For Jonathan Sadler, the line between his own artistic exploration and the expertise he brings to the classroom is fluid. Each endeavor informs the other.

An associate professor of photography in Boise State’s Department of Art, Sadler recently exhibited his work at the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Photography, the Gagosian Gallery in New York City and the Viewpoint Photographic Art Center in Sacramento. Since 2007, when he arrived in Boise from Chicago, he has taught all levels of photography at the university.

“One of the things I’m always coming back to in the classroom is the broad term ‘art,’” said Sadler. “A lot of people have a misconception that ‘art’ means a beautiful oil painting. But if you were to go to 20 exhibitions in New York galleries right now, you would probably see zero such paintings. Still, I do love a beautiful oil painting.”

Sadler wants his students to have a sense of artistic quality in photographs. “But I don’t want them to have this narrow idea that a good photograph has to fit certain criteria. A good photograph could be printed on a napkin,” he said.

His newest work is on the traditional side. Sadler spent his 2013 sabbatical at his cabin in the Sierra Nevada mountains. He shot landscapes, animals and still lifes on black-and-white film with large and medium format cameras.

That sabbatical work was a counterbalance of sorts to his approach in the classroom, where he continues to stretch boundaries. For instance, he charged his advanced photography students with the task of “outsourcing” a project. They had to come up with an idea, then have someone else bring it to life.

“Students have a tough time with this because they think the act of creating is the physical doing,” said Sadler.


“Various Fire No. 1” was exhibited at the Gagosian Gallery in New York City as part of a tribute to artist Ed Ruscha.
Landscape photography was among Sadler’s sabbatical pursuits. This photo is of Echo Lake in the Sierra Nevada mountains as night begins to fall.

The challenge produced intriguing results. One student hired a company to build the tiniest set of mini blinds possible.

In 2012, Sadler and his longtime collaborator Luke Batten, a professor at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, were part of the artist team behind “This is a Present from a Small Distant World,” a multi-media installation at the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art in Arizona.

Sadler described the exhibition as one of his and Batten’s most exciting. Like his classroom assignments, it went beyond expected ideas of what photography can be.

“Small Distant World” was a recreation of the Golden Record, the time capsule of Earth’s sights, sounds and symbols carried by Voyager missions into space in the late 1970s.

Visitors got to step inside a “spaceship” containing light boxes, performances of music composed for the installation, and newspapers printed for the occasion. They contributed their messages for space travelers — lists of favorite music, of crops suitable for lunar planting, of items that would help an alien understand life on Earth: lady bugs, paintings by Degas, red velvet cake.

The installation included a collection of light boxes. Artists listed items they would take to space. Sadler’s contribution: “Chickens for eggs, eggs for chickens.”

“Jon’s answers were the most esoteric of all, a beautiful example of him thinking multi-dimensionally,” said Claire Carter, the museum’s assistant curator and part of the installation’s creative team. “He makes a place for other people to shine.”

Sadler continues to maintain a studio in Chicago with Batten, whom he has worked with for a decade. Their website, New Catalogue, plays on photographic companies that sell stock images for commercial purposes. In Sadler’s and Batten’s hands, the subject matter is familiar — roads, trees, astronomical happenings and students — but it takes on a provocative, often humorous character.

In addition to New Catalogue, the two, who are avid cyclists, created the website Tenspeed Hero. The site sells bike jerseys, T-shirts, water bottles, all in high-design, stylish colors. Someone recently suggested to Sadler that he had become a “sock baron.”

But there also are photo essays on the site about Sadler’s favorite cycling roads, about the art of shearing an alpaca, and about the road that snakes to Bogus Basin, complete with elegant black-and-white landscapes.

“With Tenspeed Hero, we can do our photography. There’s a freedom because it’s under the guise of fun. But there’s still artistry,” said Sadler.
CREATIVE ACTIVITY

SHELDING LIGHT ON A DARK CHAPTER IN U.S. HISTORY

*Surviving Minidoka*, a collection of essays, ephemera, art and poetry, offers fascinating, if dark, imagery: Dorothea Lange’s photograph of Japanese-American children pledging allegiance inside a relocation camp; whites carrying signs that read, “Race Mixing is Communism”; a U.S. Army brochure titled, “How to Spot a Jap.”

Dr. Todd Shallat, director of the Center for Idaho History and Politics at Boise State, co-edited *Surviving Minidoka* with Dr. Russell M. Tremayne, a historian at the College of Southern Idaho. It is the latest offering from Boise State’s Publications Office, which produces popular scholarship about Idaho and the West.

The book tells a western tale that remains shadowy despite its magnitude — the largest forced relocation of citizens in U.S. history following Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor. Minidoka, located on 33,000 acres of sagebrush near Twin Falls, Idaho, was among 10 relocation centers that held Americans of Japanese descent between 1942 and 1945.

*Surviving Minidoka* remains relevant in its warnings about the “war hysteria of military necessity” Shallat said, as it explores racism and the effects of relocation on three generations of Japanese Americans.

The book grew out of the College of Southern Idaho’s annual Civil Liberties Symposium. Tremayne proposed collecting symposium papers into an anthology. Shallat saw the opportunity to create a book rich with art by Minidoka residents and descendants, along with essays on topics like the Japanese American 442nd Regimental Combat Unit, and Idaho’s political climate during wartime.

Dr. Melissa Lavitt, former dean of the College of Social Sciences and Public Affairs, wrote the book’s foreword. *Surviving Minidoka*, she said, strengthens the bond between Boise State, CSI and others in a common desire to give a voice to Minidoka. To order the book online, go to sspa.boisestate.edu/publications.

- Anna Webb

CONDUCTOR STRIKES THE RIGHT NOTE

Musicians who have played under the baton of Professor Marcellus Brown share a common observation.

Brown, they say, has figured out how to achieve a difficult balance. He gets the best possible performances out of his players, while retaining both his warmth and grace.

Brown’s explanation is simple. He loves working with people.

“I’m trying to get to the place of doing high-quality work. For me, it’s worth all the effort,” he said.

Brown, a Detroit native, came to Boise State in 1989 as a professor and director of band organizations. He directs the Boise State University Symphonic Winds, a 60-member student group that has received national recognition for its excellence, including an invitation to perform at the 2015 conference of the American Bandmasters Association, the most prestigious professional band association in the United States.

Brown’s work in the community may be as notable as his work on campus.

Boise State partly sponsors the 80-member Treasure Valley Concert Band, a highly skilled community group that has performed at both national and international music conferences held in the Northwest.

“We have lawyers, homemakers, delivery people, teachers, insurance salesmen,” Brown said.

Kevin Hall, a bassoonist with the Treasure Valley Concert Band, is among musicians impressed both with Brown’s demeanor and
his musical knowledge. Brown is as comfortable with Beethoven as he is with Gershwin, said Hall, a former violinist with the Boston Symphony.

Under Brown’s direction, each concert includes a varied repertoire. He always includes a score from a movie or musical.

“Something that cuts across all lines,” he said. His programs also include challenging, contemporary pieces along with band standards, and, naturally, marches.

“I call them toe-tappers,” said Brown. He wants his programs to show audiences what a talented concert band can offer. Treasure Valley Concert Band can play like a symphony. It can play like a big band.

“But we have our own sound,” said Brown.

The band has its own mission as well. It performs programs in local public schools, not only giving students the chance to hear a top ensemble, but to play alongside its members. Public school band directors also get a chance to direct the concert band.

“Marcellus’ arrival in the valley raised the bar for all local ensembles,” said Curt Griffiths, president of the Idaho Music Educators Association and head of the music department at Vallivue High School.

Griffiths praised Brown’s efforts to support the annual chamber music camp at Boise State. The camp offers training to young musicians, some of whom come from homes where paying for private lessons is difficult or even impossible.

Brown’s community outreach continues as one of the directors of the Hymns of Thanksgiving concert, an annual event featuring more than 300 musicians in the choir and orchestra. Brown has directed the all-volunteer orchestra for six years.

“If you’re going to live in a community, you need to contribute,” he said. - Anna Webb