

## Researching Galleries at Art Fairs

London and many other major cities offer a wide range of art fairs, shows and exhibitions throughout the year. These events are wonderful places to view a large number of galleries in one location, notice trends and see what artwork is popular. They can also be a source of visual stimulation and inspiration. All of these are great reasons for getting to as many fairs and shows you have the time and money to attend.

**Inspiration** - While you may never aspire to produce the type of art showcased at fairs like Frieze you can't help but be impressed and perhaps indirectly influenced by the latest innovators to be ushered onto the avant garde art stage. Each year there also seems to be at least one or two new events, particularly during the autumn season in London which runs from early October through November.

**Research** - The more "accessible" gallery based art fairs are also a fantastic way to research galleries, gain knowledge of buying/pricing trends, observe customer relation techniques (both good and bad), and study framing options. If you collect the work of fellow artists, you may also get lucky and discover one or two new artists whose work you admire.

If you are looking for gallery representation it is imperative that you do your homework and have a fairly good idea that your work is suitable for those galleries you plan to approach. The many fairs at which stands are only available to galleries are a great place to start that homework.

There is absolutely no point in sending out unsolicited portfolios in a shotgun approach. Not only is it a waste of your time and money, as well as the time of gallery owners or managers, it also makes you look unprofessional and only invites a potential battery of needless rejection.

As with most things, I have a system for making the most of my time and that includes how I research galleries at art fairs. While the steps outlined here certainly aren't the only way, or even the best way to enjoy an art fair, they are a good way to make the most of limited time and gather useful information for moving your art business forward.

1. Equip yourself with a highlighter, notebook, pen and a list of the attending galleries (lists are often available online from the fair website, but are always available at the fair itself).
2. Remember to get receipts for your parking, your ticket and any programmes you purchase, they're business expenses and you're here to work!
3. Start by *quickly* walking up and down each aisle highlighting any of the galleries in which you think your work might "fit in" with the other work being shown. Don't spend a lot of time on this first pass, it is meant to be a "first impression", intuitive assessment.
4. After your first pass take a short break if it's a large fair and then do the same thing again, traveling in the opposite direction. You'll be amazed at what you didn't see or notice the first time through.
5. Now it's time to take a closer look at those galleries you've highlighted. Remember that while galleries want a variety of artists, they also have an ideal customer and there is no point in thinking a gallery will change their look or the type of work they handle to accommodate you. And while they may have other artists they aren't showing at a particular fair you should be able to get a sense of whether the gallery is suitable. As you go back to view the galleries you highlighted you may find it helpful to ask yourself the following:

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- A. Is the gallery showing at least one artist working in the same medium as my work e.g. photography, sculpture, paintings etc.
  - B. Does my work sell within the range of prices being shown for similar sized work.
  - C. How is the work presented, does the gallery have a particular “look” to their framing and/or presentation?
  - D. Is my work presented at least as well as, if not better than the work being shown? And, if the gallery only frames work in a particular way (less common these days than in the past), would I be willing to change my current presentation to meet the gallery’s requirements if necessary?
5. Observe the general attitude of the gallery worker(s) are they attentive and communicating with visitors or are they aloof or engrossed with their computer, colleagues, or lunch.
  6. Are there signs of sales: red dots (remember some of these may be shells), staff busy re-hanging or re-arranging work, wrapped work with invoices taped to them or work being carried off for wrapping?
  7. When you look at the stand you should think – I can see my work at this gallery, I’d love to be represented by these people.
  8. Once you think a gallery might be suitable take or ask for a card and either make a note on the back of it or in your notebook about any details you want to remember later.
  9. Take one final break and review the cards or leaflets you’ve collected making sure that you have adequate notes to refer back to, at this point your “work” is done. If you have any energy left stroll through and enjoy the artwork for the pure pleasure of it.

**A Word of Warning** - DO NOT bring along your portfolio or try to talk to gallery owners about your artwork at the fair. They have spent thousands of pounds and hours of preparation to be at the fair and they are there to sell art and build relationships with customers, *not artists*. In fact if you are discussing a work with them that you do not intend to purchase you should be extremely mindful of others in or approaching the stand, and excuse yourself when a potential buyer approaches. Galleries rely on fairs and shows to sell art and build their businesses, if you don't respect the galleries needs and act professionally, why should they treat you any differently.

Here are a few of the gallery art fairs on my list that you may want to check out:

January	London Art Fair – London
February	The Watercolours & Drawings Art Fair – London
March	Affordable Art Fair – London
April	Chelsea Art Fair – London
May	Affordable Art Fair – Bristol
September	20/21 British Art Fair – London
October	Gateshead – Newcastle
October	Art London – London
October	Frieze Art Fair – London
October	Scope – London
October	Affordable Art Fair – London
October	Buy Art - Manchester
November	Edinburgh Art Fair – Edinburgh