

How To Decide Which Galleries Are Right For You To Approach

One of the most difficult aspects of being an artist doesn't take place behind the studio walls. It is an unpleasant, sometimes degrading aspect of your career: promotion. Nevertheless, as an artist, you need to develop a method to promote your work and still maintain your integrity. To minimize the unpleasantness of this particular responsibility, the method you devise should complement your personality and temperament. The problem begins when you decide it's time to start approaching galleries.

At this point, it's important to examine your feelings about your work. Are you emotionally prepared to deal with the possible rejection and criticism. Before you undertake the task, are you convinced that no matter what anyone says about your work (it's too decorative, it's student work--go back to school, it's too personal--there's no market for it) you will be able to go back into the studio unaffected? There are times when constructive criticism can be of great value, particularly if you are just beginning to show your work. Listen carefully to the criticism. If it is something that you have been struggling with in relation to your work, then there might be some truth to it. If on the other hand, the criticism sounds off the wall, ignore it, and carry on with business as usual. You must be secure enough with your work to want to know it's weaknesses.

Assuming you're the type that begins to cringe at the very thought of approaching galleries, there are several ways to help alleviate the pain and frustration. First of all, you want to minimize your chances of failure and rejection by determining beforehand the galleries that are appropriate for your work. The methodology I suggest for this is a simple, yet frequently overlooked alternative called "How To Establish Which Galleries To Approach." Doing your homework thoroughly greatly reduces the risk of rejection and at the very least will help you in establishing some significant contacts for the future.

Two of the biggest mistakes inexperienced artists frequently make is either not researching the type of work a gallery represents before they approach them, or, following up on contacts that haven't been researched. For example, your mother's best friend has talked to a gallery owner about your work and they are anxious to meet you. You set up an appointment and walk in carrying your work, only to discover the gallery specializes in primitive art or whatever. It's a waste of time and energy that could have been put to better use . . . How To Establish Which Galleries To Approach.

This format will provide you with a methodology for determining what galleries are appropriate for your work. The first thing you will have to do is develop a set of criteria that meets your particular needs as an artist. If you are a sculptor, you are confronted with a unique set of problems. Physical demands make sculpture more difficult and costly to transport and store, making galleries more reluctant to deal with you. Secondly, there are fewer sculpture collectors than there are collectors of paintings and flat work. Even major collectors only have a small percentage of their collection devoted to three-dimensional work. It takes a more sophisticated eye to understand the need to fill a three-dimensional space, whereas everyone who walks into a room notices a blank wall. To your advantage, however, there are great opportunities in the area of public art and corporate commissions, making a gallery relationship less important in the total review of your career development. Nonetheless, many artists are determined to pursue galleries and feel unsatisfied if they are not affiliated with a gallery. Here are examples of some general questions that should be considered by all artists:

- Stylistically, how does the work in the gallery now compare to my own? Only abstract, only figurative, or conceptual?
- Is the artwork in the same general price range as my work? (Ask to see price list)
- Is this artist in the same general career range as I see myself? Does this gallery show just emerging artists, mid-career artists, or established artists? (Ask to see artist's biography.)
- Is this gallery large enough to accommodate my work? Small enough to achieve a sense of intimacy?
- Is there proper lighting, wall space? How has the gallery been maintained? Nail holes? Floors? Needs paint?
- Does anyone greet me or make an attempt to talk to me about the work?

- In general, how do I feel when I walk into the space?

Each artist will have different questions depending on his or her specific needs. Try to develop a set of questions tailored to your work.

The next step is to visit the galleries. The easiest way to attempt this is to divide galleries geographically and visit as many as you can in one area. The best time of the year is usually summer, or during the holidays, when galleries have group shows of all their artists. It is a fast way to determine the type of work the gallery represents. Under no circumstances send slides to a gallery you have not visited, unless you have followed their exhibitions and are certain your work would fit in. Don't use this as an opportunity to introduce yourself or talk about your work. Remember, you are *How To Establish Which Galleries To Approach*; take notes.

By the time you've completed your visits to the galleries you should have a fairly good idea about the type of work they represent. It may be necessary to go back three or four times before you can make a judgment. *How To Establish Which Galleries To Approach* when there is a group show (usually summer or Christmas) can help to consolidate these trips by familiarizing you with several artists the gallery represents in one visit. Eventually, you will have a handful of galleries that you feel are ideal for your work. These will be the galleries you approach in an attempt to familiarize them with your work. (See "Gallery Approach and Presentation Guide," next month in *Words on Art*.)

Although most gallery relationships are made as a result of contacts, often these attempts are futile if the gallery doesn't handle work that relates to your own. Once you have narrowed down your choices, you can take advantage of your resources and contacts. Also, be sure to get on mailing lists of galleries. It's important to keep yourself informed so you can develop a sense of how you fit into the art community. Remember, it is you who is going to be selecting a gallery for your work, not the other way around!