



Welcome back, rodriada@salineschools.org



LOGOUT

SUBSCRIBE

FINE ART PHOTOGRAPHY

CONQUERING THE DREADED ARTIST STATEMENT: EXPERT ADVICE FOR WRITING ABOUT ART PHOTOGRAPHY

August 28, 2017

By **Conor Risch**



© RON JUDE

An image from Ron Jude's book *Lago*.

[Comments](#)

Artist statements are dreaded and mocked by critics, curators and even artists themselves for their overwrought, specialized and often predictable language.

“There is a stultifying, eyeball-rolling, headache-inducing norm out there,” says [John Pilson](#), a photographer, video artist and professor at Yale School of Art.

While many artists would rather skip the statements altogether, writing is “an important part of the art-making process,” says photographer [Ron Jude](#), who teaches at University of Oregon. Jude says he urges his students to think of the statement not as homework, but as “something that has a useful purpose in the world.” Artists are “asked to write these things constantly” for grant and fellowship applications, for exhibitions, book releases and as part of earning a degree. Statements help artists “have a hand” in how people talk and think about their work. Also, Jude adds, “When I’m in the middle of a project, I tend to try to sit down and write something about it, because it actually helps me clarify my own ideas about what it is and that helps me move forward with the project.” Jude says writing about his work also prepares him speak about it in interviews. “The last thing you want to do is sound like an idiot” in an interview that will live on the internet for the foreseeable future, Jude says.

“Nine times out of ten, your goal is just to not screw it up, not to embarrass yourself and not to say anything that you can’t live with,” Pilson agrees.

To help readers write better artist statements, *PDN* asked a curator and four photographers who also teach what makes a good statement. Here’s what they told us.



An image from Ron Jude's book *Lago*. A photography professor, Jude says he urges his students to think of artist statements not as homework assignments, but as "something that has a useful purpose in the world." © Ron Jude



Excerpt from Ron Jude's Artist Statement for *LAGO*: *My time in the desert was brief, but it was at a critical point in my early life—the transition from toddler to child—and it left a deep impression on me. We lived on the southern edge of the Mojave Desert in a town called Apple Valley. (Apparently there were once apple orchards there, but I don't recall ever seeing one.)* **To see Jude's full artist statement [click here](#).**

EXPLAIN WHO YOU ARE AND WHAT YOU DO

Clare Benson, a photographer who taught at Arizona State University says the best statements put the work in context but don't force an interpretation on the viewer. "There's a nice balance of not explaining too much but giving enough information," she says. "Also, something that I've found in the best artist statements that I've seen is that they have some personality to them—the tone fits really well with the work that they're describing."

Ron Jude. © Owen Kydd

Endia Beal, a photographer who teaches at Winston-Salem State University and is the director of the Diggs Gallery there, says an artist statement is a stand-in for the artist when she or he can't be present to talk about the work: "When a person comes in and they're experiencing your work for the first time, what do you want them to learn about you?"

Pilson believes artist statements should "tell a story about where you come from, what you've been doing, and crucially the obstacles that you have faced, the problems that you have identified," he says. Some artists choose to do this in a very straightforward manner. Others attempt to write in a voice that matches the work, to "make something which expresses in both tone and the attention to form and language similar values [to your work]," Pilson says. Writing something that's allusive or poetic, however, is risky, Pilson says, because it could fall flat. "Do I want to risk confusing somebody by making my artist statement poetic, to have my artist statement...be an expressive act unto itself, or do I want to train the conversation that I would like my work to engender?"

"The emphasis should be on the basics of communicating something about the work," Jude adds. "I know people who have written things that are more poetic and more like a piece that maybe echoes the spirit of the work. I think that's ultimately a nice way of avoiding really saying something about your work." Jude believes artists are afraid that by writing too literally, they risk "pinning down the meaning of the work." It's a fear he understands. "You don't want the artist statement to say, 'This is what the work is and this is how you should see it.' An artist statement shouldn't contain directives for the reader. It should just provide some context and a basic framework for looking at the work."



A portrait from Endia Beal's series "Am I What You're Looking For?" © Endia Beal

Excerpt from Endia Beal's Artist Statement for "Am I What You're Looking For?": *My vision is to document the lives of the invisible. The invisible are those whose voices are drowned by society's attempts to maintain normalcy through figurative castration of marginalized groups. As a minority, I too share the mark of the unknown. My artistic journey lends itself to unorthodox circumstances where I ask questions like, "What's really going on here?" I will show others through the energy of my work that coming from a place that is foreign to many does not mean you cannot radiate. **To see Beal's full artist statement click here.***

EXPLAIN YOUR METHODS AND MOTIVES

"I'm interested in talking about my own inspirations and references," says Beal. In her artist statement, she identifies the photographers who influenced her. Her statement also explains "the reason why I took the photographs....I want to tell you a story. I want you to get into what I'm trying to make and what I'm trying to say as an artist." If your method for creating the work or the materials you use are crucial to understanding the work, then Beal recommends including that information in a statement.



Endia Beal.

Jude says that a statement should be “something that clearly communicates some fundamental ideas about what your work is doing, what the goals of the work are, and basically how it’s functioning.”

Leslie J. Ureña, an assistant curator of photography at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, believes it’s helpful to identify “a particular theme in the artist’s work.” If you’re introducing a body of work that’s a departure from your usual style or substance, explain why, she says. “If there’s a break in a theme that someone has been following throughout their career, to me as an art historian it’s helpful to find out why that has happened.”

Pilson suggests telling readers the story of “the obstacles and the problems that you have faced,” which led you to create your work. “It’s a way of involving people in your process and helping people understand your process in terms of your experiments, your failures and your resolutions,” he explains.

The creative process is mysterious and can be hard to describe. Pilson says photographers shouldn’t feel the need “to chase all of that uncertainty out of their artist statement.”

Ureña agrees. “It’s not a closed conversation. Some artists present it that way. It is a place where you start a conversation about your work.”

KEEP IT BRIEF

Ureña says it’s fine if an artist’s statement is a few sentences. “It doesn’t need to go on for too long.” Enough said.



“Ground,” from Clare Benson’s series “Until There Is No Sun.” © Clare Benson

Excerpt from **Clare Benson’s** Artist Statement on “The Shepherd’s Daughter”: *Before my father, my grandmother was a hunter and before that my great-grandmother and long before that the stars made up constellations that told stories of the greatest hunts. In my work, nuances of the northern Michigan landscape of my upbringing are woven with narratives that speak to the fragility and strength of time and nature. **To see Benson’s full artist statement click here.***

YOU DON’T HAVE TO USE “ARTSPEAK” TO SHOW YOU ARE A SERIOUS ARTIST



Clare Benson.

Part of what makes artist statements exasperating is the “artspeak” that plagues many of them. Ureña notes that it’s “not just the artist” perpetuating this stereotype. “As art historians we do it,” she says. Pilson believes part of the reason photography writing can be boring is because photographs often involve human subjects, and photographers can be accused of exploiting them. “Photography is high risk because it is an interpretation of the world but it looks like the world, so it is evidence of what you’ve been doing, and what you’ve been doing can involve other people,” he explains. Photographers tend to be defensive in their statements, he says, and “to explain why they are making the work and why it is being made in good faith and how they’re not hurting anyone or harming any animals.”

Benson says that students and artists should be able to create “their own language.” Using the same jargon or buzzwords other artists use will make your work seem generic. “You shouldn’t rely on these really big and trendy words to make your work more interesting or make it sound like you have bigger ideas than you do.”

“An artist statement shouldn’t have such theoretical, specialized language in it that any reader is going to lose interest after two sentences,” Jude says. When he starts working with students on their statements, he asks them to write him a letter telling him something about the work. “I tell them to start it off with, Dear Ron,” to make the writing less formal. “That little flip in mindset is actually kind of a useful way to do it,” Jude says. “It’s helped a lot of people.”

Beal says that she’ll sometimes ask students to tell her about their work in conversation, before reading their statement. “They tell me this beautiful story about why they’re making the work and I’m like, ‘OK, this is not located anywhere in your artist statement.’”

Pilson, who is on a committee that reviews admissions applications at Yale, says that great work can be “dragged down by this dutiful, dull, boring” language. He notes that we are writing more as a society in the digital age, in emails and text messages and on social media. “Look at that stuff,” he says. “It’s you in an unguarded, expressive way.” The voice that comes through in your writing can help you differentiate yourself. As someone who has also reviewed grant applications, Pilson says he appreciates “a little bit of humor. Everybody loves honesty, everybody loves to be spoken to directly.”

He adds, “Think about the things that feel right when you talk to your friends at a bar, and try to put that into your artist statement rather than have it conform to some standard of high-mindedness, because [for] people that read a lot of these things, that’s the norm. And that’s what artists have to watch out for.”

ASK SOMEONE WHOSE OPINION YOU TRUST TO READ YOUR STATEMENT

It’s critical that artists find people who will give them good advice about their writing. When Benson was working on her MFA, she says, she reached out to creative writing students for input on her writing, and she still has former professors and others she can turn to for feedback. “I think it’s really helpful to have an outside eye see the statement and the work,” Benson says. “As artists we get so stuck in it and we think that something is really clear” when it isn’t, which can be a detriment to the work.

Pilson tells artists not to beat themselves up if they’re not good writers. “That’s not what you signed up for,” he says. “But get somebody who is a good writer and see what they do and then your revisions will be far, far more expressive.

“Nothing makes you get it together better than being misunderstood [by viewers or critics],” he says. “Nothing lights the fire under your ass to write a better artist statement than when somebody has reviewed your work and completely gotten it wrong in every way.”

THINK ABOUT YOUR AUDIENCE AND DON’T BE AFRAID TO WRITE MORE THAN ONE STATEMENT

Writers often keep in mind an “ideal reader,” a real or imagined person who represents the audience for their written work. But Pilson believes artists “shouldn’t think of an ideal reader.” A photographer may find themselves “writing an artist statement four or five times a year,” each time for a different audience, he says: “Things are always changing and contexts are different.” When you’re writing a grant application, a submission to a juried show or contacting a gallery, for instance, you’re writing for different audiences.

Benson will often rewrite statements a few times a year depending on the context. “Everybody has to determine who their audience is,” she says.

Ureña says that she has “no problem” with a statement being written in “terminology that’s understandable to a broader public; it doesn’t necessarily mean that it’s less intelligent.” The ideal reader, she believes, “is someone who is well-educated but not an expert.”

People have told Jude, he says, that only curators and critics read statements. He has a broader view of “who the audience might be.” He says he writes for someone with “enough specialized knowledge of the field and the medium” that they can understand nuance. “It’s not for the daily newspaper, it’s not going to be as generally read as that, but at the same time you should expect everybody from students...to curators. I think you do want to contextualize and frame your work in an intelligent way, but it should also be accessible to a slightly more general audience than that.”

In thinking about the audience for statements, Beal considers the gallery she runs at Winston-Salem State University. “We serve a number of audiences: We serve the general public, we serve our students at the university, we’re serving so many different people,” she says. “As an artist you take all that into consideration.

“Essentially, you want to make your work have a voice that speaks to a multigenerational audience because that’s what you’re going to get.”

Related Articles:

[How to Put Together a Standout Submission for Open Calls, Awards and Juried Reviews](#)

[How To Get Noticed—and Commissioned—by an Art Advisor](#)

0 Comments

Sort by



Add a comment...

[Facebook Comments Plugin](#)

RELATED ARTICLES

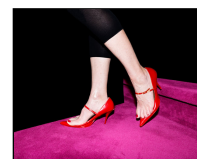
FINE ART PHOTOGRAPHY

NATALIE KRICK PLAYS WITH FASHION AND BEAUTY IDEALS IN A NEW BOOK

February 23, 2018

There’s something familiar in Natalie Krick’s images from her series “Natural Deceptions.” It’s as if we’ve met her subjects—her mother, her sister, herself—somewhere before, but of course we haven’t. Then it hits us: It’s not that we know the women, it’s that we know the poses, the hair, the makeup, the looks, the image compositions. Krick is pulling from and...

[More »](#)



© NATALIE KRICK

BUSINESS & MARKETING

REIMAGINING THE PREDICTABLE FORMULAS OF ARTIST STATEMENTS

February 19, 2018

The following essay was excerpted from “Toward a History (and Future) of the Artist Statement” in Paper Monument Issue 4. Google artist statement, and you will find a good dozen instructional websites enjoining artists to “follow these easy steps” to produce this essential bit of art-career ephemera. Most begin with a reassuring



acknowledgment of artists' presumed anxiety about putting visual...

[More »](#)

FINE ART PHOTOGRAPHY

MATTHEW BRANDT USES UNIQUE SILVER PRINTING TECHNIQUE FOR NEW SERIES 🔒

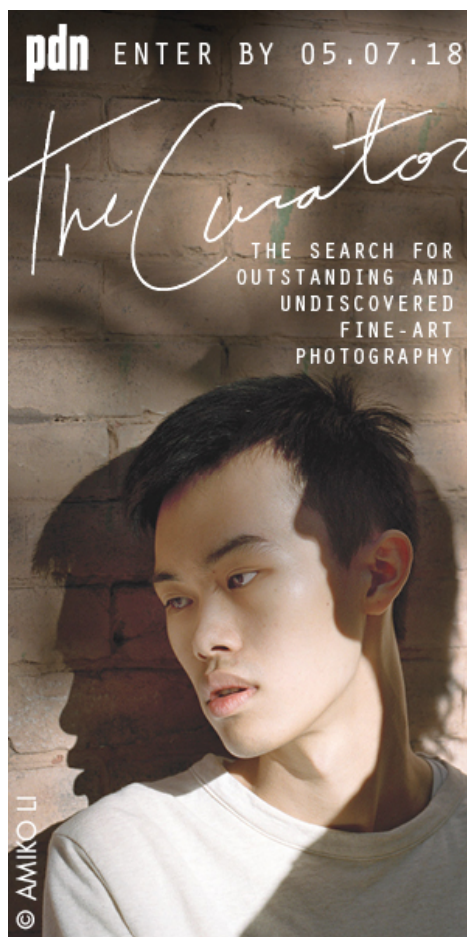
February 9, 2018

To create his new series “Silver,” photographer Matthew Brandt made silver gelatin prints of his photographs of trees and forests, then treated the prints with liquid silver, creating unique artworks. The process produces a mirrored layer which stands in relief from the deep silver of the prints. The resulting prints create a dialogue between image and object, while interacting with...

[More »](#)



COURTESY OF MATTHEW BRANDT



October 24-27, 2018

Javits Center, NYC

[LEARN MORE](#)

WPPi February 2019
Mandalay Bay, Las Vegas

[LEARN MORE](#)

NEWSLETTER SIGNUP



**SIGN UP FOR OUR
PDN NEWSWIRE**

Highlights of the
week's photo news
delivered to your

inbox.

[SIGN UP](#)

An advertisement for Adobe Stock. The top part of the ad shows a close-up photograph of several light blue macarons with white filling, some topped with blueberries and fresh green leaves. The background is a dark, textured surface. In the top left corner, there is a red square with the Adobe logo and the word 'Adobe' below it. The main text of the ad is white and reads: 'Creatives are waiting. Sell your work to the world's largest creative community.' Below this text is a blue rounded rectangular button with the text 'Learn more'. At the bottom of the ad, there is a small red square with the letters 'St' and the text 'Make it with Adobe Stock.' to its right.

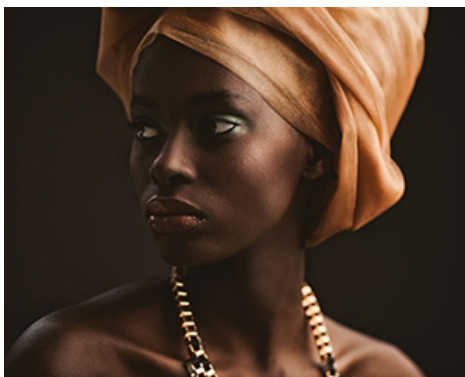
Adobe

**Creatives
are waiting.**
Sell your work to the
world's largest
creative community.

[Learn more](#)

St Make it with Adobe Stock.

PRODUCT SPOTLIGHT





STOCK REVOLUTION: STOCKSY UNITED AND ADOBE STOCK TURN THE TIDE ON THE INDUSTRY

The organization stands out from the crowd with its highly selective collection of images and a co-op structure that gives every member a voice in the company.

[More »](#)

GET YOUR **FREE** COPY OF PDN'S **FUNDING YOUR PHOTO PROJECTS**

DOWNLOAD NOW TIPS FOR FUNDRAISING, SOLICITING DONATIONS AND APPLYING FOR GRANTS.

 **Creatives are waiting.** Sell your work to the world's largest creative community. [Learn more >](#)  **Make it with Adobe Stock.**

Magazines

- Photo District News
- Rangefinder
- PDNEdu
- Emerging Photographer

Tradeshows

- Photoplus Expo
- WPPI

Blogs

- PDN Pulse
- Photo of the Day

Services

- PhotoServe
- PhotoSource

Contests

- PDN
- Rangefinder
- WPPI

Education

- Fine Art
- Commercial
- Portrait
- Wedding
- All

Membership

- Sign up now!

ABOUT US | CONTACT US | SUBSCRIBE | ADVERTISE | SITE MAP

© 2018 Emerald Expositions, LLC. All rights reserved. Read our [TERMS OF USE](#) and [PRIVACY POLICY](#)