Part 1

Galleries: Are They Right for You?

by Don Friedlich

This is Part 1 in a four part series written by Don Friedlich, Harriete Estel Berman, and Andy Cooperman about submitting work to galleries and retail establishments.

Part 1 - Galleries: Are They Right for You?
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When times are tough economically, as they are right now, they are often especially hard for artists. That said, hard times can also be viewed as opportunities to explore new ways to market your work. Supplementing your efforts on Etsy by also showing your work in a bricks and mortar gallery is one area to consider.

A relationship with a gallery is not right for everyone. The culture of the gallery is very different from that of Etsy. The gallery environment can be very critical and much less supportive. Most galleries expect that the work they show will speak with a clear and personal voice, one that is not seen in the work of any other artist. While many show both one of a kind and production work, one of a kind work is usually dominant. Most work in this category retails over $1000.

If you do wish to expand your market to galleries (or anywhere else) you need to do your research and answer some critical questions. Will this move advance your career goals? Will this venue help push you to grow as an artist? Is this the right market for your work? Who are the gallery’s ideal customers and how does the gallery market to them? Can you meet the gallery’s expectations?

There are many ways of acquiring this information. One way is to network with fellow artists. Some of this can be done online through blogs and social networking sites. That said, in-person networking still has great value. Attending craft and gallery shows offers many opportunities to talk to your peers. So does attending a conference of your media specific organization such as the Society of North American Goldsmiths (SNAG) or Glass Art Society (GAS). SNAG is an international educational organization based in the US. They publish Metalsmith magazine, a newsletter, and host an annual conference. The next conference is May 20-23 in Philadelphia. You can learn more at SNAGmetalsmith.org.

At the next conference, on the afternoon of May 20, SNAG hosts the Professional Development Seminar (PDS). Harriete Estel Berman, Andy Cooperman and I organize this four-hour program. There is a modest fee for the PDS, but you don’t need to attend the full conference to go to the PDS. While the PDS is a SNAG event (sponsored this year by Etsy), it is always our goal that the
program’s content apply well to all media. 2009 PDS topics include “Improving Website Performance and Design,” “Using Social Networking and Virtual Communities to Drive Business,” and “The Evolving Role of the Gallery in a Virtual World of Commerce.” For more information check out http://snagmetalsmith.org/Events/Professional_Development_Seminar/

The craft magazines like Metalsmith, American Craft, and Ornament offer a wealth of information about galleries. I learn more about the market looking at the advertisements than the articles: which artists are represented by specific galleries; how those galleries market their artists; and something about the aesthetic of the gallery. I can also find their websites, which offer a whole host of additional information.

While an ad generally focuses on the work of only one or two of the gallery’s artists, reviewing gallery websites really shows the full range of work they are showing, the background of their artists, how many artists they represent, and the price range (if they list prices) of the work. Note that I said showing, not selling. Most galleries work on consignment. Most have much more work in drawers than they do out on display. Hopefully, they rotate work into the showcases but from long distance, without a visit to the gallery, it is impossible to know. For this and other reasons, in-person visits to galleries are also valuable. You can get a feel for the temperament of the staff and owner, the quality of display, and the effectiveness of the location.

Of course, visiting galleries may not always be possible, as the galleries are spread out all over the country. Many of the best galleries from all over the world show at the three Sculpture, Objects and Functional Art (SOFA) exhibitions in Chicago, New York City, and Santa Fe, New Mexico. I see more great jewelry in my three days at SOFA Chicago (the largest of the three) than I do the rest of the year combined. By attending SOFA, you can find answers to many of your questions in one place.

Don Friedlich
www.donfriedlich.com

This is Part One in a four part series of articles originally published on Etsy to promote the SNAG Professional Development Seminar 2009. You can find the other articles in this series on this web site.

The Professional Development Seminar organized by Don Friedlich, Andy Cooperman, and Harriete Estel Berman presents lectures and discussion designed to offer students, emerging artists and established professionals information vital to establishing and maintaining a career in the arts.