Part 4

Galleries: Issues to Consider After Your Work Has Been Accepted

by Andy Cooperman

This is Part 4 in a four part series written by Andy Cooperman, Don Friedlich, Harriete Estel Berman, about submitting work to galleries and retail establishments.

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Part 2 - Introducing Your Work to a Gallery
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So, now you’ve scanned the gallery horizon, carefully selected several galleries which seem to be a good fit, applied to them and have been accepted. Congratulations! Now it’s time to consider the etiquette involved in this relationship.

Things to consider:

CONSIGNMENT CONTRACT: Carefully read the gallery’s Consignment Contract or use the Model Consignment Contract in the PROFESSIONAL GUIDELINES. (http://www.snagmetalsmith.org/Publications/Professional_Guidelines/)

In these hard economic times, galleries may go out of business without advance notice. The only thing that protects your work on consignment at the gallery from the gallery’s creditors is your consignment contract.

Communication:
Perhaps the single most important aspect of the gallery/artist (maker, craftsperson) relationship with a gallery is communication. It is the lubrication that keeps the machine working.

• Keep the gallery up to date on your work and career: where your work has been published, exhibitions in which it has appeared, awards, etc.

• Check in with them on a regular basis, perhaps once every month or so. They will appreciate your interest and perhaps think of you first for future opportunities.

• Ask the gallery for honest feedback about your work (and be prepared to listen). Ask how the customers are reacting to your work. What are they saying? Does the gallery staff have any suggestions? Let the gallery know that you really appreciate their honest feedback. Remember that the gallery is your eyes and ears.

• How does the gallery staff talk about your work? If they aren’t familiar with your technique or media then they may not be able to communicate what’s so great about your work to the public. Find a way to talk with them about your work.
Custom:
Decide early on what the nature of your relationship will be. Whether the gallery has purchased work at wholesale or you have loaned work to them on consignment you will be asked one day if you are willing to make another similar piece: A custom order. Many artists and makers simply don’t like to do this. I have found it to be fun, challenging and a great way to make money. Discuss this issue with your gallery.

Keep it Fresh:
After a gallery has had consigned work for a while ask them if they’d like to exchange some of your inventory for different work,. Send the returned work from that gallery to a different gallery. It’s often surprising how regional tastes vary. One gallery’s unsellable piece is the next gallery’s hot item. You never know until you try showing the work at different galleries. By rotating work among galleries, even “older” work appears fresh to a new set of customer eyes.

Keep Your Promises:
Meet your deadlines or, if something comes up, let them know (see communication).

Keep Records:
If you have more than one gallery, inventory management can get confusing. Don’t depend on your memory. Keep track of sales, consignment, special orders and promises.

Keep it Real:
Prices for the same or very similar work should be the same from gallery to gallery, venue to venue. Don’t Undersell the Gallery (and, so, yourself). This is especially true in the global marketplace of the web.

• If, for instance, you have the same work in both a gallery and on Etsy, it’s tempting to sell the work on Etsy for a lower price since the commission structure is so different. This will backfire when a customer buys a piece at the gallery and then sees it for less on the web-- or even worse-- the Gallery finds out you are selling the same work on Etsy at a lower price. It may be best to have distinctly different work on Etsy and in the gallery to avoid this potential conflict.

The other vitally important ingredient in the gallery/artist relationship is trust. If the gallery thinks that you are underselling them or somehow double-dealing, the relationship won’t thrive and prosper. And if you feel that you aren’t getting the straight story—that your inventory records and the gallery’s aren’t adding up, that you aren’t being paid in a timely fashion for work sold or that the work you so optimistically consigned to the gallery is sitting in the bottom of a drawer instead of being shown, it may be time to amicably end this working relationship.
Working with a gallery can be a productive experience, mutually beneficial and financially rewarding. In the best situations it is a team effort. Remember that as an artist, craftsperson and maker you have expectations and rights: The gallery/artist relationship is one of equal partnership.

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This is Part Four 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 Andy Cooperman, Harriete Estel Berman and Don Friedlich presents lectures and discussion designed to offer students, emerging artists and established professionals information vital to establishing and maintaining a career in the arts.