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THE BUSINESS OF MARKETING ART

How Commitment, Visibility, and Luck Can Snatch the Brass Ring

For much of the twentieth century, northern New Mexico was home to one of the most vibrant art scenes west of the Mississippi. During that time, some of the art world's greatest movers and shakers made their pilgrimages to this state's stark mesas and vistas.

Although New Mexico's rugged beauty inspired many of the era's great artists, they were also forced to rush back to their ateliers in Greenwich Village or the Left Bank in Paris for the real business of marketing their art. Happily, all of that has now changed.

With its roots deep in America's artistic coming-of-age, northern New Mexico has blossomed into a major art center. Artists no longer merely dip their brushes into the wondrous colors of the Southwest; they also plant their studios in the middle of it and nurture a creative life.

There are at least 200 galleries in Santa Fe, dozens more in Taos, and by some estimates, more than 10,000 artists plying their craft in studios and shanties along the Taos-Santa Fe corridor. As Santa Fe artist Mark Spencer observes, "Santa Fe is a great place for artists because you can live here and actually believe the world cares about art. Of course, that means more artists are here as well. There are only a few venues that sell art and only so many in which to show your work. So it's more competitive."

In such a crowded field, new artists and even experienced ones must ask: Is it even possible to find a place in the northern New Mexico sun?

"Yes," declares Rachel Darnell, a successful artist who showed at Waxlander Gallery and now owns Darnell Fine Art. "But you have >

TEXT BY CATHERINE COGGAN | PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRENDA KELLEY



All the artists maintain that patience and perseverance are the bywords for becoming known. It's the "Woody Allen Principle"—success is 98 percent showing up.



to be patient in order to build up a market.”

That's an important point. All the artists maintain that patience and perseverance are the bywords for becoming known. It's the "Woody Allen Principle"—success is 98 percent showing up. Artist Dan McBride agrees. "There's no real pivotal moment. It's an ebb and flow. You still have to show up." Josephine Brionez de Flores, an Albuquerque artist, says, "You get a lot of rejection. You pick yourself up and keep going. Persistence is the key. You just have to keep going and love what you're doing."

Nevertheless, while they're fully aware of rejection and totally devoted to perseverance and patience, what artists really want and need is a way to find an audience, a client base, for their work. Luckily, there are a multitude of ways.

Sometimes, an artist is just plain lucky; like Jack Slentz, lead instructor for sculpture at Santa Fe Community College. While studying art at the University of the Ozarks in Arkansas, he was already selling art to faculty and staff. The university's student scholarship club even bought one of his pieces to give to Helen Walton (of Wal-Mart). When Slentz moved on to graduate work, he kept selling and eventually became connected to a group of wood art collectors. Then, a gallery began showing his pieces and his career soared.

But for most artists, snatching the high profile brass ring is a long journey that demands imagination and tenacity.

One of the cleverest gambits is utilized by the New Mexico Printmakers Gallery. They use a "round-robin" strategy that Mary Thompson, one of the moving forces behind the gallery, believes is the perfect way in which to spend advertising money intelligently. "Our focus is local but we have connections with print galleries in Washington, D.C., Oregon, and the International Woodworkers Network."

This Printmakers Gallery exchanges exhibits within their network. When the

PREVIOUS PAGE: Opening reception at James Reid Gallery in Santa Fe. **TOP:** Dan McBride in his studio. **BOTTOM:** Josephine Brionez de Flores works on a mask that will be finished for summer Contemporary Spanish Market in Santa Fe. It measures 5' x 5' x 4' deep with over 5,000 feathers: Ringneck pheasant, Lady Amherst pheasant, peacock and parrot.



Heidi Loewen (LEFT), Mark Spencer, Rachel Darnell, and James Reid (BELOW) at an artist's opening reception.

The theatrical image of the neurotic painter, locked in his garret studio, spurning society and living for his art, has long since been eclipsed by the practical truth that it's *nice* when people know your art, like it, and buy it.

Dan McBride built his early career by going to parties. "I socialized. I got myself known. In conversation I'd mention what I did and invite anyone interested in my work to my studio." Later, he moved to Dixon and took advantage of the well-known Dixon Art Tour to schmooze and introduce his work to potential clients. "A lot of people came out to see what we did. A gallery in Taos invited me to show with them." He repeats, "Starting out, the more visible you are, the better."

Susan Contreras is convinced networking is crucial to an artist's career no matter how well-known the artist is. "A lot of time is spent meeting people and networking. Sometimes you'd rather be working, but you have to make your studio open to people who like your work." Heidi Loewen, a clay artist in Santa Fe, connects by inviting her clients into the art-making process. "When clients find me, if they buy from me, they also get to come in to see my studio and make a piece of pottery themselves."

Even when artists are represented by a >

Networking rules as a highly significant means of building both a viable client base and a high profile.

Oregon chapter sends a show to Santa Fe, this local arm dispatches one to Oregon in kind. Both galleries advertise locally but also create a national presence for their artists. It's even better with the International Woodworkers Network because they have venues all over the world. And, Thompson reveals, the New Mexico Printmakers are instrumental in bringing the International Woodworkers Network to Santa Fe for their 2005 annual meeting in July.

Using an effective route that many artists have taken, DeHaven Solimon Chaffins chose to enter as many juried shows as possible. The painter and book artist from Laguna Pueblo found them to be a very helpful and lucrative path. "I scanned the ads in art papers and magazines. I figured it doesn't hurt to try. It took about two years and suddenly things took off." She also donates her work to charity. "It's a lot to ask because you're trying to earn a living, but it's also a way to be seen. I do the artwork for the March of Dimes posters."

For artwork that leans more toward the craft end, Josephine Brinez de Flores swears by arts and craft shows. "It's tricky to find the right show. It's very hard but I even went to California and Michigan. I grouped my work and did a ton of shows." The shows offered her a two-fold opportunity. The first garnered her publicity. "I've gotten a lot of

coverage in newspapers and journals. Somebody sees my work and does a story about it." Second, the shows are particularly advantageous for networking. In fact, de Flores found the true niche for her feather masks when someone at a craft show told her about Contemporary Spanish Market in Santa Fe. "It does it all for me. I sell out completely every year."

Actually, networking rules as a highly significant means of building both a viable client base and a high profile.



Tips for an Artist

Samantha Furgason, owner of ARTWORKinternational, (www.artworkinternational.com), is an artist's rep in Santa Fe. She offers some tips to aspiring artists hoping to establish themselves with a gallery.



Samantha and Leftie.

DO:

- Make sure you have more than one portfolio of your work.
- "Create consistency with your portfolio," Furgason advises. "Use only one font, one kind of paper, don't over-design your letterhead, or use color on your supporting documents."
- Take time to research the galleries. Go online. See what kind of work they exhibit. Check out their guidelines. "Follow them to the letter," Furgason says.
- Take the time to find out the name of the director and send your material directly to that name. Never send anything "Attention Director."
- Expect a 3-6 month wait before you hear from a gallery. "The longer they hold on to it, the better."
- Update the galleries you're interested in about your work. Send them invitations to an exhibition you are in or a slide of a recently completed work.
- Spend the money on a good Web site for yourself. It's a good marketing tool.

DON'T:

- Just show up at a gallery. It's an intrusion into their time and not professional.
- "Unless it's past the expected waiting period," Furgason warns, "don't call and bother the gallery still holding your portfolio. It will expedite the return of your materials but probably at the cost of their consideration."
- Buy into mass market Web sites. It might be inexpensive but they can be confusing to collectors and your work gets lost in the shuffle.

gallery, meeting people is still essential. "You have to be responsive to people," Rachel Darnell explains. "Not that you have to paint *for* people as much as you need to find the people that like what you paint." For Darnell and all gallery owners, it's a matter of working within a viable partnership between artist, gallery, and client.

Galleries and their advertising dollars definitely help find which markets work for the artist. "I get people in here who tore out the magazine page and walked into my gallery," Darnell says. But doubtless, the artist needs to connect with the client to make those advertising dollars work.

Mark Spencer, an experienced artist who's worked with several galleries, stresses that galleries can also be a pitfall for the neophyte. "Some artists have the fantasy that being in a great gallery projects the responsibility for their careers and their success onto the gallery." It's a dangerous

assumption. "The artist is responsible," Spencer maintains. Most artists agree. Even while Dan McBride's work was represented in galleries, McBride organized "open studios and I'd send out cards and invite collectors and friends."

Fashioning a public profile and a devoted client base involves developing a good resume, subscribing to art magazines and journals to stay on top of trends, entering competitions, meeting people, looking for grants, and having the best slides of your work that money can buy. But it is apparent that marketing art is an undertaking that accompanies artists throughout their careers. Perhaps the secret to a successful marketing campaign is flexibility.

"The challenge to contemporary life is that our world view keeps getting shattered and changed," Spencer says. Accommodating that reality is part of the work of the artist. Both Spencer and

McBride feel that galleries sometimes want to keep you in a niche. "It's contrary to their financial interests to let you explore different imagery," Spencer warns.

Artists, however, can deal with that limitation. For McBride, the primary thing "is the commitment of just doing my art. The big commitment is to make that commitment." After that, he says, "The work will draw energy to it."

Heidi Loewen sums it up nicely: "The best way is to make the best art you can and get the best gallery to represent you. You also need to keep your client base up." But most important, Loewen feels that as an artist balances the fine line between artistic expression and commercial interest, "you have to learn how to stay true to your artistic vision as well as to the market." ✱

Catherine Coggan is a Santa Fe freelance writer.