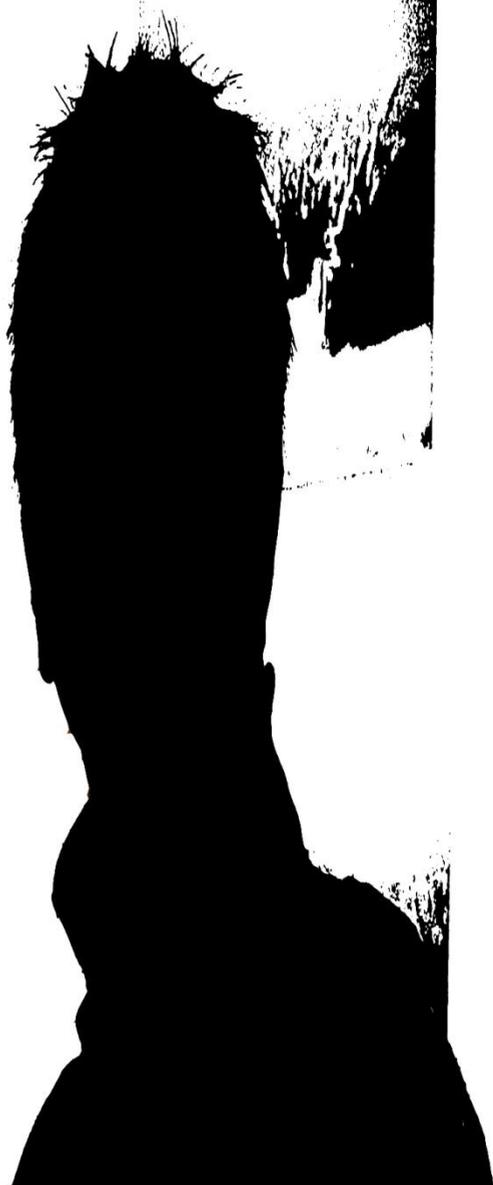


# Exposing Yourself: A beginner's guide to art galleries



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## **A beginner's guide to art galleries.**

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**Published by Collingwood Gallery Publishing**

**2012**

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## **Introduction**

This guide has been prepared to help artists plan, select and manage an exhibition of their works. Exhibiting art for the first time (and indeed for many times) can be a very inhibiting time for all artists. Will the works sell, will people like them, am I any good, is this my best work, will I become famous, can I work full-time as an artist, will I make a fool of myself? These and many other thoughts will often fill the minds of exhibiting artists. Rest assured, self-doubt is a healthy sign that you are indeed human, and that you are ready for the trial by exhibition. And for some of you there will be full confidence that you are ready and that the world is ready for you. Either way, this is something you must do. It is important that your self-doubt or indeed hubris do not get in the way of your future career as an artist.

For some (a very few) there will be instant success, for others this will be a labour of love which may last many decades. Your works will mature as will your audiences and with any luck there will be a confluence of your talent and audience acceptance down the track. This path, more often travelled, will bring you as much disappointment as success, however if you stay true to your artistic integrity you will have achieved much as a person.

This booklet has been designed to put you on a path, not as an artist, but as an exhibitor. This writer has been a gallery owner for over a decade and has observed nearly every fault that artists can perpetrate when exhibiting their own works. It is therefore intended that what follows will help eliminate

any possible errors and at least ensure that it is only your talent as an artist that is on display and not your inexperience as an exhibitor.

### **Selecting an art gallery**

In Australia there are four main types of physical galleries.

- Museum galleries, which only buy historical pieces or works from artists with a significant established reputation.
  
- Commercial galleries which choose the works of living artists whom they believe have the potential to establish a reputation or who are already established. These galleries typically have a strong buyers list and provide expert marketing and presentation services. Such galleries can be hard to get into and will usually be expensive. However against the costs they are usually very good at achieving sales. These galleries generally charge commissions of 40% or more and often require the artist to pay for printing and opening expenses.
  
- Artist access galleries where the artist hires the space and generally runs the show. Some of these galleries also offer commission charges between 10% and 20% to sit the gallery. Usually the preferred method is for the artist to sit the show. This allows the artist to receive the feedback which will allow them to understand their market and to receive criticism.

- Private galleries where an artist displays only their own work. These galleries are typically found in country towns and regional centres.

In addition to these four most common types there are numerous other outlets for artists.

- Online web galleries
- Co-op studio galleries
- Publicly funded Council galleries
- Restaurants which display art for a small commission or for free
- Some libraries have small galleries for local residents
- University and TAFE galleries
- Pop-up galleries in vacant shops
- Galleries in pubs
- Street art in lanes

Clearly there are many outlets for beginning artists; however cost should not be the only consideration. Exposure, reputation, mailing list and not least, the gallery director(s) should all be considered when making your choice.

### **Exposure**

There are many galleries down lanes which only get visitors from their mailing list. There are also many galleries on 'The High St.' which have large

numbers of visitors off the street: and of course many in between. Each of the galleries will have their strong and weak points. There is no clear right answer as to which gallery is best for you. It is up to you to consider the options.

### **Reputation**

The reputation of a gallery is its prized asset. They want satisfied customer and happy artists. It is always a good idea to ask around about a gallery. Visit the website and try to contact previous artists. Were they happy with the services of the gallery, did they have many visitors, was the management supportive and helpful and did they get value for money?

### **Mailing list**

It is important that the gallery has a good reach in its advertising. One of the most important elements is their direct contact via mail and email to regulars and buyers visiting the gallery. These mail lists help ensure a quick word-of-mouth response to the exhibition.

### **The Director**

This can be a very important part of the gallery experience. You should get support and encouragement from the gallery director and staff. This should be thoughtful and respectful. Once again this is something you can ask previous artists of the gallery about. Also, trust your instincts when you first meet the director of the gallery. Did they make you feel welcome and were all conditions explained clearly to you? If so, you are probably in the right place.

All of these aspects need to be taken into consideration and it is up to you to decide which is the most important and if you feel comfortable about exhibiting there.

## **Planning**

Putting an exhibition together which is successful requires good and sensible planning. To assist you in this, it is recommended you attend as many exhibitions and openings as you can to obtain ideas, meet other artists and to understand how galleries work. Most galleries advertise in Art Almanac and similar publications. They also have mailing lists you can subscribe to for invitations to openings and exhibitions. Visiting exhibitions is an essential part of your art education. Only by attending galleries will you be attuned to new ideas and styles and also develop an effective critical judgement.

Once you have decided to exhibit there is one very important activity you must do, and not doing this is a common mistake for first time artists. You must CULL and EDIT your collection. Be as objective as possible, you don't want your audience to see your lesser pictures. You want people to think your best is your constant standard. Have someone whom you trust to help you or ask the gallery director for help. If you find after this that you don't have enough works then wait, produce more and only present your best.

Your next consideration is how the works will fill the available space at the gallery. You need to consider content, color, size and space.

The first thing you should do is to place the works around the room on the floor, leaning against the wall.

This will be the first time you see your works in the space. It is here you will see how they work with each other in an empty space. You should move and swap the works around several times to see how they interact with each other. Try not to rush this process as selecting the best places to hang works can take several hours to get right. So try to allow a full day for hanging. Alternatively, some artists like to draw a plan of the space and pre-plan the locations of their works.

### **Content**

You need to consider if certain placement of works promote a narrative and if it is an intentional narrative. If they are portraits do you have people looking away or to each other, do the clusters of painting say something unintended. If they are abstracts do they work with or against each other?

### **Color**

You should be aware of color theory as an artist, so now is the time to put it to additional use. This is where you decide whether the dominant colors in your works create unwanted pairings or tensions.

In addition you will need to consider whether the colors draw the eye into the gallery. Will the works that are most visible when entering the gallery capture the viewer's attention and will the ones further back encourage the viewer to explore.

## **Size and Layout**

This can be a difficult decision. You need to first decide if you want the tops, middles or bottoms aligned. This can vary in an exhibition, but usually not on the same wall. If you decide on another way of hanging (e.g. steps, spiral) make sure that the steps have a mathematical uniformity. Confusing and haphazard hanging will confuse the viewer and reflect badly on the artist. Use measuring tapes and levels if you need to. Generally if it looks right, then it is.

Another problem which can arise is the hanging of very small works with deep frames. The deep frame will nearly always cause part of the work to be in shadow. You may be happy to accept this or you might choose a shallower frame for the exhibition. Alternatively you could arrange for extra floor based lighting.

## **Space**

Many new artists make the mistake of putting everything on the wall so that barely a square centimetre of wall is visible (remember CULL and EDIT). Your wall is a very important part of your exhibition. Paintings need space to breathe and show-off. You don't want the painting next door crowding out its neighbour. Plan and provide for space around your works. The amount of space is entirely subjective but in general the larger the work the more space is required. In some cases a small work might be so significant that a large space is required. Once again this is subjective.

## **Lighting**

Generally you will have little choice in the type of lighting for your works as this will already be installed in the gallery. However there are some things to take care of. For the period of your exhibition the exposure to natural sunlight should not be an issue, however beware that the UV and infrared in sunlight can damage works especially those on paper like drawings and photos. It also will over time fade pigments and damage all works.

The gallery owner will have a large degree of expertise on lighting gathered over many years. They will usually do the lighting for you, but if you have any special requests discuss it with them.

## **Framing and glass**

This can be a vexed question for many artists. Generally the decision to frame will depend on the work. In many cases artists with works on stretched canvas will hang the work unframed. Some will paint the exposed side canvas others will leave it as is. Works on paper will nearly always be framed or mounted to facilitate hanging. Photographs are also usually framed or mounted.

In choosing the frame, keep it simple. Some buyers will want to change the frame so it is best at this stage to use cheap kit frames where possible.

When placing the hanging wire or string on the work make sure it is taught and cannot be seen above the top of the frame when hung. The lower the wire the greater the chance the picture will hang out from the wall. So do check this before the hanging of the works.

Many artists also put glass on their works. Be aware that highly reflective glass can be very difficult to light and at times can completely obscure the picture with reflections, especially monochrome or dark works. If glass is required discuss non-reflective or low-reflective glass with your framer. They should be able to give you good advice.

## **Pricing**

Pricing is one area that many artists agonize over. This has to reflect your costs, the artistic value you place on the work and the gallery commission. It should also include GST if you are registered to collect it.

The best way to set a price is to visit many galleries and see what other works are being priced at. Take into account the reputation of the artist and the stage of their career. Try and see other emerging artists and seek the advice of your chosen gallery.

## **Invitations and publicity**

Press publicity for an exhibition is extremely hard to get. Most of the popular press will only review their mates or large exhibitions. To get publicity it is important to send out information and press releases at least six weeks before the exhibition. To make it easier it is best you write your press release as if it is the finished article to appear in the press. Most galleries will have the contact for the local and regional press, and these are the easiest in which to get publication. So think of a local angle for the story. Also include images with your press release, remembering that if they want to publish an

image they will need a high resolution copy. Always make sure you have some images at 300dpi resolution ready for the press.

Other areas for easier publicity are public radio and television.

Increasingly, galleries are using e-invitations distributed by email lists. However it is always a good idea to have a design in mind for print versions. Print versions should always have images of 300 dpi and are usually designed in Adobe InDesign, Adobe Illustrator or Photoshop for PCs and Macs. Quark is also used on Macs. Printing prices vary considerably and you should look to local and internationally based printers for the best deal.

## **The exhibition**

### **Planning**

The first thing to have in mind is to allow for plenty of time to set up the exhibition. Putting pictures on the wall needs considerable planning as already mentioned. Lay the works out around the walls, swap them around and then again, see if there is a natural narrative suggested by the subjects and colors. You want to draw the audience into the gallery and to not have them disappointed. After taking all factors into consideration it is now time to hang and light the pictures.

### **Catalogues or Labels**

There are two options for informing people about the works. The first is to produce an exhibition catalogue which has the title, description (media and

size) and the price. The pictures are then numbered and relate directly to the list.

The second most popular is to put labels with each picture, each with the information and price.

In addition to this basic information, it is always a good idea to have an artist's statement in which you describe the philosophy of your works, your artistic background and previous exhibitions. This statement can be part of the catalogue or on separate flyers.

### **The opening**

The opening event to your exhibition should be seen as a celebration of your work. In most cases, the people who attend will be family and friends as well as some gallery visitors. The better you become known, the larger the number of visitors unknown to you will attend.

Usually you will supply the alcohol and nibbles for this event. Most openings happen between 6pm and 8pm. The gallery will advise you on which nights are best for its location.

Many artists prefer to have someone formally open the exhibition with a speech. Let the gallery know if you have someone organised or would like them to do it.

## **Sitting**

If you are sitting the exhibition you should come prepared. This can become quite boring at times, so bring along a selection of books, games, laptop etc. Use the time constructively to catch up on study and reading.

You are representing your works of art and the reputation of the gallery, so tackle this sitting task professionally. This is not a time to meet with mates and drink alcohol all afternoon. Your job is to engage with visitors and make them feel welcome and make sales. If there is a radio keep it a sensible volume. Don't stand in the doorway smoking and don't take naps! These are all big turn-offs for visitors. Keep the doorway clear; keep the space inviting and look interested.

It is also the artist's responsibility to keep the place clear of litter.

## **Sales & Record keeping**

You are there to make sales. Therefore you will need an order book. This book will include the buyer's name, the work and price bought for, contact phone and address and email. If you are making sales through an EFTPOS terminal, keep the merchant copy with the order book.

When you make the sale ensure the person knows when they can collect the works. Usually they would wait until the end of the exhibition, but sometimes circumstances prevent this and they will want to take the work with them.

When a picture is sold you should place a red dot on the wall. If it is an edition print put two red dots next to it so that people realise they can buy it more than once.

### **Packing up**

The gallery will inform you when you will need to pack up and leave the gallery ready for the next show.

You should plan for this and have packing materials ready. You may be asked to make good any damage caused during the show. Discuss this with the gallery.

### **Conclusion**

It is hoped the preceding information will enable you to have a less stressful and a more successful exhibition.

Good luck for your future as an artist!

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