A couple years ago I was part of an exhibition at a gallery and the experience was so bad and unprofessional it brought back memories of painful learning experiences as I fumbled my way into the art business. More importantly it highlighted the good relationships I have built with several galleries and what I appreciate about working with them. Believing it is not the bad experiences that define you, but rather what you do with those experiences, I teamed up with Lauren Karle, a great writer and a rising voice in our community to co-author this article.

Our hope is that the research and experience that went into this article will empower you to make savvier choices, advocate for yourself, and lift up and support the good galleries. Professionalism on both the part of the artist and the gallery is essential for a symbiotic relationship. At the heart of this relationship is a good gallery contract that protects both parties and makes expectations clear.

Too Good To Be True

SL: Just last week I had a conversation with a local artist who makes fanciful large metal sculpture. We spoke about the value of galleries and how he could sell his work. As I listened I found his firmly held attitudes about galleries deeply problematic but not uncommon. He had approached a lovely gallery in Door County (the Cape Cod of Wisconsin) about selling his work. He could not believe that they wanted 50% of the sale price for just selling his work. He spoke about the material costs, as well as the time and labor, and expertise of making the pieces. Given these costs, he would get about 30% of the sale’s profit; totally unfair. He works really hard, and all the gallery has to do is sit there, and they take 50%. Instead he had found a restaurant with a large piece of land alongside a main road busy with traffic, which was willing to display and sell his work for 10% of all sales.

Over a year later, none of the pieces had sold; I have some suspicions as to why. Regardless of the quality of any artwork, people tend to go to restaurants to buy food, not art. They come into that environment seeing their surroundings as ambiance, not as commodities. Most people enter a gallery when they are looking for artwork, so the customer base is already self-selected for the product. A good gallery will stay in contact with collectors and clients, inviting them to see new inventory. It is unlikely a restaurant will do this. An established gallery will increase the status of artists it represents since it has done the vetting and deemed the work worthy.

Years ago when I began to approach galleries I was taken aback by the idea of a 50% consignment rate, and conversely found other offers tempting. A flower shop that “Loved” my work offered to display vases in their shop for sale, and they only asked 30%. I was flattered and thought, “What a great deal. I will get 70% of all my sales.” In the end I got 70% of $0.00, and the flower shop got a lovely window display. I was beginning to learn to assess the motivations of the gallery or business that was offering to sell my work and to see the difference in the amount and quality of work that goes into running a good gallery.

Good Galleries Work Hard

LK: As someone new to working with galleries I wanted to know what their role in my career could be. I reached out to a variety of galleries, from sculptural to functional, and profit to nonprofit. What I found is that the cost, time, and passion of a good gallery owner equals that of an artist. They earn their 50% through overhead, advertising, and the time and expertise they invest.
Running a ceramics gallery is not a highly lucrative business. People invested in the ceramic arts, like the artists themselves, go into it because they are passionate about it. Gallery owner Avra Leodos, of Santa Fe Clay, is clear that her motivation is to present the artist’s message to the public. Galleries choose which work gets exposure, ultimately influencing the direction of the field. Art reflects and influences the evolution of our culture; this is an enormous responsibility and opportunity. Some galleries, especially the non-profit galleries, take their role of educating seriously. From the collector to the child who walks in off the street, gallery staff describe the ceramic processes and artists’ influences, sometimes acting as an “interpreter.” Communicating the story, history, context, and process is an essential role in marketing.

Charlie Cummings Gallery sometimes plans shows that won’t necessarily sell well simply because Charlie is committed to exhibiting the best of ceramics, both sculptural and functional. There is work that which he feels is worthy of exposure. Red Lodge Clay Center, in their mission statement, makes the commitment to share the importance of art in our everyday lives.

Great work is muted if not displayed properly. Galleries need an appropriate exhibition space which creates overhead. Rent, utilities, and staff need to be paid. Hanging and arranging work takes time and expertise. Photographing for promotion and creating an online marketplace requires skill and professional equipment. Online and print advertising costs money and takes training. If doing their job, galleries work hard for their 50%.

SL: As an artist I have come to think of the 50% consignment rate as money I am spending. At one level I am a consumer of the gallery's service. From this perspective I ask myself, “What am I getting for the cost?” I am willing to pay for quality and professionalism. I do not sell work exclusively through galleries; I also sell through my Etsy site and pottery tours, as well as my own ill-trafficked gallery space at my home in rural Wisconsin. I tend to think of the consignment rate as my advertising budget. I am buying exposure, nationally and to new markets. I am buying status; the reputation of the gallery and their blessing on my work. I am buying someone’s time to sit there and educate folks about my work and process. I am buying accessibility to my work through the internet and through the storefront. I am buying access to collectors who have long-standing relationships with these galleries. Finally, I am buying the opportunity to be in curated shows at these galleries with the occasional solo show.

Building a Partnership
This perspective is helpful to me in seeing the value of a good gallery and assessing which ones to approach, but it overlooks the relational nature of the partnership. A gallery is not simply a product or service to be purchased; like any relationship it takes maintenance and communication to keep it healthy. It behooves us as artists to help our galleries support and promote us, and it is important that we protect these relationships. Here are a few things you can do to provide a strong foundation for your galleries:
• Have a website.
• Make it a place where the gallery can learn about your work as they promote you. It is a global reference point that gives your work a professional legitimacy outside the gallery.
• List your galleries on your website.
• Add links and even a map with pins, so customers of yours who don't happen to live nearby can go see your work.
• When your gallery is having a show, especially one that includes you, promote that event on your website and social media.
• Standardize your prices.
• Do not undersell your galleries through an online store. Even if you make one-of-a-kind work, alike pieces should be the same price anywhere on the web. I have three price lists. I have a cheaper price for work sold in person through my own gallery; I will reward you for traveling to Gresham, Wisconsin. My second pricing is for all gallery and online sales. A cup through my Etsy site will be the same as a cup in any gallery nationwide. The blessing with one-of-a-kind work is that if you want that specific cup, you need to buy it through that source, nowhere else; therefore I am not competing with those galleries by having an online store. My third and highest priced work is the cream of the crop, juried exhibition, national invitational, or museum-quality work, only available through that highly vetted event.)
• Send your galleries really nice work.
• Replace work that is substandard in anyway.
• Help your galleries develop your reputation for quality by standing behind what you produce.
• Provide your galleries with images representative of your work. (Having promotional images representative of your work is up to you. They are great on your website, or social media promotions, but making hi-res versions available to your gallery helps them promote you in print and digital media advertising.)

In general I do not take images of work I send to galleries for consignment. I make too much work to document. I feel that this is their job because of the time cost for me, but also good galleries want the look and feel of their online resource to be consistent, and images from 30 different sources is antithetical to this goal.

LK: Success for artists and galleries is based on the two-way relationship. This means that, as artists, we have the responsibility to help the gallery as well. Professionalism, shipping, providing materials, and supporting each other were the most common ways galleries explained their expectations in a healthy relationship with an artist.

Galleries have deadlines. They need to change stock in order to sell work. They can’t afford to have an empty store. As professionals, it is our responsibility to meet deadlines. Missed deadlines
compress a gallery’s already tight schedule to photograph, write press releases, enter data, post online, as well as install the object in their physical space. When work arrives late, the streamlined process is interrupted and the gallery is hindered in their ability to do their job well.

Sometimes life happens and every gallery I talked to was more than understanding of this. If firing goes awry or unexpected circumstances arise, communication is key. The courtesy of a call with a new expected arrival date goes a long way. It saves the gallery time in wrangling the artist and they can prepare accordingly. When work arrives it should be labeled clearly with the price and a concise inventory sheet. Wes Harvey, former curator of exhibitions at Red Lodge Clay Center, shared that he appreciates when artists carry craftsmanship into sending a polished finished package, including an up-to-date bio and artist statement. Filling out other paperwork, the contract and return shipping address, helps galleries and artists stay coordinated, keeping expectations clear and saving time for both parties.

The most common pet peeve of galleries is poor packaging. Opening boxes of broken work suggests disregard on the part of the shipper. Artists should treat the work as if it is valuable art work—after all, you’ve already invested your time, material cost, and energy. Charlie Cummings explained that, “Ceramic artists distance themselves from work in progress, because it’s in constant jeopardy; at any moment something can go wrong and it can be ruined. Once a piece is finished we need to think of it as valuable and take ownership.” Clay teaches us a precarious life lesson; give everything and expect nothing, but once it is finished treat it like it’s everything.

How you treat your work will influence how a gallery views your work. When a gallery highly prizes your work and views you in a good light, that sentiment is passed on to the customer.

When you speak highly of the gallery and other artists you are showing with, you are promoting the ceramic arts as a whole. As Simon has mentored me, “A rising tide lifts all boats.” We as a ceramic arts community are in this together. Tippy Maurant, sales gallery and special events manager at Northern Clay Center, explained that galleries notice when artists support each other; she appreciates when we are generous with our knowledge because it builds educated appreciation. Ultimately, we are opening doors and helping ourselves by passing a good experience and information onto the customer.

Pay Attention to Red Flags

SL: There are many reasons why folks start galleries. Some are artists themselves who are looking to exhibit and promote their own work while earning income. Some folks see a niche market in which they have interest, love, or expertise. Like artists, not all gallery owners are business savvy and many learn as they go. As artists, it is our job to hold the galleries accountable. My gallery experience that lead to this article raised several red flags. Motivated by a rare opportunity to exhibit with a friend and artist I respect, I gave more ground than I should have.

The first few red flags were in the gallery contract. After reading “Shipping or delivery to and from the gallery is the artist’s responsibility,” (usually these costs are shared by the gallery and artist) I started to look carefully at the rest of the contract. The second red flag was that insurance of the work while in the hands of the gallery was also the artist’s responsibility. I agreed to deliver and pick up the work, but I explained that the gallery needed to insure the work while in its possession, and the owner reluctantly agreed. The gallery did, however, refuse to hang a grid of wall tiles because the owner didn’t want to assume responsibility. A good friend of mine, unaffiliated with the gallery, was kind enough to install the piece. Next, I received a package of 500 cheaply printed postcards, for me to send to my own mailing list. Any profit margin of my 50% was being diminished by delivery costs, favors, and now...
promotional expenses. I was not getting back what I was putting in; the relationship was not symbiotic.

It is affirming, especially early in an art career, to have a gallery offer to exhibit your work; it is imperative though that you advocate for yourself. We as artists should hold the bad galleries accountable. We should not diminish the value of our work by placing it in cluttered venues that don’t promote or present our work respectfully. We should share freight costs. We should expect our galleries to advertise us on the web and in print. We should feel partnered with our galleries, supported and supportive, and we should not do business with galleries that take advantage of artists. Fewer bad galleries mean less competition and helps support the good ones.

### Evaluating Long-Term Goals

**LK:** I have worked with galleries on a one time basis as part of juried shows and invitationals. I am now ready to start developing long term relationships with galleries. I am in an important process of evaluating what my goals are, what I want out of a gallery relationship, and what I have to offer.

In choosing which galleries to approach, I have been looking at the work they sell. Can I promote the gallery and speak highly in an honest and genuine way of the other art represented? For me, this is an important part of belonging in any gallery’s community and part of my responsibility as a represented artist. I am reviewing which galleries have accepted my work into their juried shows, believing it is an indication that they will be excited about my work. I want them to be passionate about displaying and promoting what I have created; I want them to know me and my story.

As a represented artist, it is important to ask for what you need, even if the request is not traditional. When asked what her obligation is to the artist, Leslie Ferrin, owner of the Ferrin Gallery said that it depends on the artist; each has completely different needs depending on their work and experience. From helping with grants, marketing, or securing production costs ahead of time, she tailors her services to each artist’s schedule, looking to achieve long-term goals. As someone interested in the function of the pots beyond their utilitarian purpose, I design my work for who and how it could be used. The object is a gateway to the experience of being part of something. For example, I sell mugs in pairs as part of a project called **Symbolic Connections**. The idea is to keep one mug and give the other to someone close, so the act of drinking, even across great distances, is shared. The idea came from a need that arose from my own nomadic life. It is important that the idea is communicated and customers are invited to participate. Invitations like this and any further communication with the customer is not common practice. It requires a strong collaboration with the gallery and potentially a new market to reach. With time and trust, I hope to develop relationships with galleries that will allow me to have a balance between reliably salable work and experimental interactive projects.

With the knowledge I gained through interviewing gallery owners, my limited experience, and mentors like Simon who have generously shared their wisdom, I feel more prepared to be an active participant in the ceramics community. Our hope is that together we can achieve more.

**SL:** Lauren and I have different goals, we make different work, and we are at different stages of our careers. Though galleries have had to adapt to new pressures and methods of sales due to social media and sites like Etsy, the artist-gallery relationship has not changed much. It is still a very human business, therefore mutual respect, timeliness, and professional communication are key. Lauren and I are both committed to, and benefit from, supporting good galleries.

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