live. I am free and I can do whatever I want.”

Commercial

Compared to running a fine art career, a commercial practice could be more appealing as there are more available jobs, but just like a fine art practice the reality of the industry is cruel. No one is going to hand out anything on a plate, and it's a struggle to get to the top. Only those who are thick-skinned and determined should consider this vocation.

Adam Hinton (www.adamhinton.net) describes himself as a documentary photographer who works in advertising. He started his career as a photographer on *The Telegraph*, but gave it up as he found the job tedious. “I was just out of college and I got to a point and said, ‘Okay, this is not what I want to do – let's call it a day.’ Since then I've been working in advertising.”

However, as Adam explains, it's not as simple as it appears. “You don't work six days a week in advertising,” he states. “I mean, if you did you would be minted. If you're lucky you might work six days a month. There is a lot of pre-planning, meetings and things like that.”

Adam finds that the commercial aspect of his job to be simple to understand and feels that advertising fits his style and creativity perfectly. “All photography is quite false to a degree; however, with advertising it's transparent – everyone knows it's constructed. I find advertising ethically more straightforward to understand,” he says. “Nowadays everyone who comes out of college wants to go into advertising as it's one of the few areas left where you still have creative control.”

Like a fine art practice, your commercial portfolio is vital, and using the internet to your advantage is one of the better ways to get noticed. Unlike a fine art practice, a physical portfolio is not as important, but making sure you know where your strengths lie is crucial. “A while ago people used to produce a portfolio to reflect different genres,” explains Adam. “However, to get noticed you've got to find what you love doing and the one thing that you're going to do best. Find what you love and focus on it.”

To increase your chances in the commercial industry, an agent will be a valuable asset to your practice. However, this can also be a tough challenge in itself, as Adam explains: “When I came in I could get into agencies and meet the art directors personally,

which I feel was a massive help to me because I'm a people person and people wanted to work with me. Now it's very difficult as these agencies get inundated with portfolios and there's so much competition. You have to be inventive and determined.”

German-born photographer Andreas Bommert (andreasbommert.com) also works in the commercial advertising industry and conducts his practice from Australia. “No one will open the door for you,” he tells us. “There will be many rejections from the time you start to the time you are a fully grown photographer. People will like things but cut you down for other things. You need to have an actual obsession with creating images – if you don't then the commercial world can be very hurtful.”

The competition to get the work is also tough, and for Andreas to get the job he has to pitch his ideas to the companies. “What's required a lot of the time is you get a layout handed out to three or four photographers and you have to write a treatment,” he says. “You have to previsualise every aspect of the final shot and put it down in a verbal treatment in an essay style with a picture reference. At the beginning it can be very hard unless you have a vision of what you want to do.”

Although it may appear like there's a lot of doom and gloom, there are positive outcomes when undertaking a photographic vocation. “Photography is much more appreciated now and you can get recognition for what you do,” summarises Adam. “Images are absolutely everywhere as they are signs to supplement language.” “In photography the amount of judgement that is put on you feels a little more personal and it can be soul-destroying if you get rejected,” says Andreas. “On the other side, if you are successful then it's very beautiful.”

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