

## The Direct Approach to Galleries

There are almost as many types of art gallery as there are art and each one will have its own means and method of choosing the artists they represent. But for the purpose of this report I will categorize them into three basic levels. While I realize this is a gross oversimplification of the subject, from the point of view of an artist seeking gallery representation I think it is useful.

**Entry Level Gallery** – This type of gallery often displays a mixture of artwork and design crafts – ceramics, jewellery, textiles, small-scale sculpture. They usually sell paintings, photographs, prints and note cards by a number of artists, most of whom are local or have a theme in common, such as seascapes or marine life if the gallery is on the coast. The gallery does not run group or solo exhibitions per se, though there may be themed shows featuring a number of artists several times a year. The price of work ranges from £50 - £2,500.

**Mid-Range Gallery** -- This type of gallery is more common in cities where there is a larger art buying population, but it may also be based more remotely with a large percentage of its turnover taking place at art fairs or events well attended by their clients. The gallery is often managed or headed by a curator with the day to day sales being handled by other staff. The vast majority of work is original art, though a few may also sell limited edition prints. The price of work ranges from £350 - £10,000

**Hi-End Gallery** – This type of gallery is located in major cities and is usually grouped with other galleries in affluent areas. A fair share of the work on display may be from artists who are deceased and the living artists are fairly well established and well known for their distinct style and body of work. The price of work ranges from £5,000 - £1,000,000+.

It is fantastic when a young artist's work is discovered during their degree show and offered representation by Saatchi or Jopling, becoming an overnight sensation, guaranteed a life of fame and fortune. The truth is, those artists who are "discovered" in such a way will have put in very long hours and will continue to work extremely hard to build and maintain their status if they are to succeed.

This scenario is also extremely rare, and the majority of artists will find gallery representation another way. Once an artist has honed their skills, developed their own identifiable style of work, and created a high quality body of work they are ready to look for a gallery. I've named the first group of gallery "Entry-Level" because it is the type of gallery in which most artists will find their first representation, gain experience working in partnership with a gallery owner and gain the confidence and reputation needed to move to the next level.

It is also possible for an artist to find their first gallery representation through a collective or cooperative, associations or guilds which often have galleries bridging the entry-level and mid-ranges. The main point is you shouldn't expect to find Mid-Range gallery representation without having spent considerable time in the trenches. This includes all types of self-promotion at art fairs, open studios, competitions or group shows and smaller, entry-level galleries.

That's not to say you shouldn't aspire to be and work toward representation by mid-range and hi-end galleries. This "time in the trenches" is the perfect time to start exploring and developing relationships with mid-range and hi-end galleries for the future. I'm also not saying it's impossible to skip the first stage, but I will say that in order to do so your work needs to be extremely good and well developed, and you will need to be in just the right place at the right time. So while you're waiting for all the planets to align in your favour you might as well get started in a few entry-level galleries.

I believe the easiest, fastest and most effective way to find gallery representation at the entry-level is via the direct approach. In short you do your research on entry level galleries in an area, prepare your portfolios, put samples of your best work in the car, walk into the first gallery on your list and approach the owner.

This may be contrary to everything you have been told in the past, and most galleries will never suggest this approach in their submission guidelines, but most guidelines are designed to make it easier for the gallery owner to say “no” to people. Done properly the direct approach can be extremely effective. You will first need to do your homework, prepare your presentation, practice your approach, and be comfortable facing rejection.

**Prepare Your Portfolio** – Purchase 6-8 presentation folders with plastic sleeves that can be easily updated. Format your images to fit 1 – 2 images per page with all the pertinent details (Title, Medium, Size, Retail Price) directly beneath each image. Include several images of sold work, indicated by a red dot or SOLD next to the title, and if possible some images of sold work insitu either in the buyers home or office.

Make sure your images are professional meaning: well lit, properly cropped showing only the work; not frames, walls, easels, fingers, walls etc around the edges, flat (if 2 dimensional) and without reflections, shadows or hot spots from flash. Print them on photographic paper with either a laser or photo printer on the highest quality setting.

Put 20-25 of your most recent images in the front of the folder. Then place your Bio, CV and Artist Statement at the back with a contact page last.

**Do Your Homework** – Begin your research online in an area close to home. If the gallery doesn't have a basic website I would definitely want to know why, and I would have serious doubt as to their level of professionalism. As you perfect your presentation technique you can widen your circle and venture further a field.

Most entry level galleries will display a wide range of work and as you will be visiting the gallery yourself at this stage it's most important to note the galleries open hours and location, how long they have been in business and any customer testimonials that might give you insight to their reputation and approach to marketing.

Once you've found several potential galleries in an area group them and make an itinerary so that you arrive at the first at least forty-five minutes to an hour after they open. (There is nothing worse when you are trying to get a shop open and prepare for customers then to have someone trying to get your attention.)

**Make Your Presentation** – Walk into the gallery with your portfolio in hand and smile on your face. Walk confidently toward the first person you see extend your hand and say:

“Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_. I am a professional artist from \_\_\_\_\_ (home town) \_\_\_\_\_ and I am in town for the day looking for gallery representation. Do you have a minute to look at my portfolio?”

Before you finish your sentence or the person has time to respond extend your portfolio for them to take. People want to be agreeable and more often than not if you are pleasant and confident the person will take your portfolio, you have made it difficult for them to do otherwise.

You have also demonstrated that you are a professional, have a specific agenda you are looking for a gallery and critic of your work; (you are not just there to get their opinion or waste their time), and that you want immediate feedback because you are only in town for the day.

If you are speaking to the owner or decision maker they will most likely open your portfolio and start looking at your work. The most important thing for you to do at this point is be quiet. Silence makes us uncomfortable and we immediately want to fill the void, but don't.

Don't comment or offer explanations, explain your technique or what your objective was. Don't justify your palette or go into your history. Just let the person take in your work.

They are already having a conversation in their mind. They are asking themselves:

Do I like the work, is it unique, exciting, or in some way catchy?

Will my current clientele like it, will they buy it as priced?

How does the work fit in with that of other artists I am representing?

Do I like the artist and will I enjoy working with this person next to me?

From out of the gallery owner's inner conversation will come questions or comments for you:

How much work have you sold, over what period of time?

How much do you produce, what other galleries represent you?

Where else has your work been shown etc.

Answer their questions honestly, and directly. Don't get side tracked and ramble on for an hour, act professionally. Your visit was unannounced and you have additional calls to make. Their time and yours is precious.

Dress professionally, look the person in the eye when you speak to them, be friendly and keep smiling. Be prepared to show samples of your work if asked.

If the gallery owner wants time to think about it, or the person you are speaking with needs to consult with someone else offer to leave your portfolio and ask when you can return to collect it or when you should expect to hear from them.

Be sure you remember the individuals name and have their correct contact details leave the gallery and move on to the next one on your list.

Within the next 48 hours send a thank you note on a note card with an image of your work to each gallery owner you approached, whether or not they spent time looking at your work. Unless you determined that you would not want your work shown in the gallery add it to your database and include them in your marketing.

Remember that everything becomes easier with practice. If it takes 5 approaches before someone views your portfolio, and one in twenty of those who view your portfolio agrees to show your work, than you will need to approach 500 galleries to have your work shown in 5.

No one said it would be easy, but it is simple, you just have to do the work.