

GETTING

Exploring the Artist/Gallery Relationship

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For many artists looking to exhibit their work with a gallery, the dynamics of the professional relationship can be unclear. The role of a gallerist is to present an artist's work in the best environment possible and help grow their collector base. Artists should understand a few elements of the artist/gallery relationship. Promoting shows, speaking with potential collectors, and creating and maintaining mailing lists are just as much the artist's responsibility as it is the gallery's. Before you begin picking out your outfit for the opening reception...how should you start?

Every gallery is different and everyone has different philosophies on how to show, make, promote, and sell art. Coupled with my own thoughts and opinions, I have asked three gallery owners how they prefer to be approached by artists. Here are the most common steps to establishing a gallery relationship and how to go about them.

RESEARCH

Just as not every assignment is right for every commercial photographer, not every gallery will suit your work. In order to create the best artist/gallery relationship possible, you need to be excited about the kind of photography and photographers that the gallery exhibits. Conversely, this will make them

more excited about you. Brie Castell, owner of Castell Photography in Asheville, North Carolina, told The Kiernan Gallery, "Artists should do their homework on which gallery is appropriate for their work in terms of style. Sending [Castell Photography] your portfolio when it is the opposite of what we show is insulting because it's clear this artist never took the time to learn about who we are." If a gallery only exhibits the work of very famous artists, does not show photography, or has stated that they are not currently accepting submissions, sending them your work is a waste of your time and theirs. Furthermore, if an artist cannot take twenty minutes to examine the gallery's website and read their mission, why should the gallery take the time to look at the artist's work? Spend time researching the places you want to send your photographs, and be honest with yourself about how the gallery would view your work. The gallery will do the same.

MARKETING MATERIALS

Every gallery owner I spoke with prefers to be addressed by name rather than "To Whom it May Concern" or "Dear Sir/Madam." Addressing someone so vaguely proves that you have not spent enough time learning about their gallery, particularly if the gallery shares their name. I like to receive properly

addressed email inquiries on the best way to submit to the gallery. This gives me a chance to elaborate on the gallery's mission and give the artist the most complete information before they send me their work.

Sophisticated and well-presented materials for review are a must. Many galleries review submissions in groups, so it is important that the presentation of your work grab the reviewer's attention. Jennifer Schwartz of Jennifer Schwartz Gallery in Atlanta, Georgia looks for a properly addressed introduction letter, a CD of images in an envelope with the artists' branding, and an outstanding postcard or small sample print. She has zero tolerance for badly presented submission materials. A blank CD in a cardboard mailer will certainly go straight into her trashcan. Aside from screaming "unprofessional," it can also scream "virus!"

I like to receive packets in a nice or hand-made folder with a one-page letter of introduction explaining why the artist thinks his or her work is a good fit for one of The Kiernan Gallery's solo shows. This packet should also include a postcard, a one or two page resumé, a disc of images, and a sheet of thumbnails so that I can get a sense of the work prior to putting the CD into my computer.

STARTED

PRESENTING YOUR WORK

Artists who walk into a gallery without an appointment and expect to show their work are generally not well received. Gallery owner Brie Castell is less inclined to look at work when an artist comes into the gallery with “his/her portfolio in hand without an appointment.” Similarly, Jason Landry, owner of Panopticon Gallery in Boston, Massachusetts says, “My number one pet peeve is when [artists] show up at the gallery unannounced, circle around looking at the show but act like a shark waiting for the appropriate moment to tell me that they are a photographer and can I look at their portfolio right now. Please don’t do this.”

Personally, I do not like when an artist—even someone who has an appointment—shows me their work on their phone, tablet, or other electronic device. Because the photographs I exhibit are seen as prints on the wall, it is important for me to see the quality of the printed work. Jason Landry says, “Email me first with a link to your website or 2–3 small JPGs. If I like them, you will hear from me.” Be sure to follow up if you have not heard from the gallery for a few months.

REJECTION

If, after having submitted your materials or having had your work reviewed, you receive

a rejection letter or phone call, understand that this is a part of the process. Much like interviewing for a job, the fit needs to be right for both you and the gallery.

There are many reasons why a gallery might not accept your work. They might feel that you do not have the exhibition history they are looking for, or that you need to further develop your bodies of work. Often they are simply not looking for new artists. Regardless of their response, it is a good idea to add the gallery to your mailing list (with the option to unsubscribe) to keep them updated with new exhibitions, works, and press. Do not, under any circumstances, reply in a rude or snarky manner. I can assure you that a little politeness goes a long way, and conversely, that an inappropriate response will not quickly be forgotten.

ESTABLISHING A RELATIONSHIP

If the gallery has responded positively to your inquiry and has set up a meeting or asks for sample prints, it is important that you present work that is finished. This means exhibition-quality prints. Do not send framed pieces unless you are asked (yes, this happens). It is a good idea to bring a previous body of work and some current works-in-progress so your reviewer can see past work, the work you submitted, and the di-

rection in which you are heading as an artist. Mention that you have past and in-progress work available, but in order to avoid confusion, don’t lay everything out at once.

It is important to remember that you are looking to establish a relationship where you will be sharing your work with that gallery on a regular basis. Decisions about the edit, print media, print size, editioning, or framing should be made with guidance from the pros. Framers know how to frame, printers know how to print, and galleries know how to price for their clientele. Take their advice into consideration while maintaining your vision. Showing work in a gallery that has its own aesthetic is a partnership. These discussions will help both parties decide if your visions of how the work should be realized in its final form mesh. If they do not, then maybe they are not the right gallery for you.

The best and most honest advice I have is to view the gallery/artist relationship as just that, a relationship. Remember that galleries want to help artists succeed. Criticism and guidance are in the best interest of the work and it is in the best interest of the artist to further their exposure before, during, and after each exhibition. 📍