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Diversifying VRC Services within a studio department: The Portfolio Photography Room

Abstract

With the changing landscape of visual resources in the past decade, our facility has remained useful to our department by providing relevant services that revolve around imaging. When we noticed a void in the department for students to professionally document the art they were creating, the Visual Resources Center was a natural fit. This article explains the process of establishing this service.

Keywords

portfolio photography, visual resources, art department

Author Bio & Acknowledgements

Lia Pileggi is the Digital Imaging and Technology Coordinator at the University of Colorado Boulder. Lia has been with the Visual Resources Center within the Department for 10 years. Her background is in photography and digital imaging.

Introduction

In an effort to diversify the offerings that the Visual Resources Center provides to the Department of Art and Art History on the University of Colorado at Boulder campus, we undertook the conversion of a small room inside our Visual Resources Center to create a new Portfolio Photography Room. The following provides information about how we managed to accomplish setting up this new service for our constituents and the lessons learned.

Background

About 9 years ago, our facility noticed a need for a place for our studio students to document their art. Since my education was in photography, I was a natural fit for helping fill this need. I started going from class to class holding workshops on documenting art. I quickly noticed that the students were not retaining the knowledge from this teaching environment and that I was constantly being asked by students to meet individually with them to troubleshoot specific photoshoots. We soon realized that the department needed a space dedicated to only documenting art. However, there were no extra spaces in the building, so for years I continued this inefficient method. Then, after a move to a new building about 5 years ago, we found a small space that we could convert to a portfolio room. The room was not made for this purpose, but we made do with the space we were given. Since we didn't have the money in our budget to outfit it with equipment, we applied for an internal campus grant for technology improvements in learning spaces, and we were awarded \$5000 to get started.

Current Equipment

The following provides a list of the equipment that we were able to bring together for this new facility:

- Camera: EOS 6D DSLR Canon Camera with 24-105mm f/4.0L IS USM AF Lens,
- Light kit: Smith-Victor KSB-1250F 3-Light Fluorescent Soft-Box Kit,
- Tripod: Manfrotto 294 Aluminum Tripod with 804RC2 3-Way Head,
- Shooting table: Manfrotto 320 Mini Still Life Shooting Table with 59"x30" Plexiglass Panel on wheels,
- Pedestal: Plywood painted white on wheels 36"Hx20"Wx20"D,
- Computer: iMac (for shooting tethered),
- Software: Adobe Lightroom 5 (for shooting tethered).

The Room

Unfortunately, the room is small (7' x 8'), but we keep all the equipment on wheels so the room is easily convertible. We have one wall with an attached sheet of metal painted white and we use strong, small magnets to hang prints and drawings on it (we don't want to damage the work with pins or tape). The second wall has an attached picture hanger for framed work and canvases, while the third wall is plain white and used as a background for shooting larger sculptures on pedestals. The shooting table is for small sculptural work and it fits in and out through the door when not needed. For large installations students can check out cameras, tripods and light kits from our Equipment Room and take the equipment to wherever they have their installation set up.



Figure 1. The shooting table in use for a smaller sized sculpture. Notice the image on the computer that was captured with the tethered set-up.

Using the Space

The Portfolio Photography Room is available to any of our currently enrolled Art and Art History students. I train every person who uses the room and it is only available during my office hours. After initial training, the students are expected to shoot the work themselves, but I am always available to help with difficult-to-shoot art, or if they forget any settings. The students are also responsible for any damage to the equipment during their appointment, so they must sign a checkout agreement every time they use the room. I work closely with all the sections of our Intro to Art studio classes since all new majors start with that class. Then, hopefully after four years of using the room, our seniors are taking high quality images of their work.

Shooting the Work

I show each student the very basics of camera settings and lighting for the type of work they are shooting. I always allow students that have a photography background to make any changes they want to the camera and lighting, but I reset everything before each appointment so there is a consistency with the less knowledgeable students. We shoot tethered in the room, so the students can see their images full-size immediately. This allows them to make any necessary changes right away. I also post help documentation on our website that students have access to anytime they need it (that document is in the appendix below).



Figure 2. Adobe Lightroom allows the students to shoot tethered and to inspect the images right away so they can make changes if needed.

Results

The Portfolio Photography Room has been a huge success. I average between three and four hundred appointments during the academic year. The students are very happy to have a place to shoot their work, and the faculty is appreciative that the images students are turning in are higher quality and more professional. The room also keeps a steady flow of foot-traffic into the VRC so they can learn about the other services we offer. The only obstacle is that the room is too small for large portions of the work our students are creating. If I were starting the process over again, I would try to get a room at least three times the size that I have now.

Conclusion

As the field of visual resources continues to the transition from analog to digital, expanded facilities, such as the University of Colorado at Boulder's Portfolio Photography Room, provide valuable services to campus constituents. Creative re-use of even a small room can signal to the administration the ability of the Visual Resources Center to maximize services in areas where our special expertise can be put to good work.

Appendix

How to photograph small to medium 2-D artwork

Hanging your art

1. Place or hang your art on a flat surface (like a wall) with a grey, black or white background.
2. Make sure the art is level.
3. Measure up from the floor to the middle of the art. Take note of that height, you will need it later

Setting up the lighting kit

1. Set up the stands first, and then add the lighting heads.
2. Place the umbrellas onto the lighting heads and then face the lights away from the art.
3. The lights should be placed at 45 degree angles from the art, half way between the art and the camera, this will give even, diffused light (see the attached diagram).
4. Note: If you are shooting 3-D or highly textured art you will want a different lighting setup.

Camera Settings

1. Set the camera to shoot in RAW (this will give you the most digital information).
2. Set the ISO to 100 (this will reduce “noise” in the digital image).
3. Set the camera to “aperture priority” (this will keep the aperture locked).
4. Set the aperture to f/11 or higher (this will put more of the image in focus).
5. Set the white balance if shooting in jpeg or tiff (Tungsten, Fluorescent, Daylight, etc.).
6. If you have mixed lighting you can create a custom white balance or just shoot in RAW.
7. Set the camera to timer mode (this is to minimize camera shake).

Setting up the camera

1. Set up the camera on a tripod, make sure the tripod and the camera are level.
2. After attaching the camera, bring the lens to the exact height of the middle of the art (this is the measurement you took when hanging the art).
3. Place the tripod at a distance where the art fills almost the entire view, yet you are not too close to get distortions (see the attached diagram). Zoom in with the cameras zoom lens if needed.

Shooting the work

1. Clean the camera lens with a lens cleaning cloth.
2. Turn on the light kit.
3. Get the entire image in the frame with a bit of background (you will crop it out later).
4. Focus your image (manually or with auto focus).
5. Press the button and let go of the camera, the timer function will open the shutter and take the shot.
6. Bracket your shot by increasing and then decreasing the shutter speed, to get a variety of exposures.
7. Leave the tripod in place in case you need to come back and shoot more images.

How to photograph small to medium 3-D artwork

Positioning your art

1. For smaller sculptural work, place your art on a flat surface with a neutral colored background.
2. Don't place your art too close to the background, give it some space.
3. Note: If your art is small enough and you want even diffused light, use a tabletop soft-box.
4. For larger work, shoot the pieces on a pedestal or directly on the ground.

Setting up the lighting kit

1. Set up the stands first, and then add the lighting heads.
2. Place the umbrellas onto the lighting heads and then face the lights away from the art.
3. At first place two lights at 45 degree angles from the art, half way between the art and the camera, this will give even, diffused light (see the attached diagram on setting up lights for shooting 2-D artwork) Then add a third light on a boom arm above the art.
4. Experiment with moving one of the side lights (or turning it off) to start creating shadows, once you have reached the desired shadows begin shooting.

Camera Settings

1. Set the camera to shoot in RAW (this will give you the most digital information).
2. Set the ISO to 100 (this will reduce "noise" in the digital image).
3. Set the camera to "aperture priority" (this will keep the aperture locked).
4. Set the aperture to f/11 or higher (this will put more of the image in focus).
5. Set the white balance if shooting in jpeg or tiff (Tungsten, Fluorescent, Daylight, etc.).
6. If you have mixed lighting you can create a custom white balance.
7. Set the camera to timer mode (this is to minimize camera shake).

Setting up the camera

1. Set up the camera on a tripod, make sure the tripod and camera are level.
2. Place the tripod at a distance where the art fills a large portion of the frame, but give 3-D work some breathing room around the piece.

Shooting the work

1. Clean the camera lens with a lens cleaning cloth.
2. Turn on the light kit.
3. Focus your image (manually or with auto focus).
4. Press the button and let go of the camera, the timer function will open the shutter and take the shot.
5. Bracket your shot by increasing and then decreasing the shutter speed, to get a variety of exposures.
6. Leave the tripod in place in case you need to come back and shoot more images.
7. Make sure to capture your piece from multiple angles.

Tips for photographing installations

1. Shooting installations requires capturing full views of the work as well as details.
2. Try shooting your full views with a wide-angle lens. Remember that distortions can occur at the edges of a wide-angle lens, so zoom in a bit with the lens when shooting. Always look at the image on the view-finder to see if you have noticeable distortions.
3. To capture the installation in focus you must keep your aperture closed down quite a bit. Try using only f/16 or higher and see what your results look like. Because you are using such a small aperture and lighting in installations are very often dim, a tripod is an absolute necessity.
4. Make sure to get shots from a variety of angles and positions. When people walk through or into an installation they often can experience the art from many different views, make sure your photos can document that aspect of an installation.
5. Be very aware of the backgrounds that may exist within the space of the installation. Make sure to avoid elements that may distract from the work, or be sure to include them if they are part of the work.
6. While most installations can be shot with the current lighting, sometimes adding additional light can be helpful to highlight a certain area. If you are supplementing the current light with a lighting-kit, be sure to position the kit so it cannot be seen in the photo.
7. Make sure to get lots of detail shots of the installation, and be sure to still use a tripod.
8. If scale is hard to determine in the work, try including a person or two in a shot, but try to not show faces.
9. If people are supposed to interact with the work, consider time-based documentation like video or time lapse.

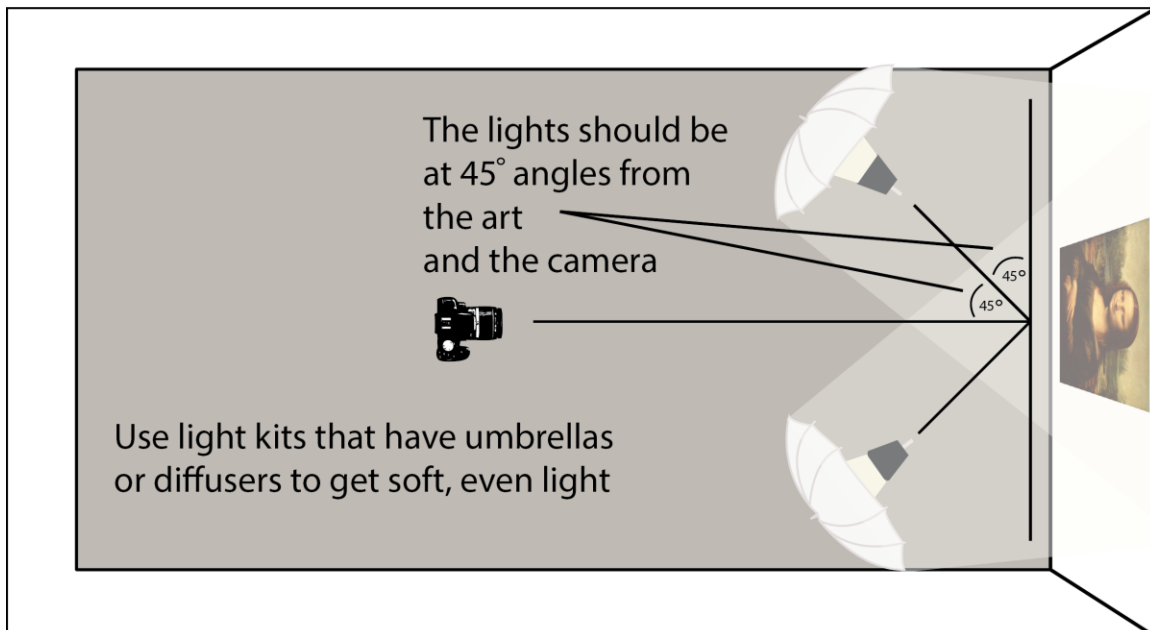
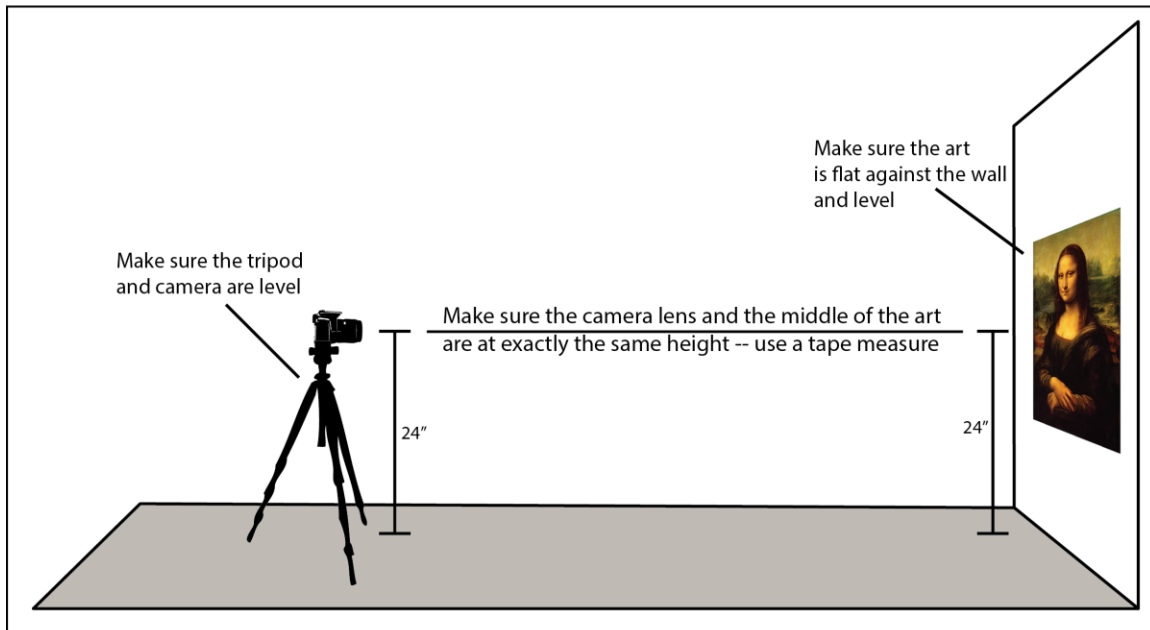
Tips for photographing museum artwork

1. Make sure you have permission from the museum to photograph their contents.
2. See if the museum allows tripods (or monopods).
3. If you need to hand-hold your camera try raising the ISO up to 800. This will give you some more digital noise, but it will reduce camera shake.
4. Try experimenting with the aperture setting. The bigger your aperture, the faster the shutter speed will be (less shake), but less of the image will be in focus. Remember that a larger aperture is a smaller number (ex f/4.0).
5. If the piece of art is behind glass, use a polarizing filter to reduce glare, and try shooting the work at a 45° angle. Then fix the distortion of shooting at a 45° in Photoshop.
6. When taking the pictures, tuck your arms in close to your sides to give the camera the most stability as possible. Also try breathing out, and then as you shoot the picture hold your breath. You can also try gently running your finger from front to back over the shutter button as opposed to pushing it, this will also minimize camera shake.
7. Also remember to take a quick shot of the museum ID tag so you can identify the piece of art later

Tips for photographing outdoor buildings or public art

1. It is best to shoot at dusk or dawn when photographing buildings or outdoor sculpture/public art. There is better lighting and fewer people to get in your shot. Only photograph during the day if there is a very specific lighting reason to do so, for example shadows are an important element.
2. Since you will be shooting in a low light situation (dusk or dawn), a tripod is absolutely necessary.
3. Be sure to get multiple shots from many angles. And be very aware of the background of your shot. Moving to the side one or two feet may give you a significantly better shot.
4. For larger building or public art pieces you may need a wide angle lens. Be sure to watch out for distortion at the edges of the frame. Zoom in a bit or stand closer to your subject and it may help with the corner distortions.
5. Your depth of field can vary quite a bit with outdoor photography. For large buildings where it is important to get the entire structure in focus, use a small aperture (f/22). For isolated sculptures where you want just the sculpture in focus and the background blurry use a larger aperture (f/5.6).
6. While almost all public buildings are legal to photograph, a few are not (especially in foreign countries). Do some research to find out if you are allowed to photograph your site of interest.
7. Be sure to bracket your shots. You may not get another chance to come back and shoot the subject again so be sure to have a variety of exposures from each shot to choose from later.
8. Also remember to take a shot of any kind of plaque or ID that may be posted near the building or art to help you identify it later.

Camera and light setup for shooting 2-D work



Common distortions when shooting 2-D work

