

How Galleries Select Artists

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One of the great mysteries of the art business is how galleries select the artists they represent. The reality is that there are far fewer galleries and far less wall-space than it would take to show the work of all of the artists who would like to show in galleries. It can feel overwhelming to think about the odds that seem to be stacked against you if you are seeking gallery representation.

So what is the process that occurs in galleries as they are selecting new artists to show? It seems like it would be helpful to understand this process in order to prepare your work and submission materials so you can optimize your chances for success.

Unfortunately, there is no such thing as “the process” for selecting artists. Every gallery approaches the question differently. Let’s explore the different review processes and discuss how you can best approach the galleries that employ each.

The Committee Review

Some galleries follow a regimented review process with stringent submission guidelines. This review process is prevalent in the institutional world of museum and academic galleries, but it is also used by some long-established commercial galleries where the leadership structure of the gallery is spread among a number of people rather than being held by a gallery owner or partnership.

When a gallery follows a stringent review process, they typically will post very clear guidelines for artists to follow when preparing submissions. The benefit of this process to the galleries is that it allows for a streamlined and organized review process. The advantage for the artist is that this process provides clear guidelines to follow in preparing a submission.

Often galleries that have a formal review process like this will review work only one or two times per year, giving artists deadlines for submission. A committee of stakeholders will meet to review the submissions and discuss the merits of



each submission. Sometimes outside jurors are brought in to participate in the process.

While there isn’t much room for flexibility in the committee review system, I have heard of many instances where exceptions to the process were made when an artist of particular note was sought by the gallery.

How to succeed when submitting your work for committee review

There aren’t any real secrets about how to succeed when you are submitting your work for review by a gallery that has a formal submission process. Follow the guidelines provided by the gallery and pay attention to artists who have been accepted in the past. Galleries tend to gravitate toward consistency when selecting artists. You will have the best chance at success if you are submitting work that has common characteristics with other artwork the gallery has shown.

It should go without saying that you will want to make sure that you are submitting your best work and that the photography of your work is of a high quality and captures the subtleties of your art.

The Partner Review

While most galleries don’t follow a strict review regimen, the longer a gallery has been established, the more likely it will be to have some sort of structured review process. Established galleries will typically have an idea of what the best process is for them to consider new artists. Sometimes these galleries will provide artists with a timeframe for submissions (often based on the seasonality of the gallery—

submission review is frequently deferred until the gallery’s off-season), and with general guidelines to follow.

An established gallery will often have more than one decision maker. Artwork will be reviewed by a gallery director and then presented to the owner(s). Review might occur in a formal meeting, or it might happen via email, or during casual interactions. This review process might take only a matter of days, or even hours, or, if the gallery tries to review all submissions at once, it might take months.

How to succeed when submitting your work for partner review

Finding success in submitting to a gallery that reviews work among owners and directors is achieved in a similar way as when submitting to a formal review committee. Consistency and quality are paramount. The more established a gallery becomes, the more risk averse it tends to become. There is some irony in this, because a more established gallery can lend credibility to an unknown artist, and an established gallery is better suited to weather the sparse sales that often come in the early months of artist representation.

The “By the Seat of My Pants” Owner Review

By far, the review process you are most likely to encounter in the early phases of your career is far less formal than either of the previous methods. Early in your career, you are likely to submit to galleries that are not long-established institutions, but rather are relatively new and are thus willing to take greater risks in bringing on less-established artists.

Often, newer galleries are owned and operated by a small group of individuals, lead by the owner/founder. Often (this was certainly the case when I began my gallery in 2001) the owner acts not only as CEO, but also as the director, the bookkeeper, the secretary, the installer, and the janitor. The owner wields complete control over every aspect of the business, including which artists the gallery will show.

Younger galleries are riskier ventures. Many galleries can't survive the capital-intensive first years after establishment. The successful, young galleries often survive by bringing something new to the market. The newer gallery also tends to shift artwork around far more frequently than a well-established gallery, and they tend to accept a wider range of artists.

Quite often, the newer gallery's review process is anything but structured. Artists might have their work selected by a newer gallery after a visit or email sent to the owner. Decisions are often made on the spot.

While there are obvious risks when showing with a younger gallery, there are also huge potential benefits. Often artists who are taken on during the early phases of the Gallery's operations will remain with the gallery long-term.

How to succeed when submitting your work directly to the owner of a gallery

In this less formal review process, the relationship between the owner and the artist becomes far more important. While the quality and originality of an artist's work will certainly be a factor in a gallery owner's decision, so is the chemistry between the artist and the owner. The quality of your portfolio is important, but your enthusiasm when showing the portfolio can be just as important.

Because the chemistry is so important, an in-person visit to the gallery can often prove the most effective way to approach the gallery.

What Galleries Seek When Reviewing Artists

So what are galleries looking for when they review submissions? In brief, they are looking for artwork that will show

successfully in their gallery space. Remember, success can mean different things to different galleries. An academic gallery is looking for community interest and publicity, while a commercial gallery is looking for sales. Make sure your goals align with the goals of the gallery!

We are primarily interested in commercial galleries in this discussion, so let's think about what factors a commercial gallery would take into consideration during a review.

First and foremost, the question a commercial gallery is asking when they look at your work is "will this artwork sell?" Speaking from personal experience, this can be very difficult to predict, and so a gallery owner is left to try and presage sale-ability by looking at proxy indicators.

- Has the artist established a track record of sales? While they are no guarantee, past sales can be a good indicator of future sales.
- Is the work striking? Do I love it? If the artist doesn't have a sales history, an owner will often try to judge the work by her own reaction to it. "If I like it a lot, other people might too."

Owners also take into consideration the price point of the work. A gallery is unlikely to take on an artist whose work is dramatically more or less expensive than other artists' work in the gallery.

An owner must also weigh whether or not the work brings something new to the gallery. If your work is very similar to that of an artist the gallery already represents, the gallery will probably reject your work to avoid duplication.

Things You Should Keep in Mind When Seeking Representation

Treat gallery submissions like a marketing campaign

Let's face it, because of the fluid nature of the review process, acceptance is, to an extent, a matter of serendipity. In order to get "lucky" and have a gallery agree to represent you, you are going to need to make a lot of submissions. This, like any marketing effort, is a numbers game.

You may have to submit your portfolio to hundreds of galleries in order to find representation. Okay, many artists find success before submitting to hundreds of galleries, but you should be prepared to be persistent.

Realize that as a gallery owner, I can expect to receive dozens of submissions from artists every month. Your chances of finding success with any one gallery are small, but if you submit to many galleries you dramatically increase your odds of success.

Exceptions

Even in galleries with a formal submission process, there are times when a gallery will make an exception to that process if they see something spectacular in a portfolio. I know of many instances where artists found representation in galleries after having circumvented the formal review process. Some have done this by leveraging introductions to the owner by a mutual acquaintance, and others by boldly ignoring submission guidelines.

Don't take rejections personally

Knowing what you now know about the review process, I hope I can encourage you not to take rejection personally. As mentioned, galleries reject most artists who submit, so you are in good company! Think of a rejection as a favor. A gallery, by rejecting you, is saying "We don't feel we would be able to do a good job of selling your work." You might feel that they are wrong, but if they don't believe they're going to do a good job of selling your work, it's better to keep searching until you find a gallery that is confident in their ability to sell your work.

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