

Chapter 11: Fear Of The Gallery System

All of the fears discussed in this section can be described as self-imposed to one degree or another. Unfortunately, fear of the gallery system is often based on either first-hand knowledge, preconceptions, or rumors of situations not altogether advantageous to you, the artist! At this point, my job, as author of this book, becomes somewhat tenuous. On the one hand, I believe artists should be aware of all the problems when dealing with galleries. However, on the other hand, I do not want to give you any excuse not to pursue gallery representation. I am going to do my best, therefore, to give the most even-handed overview of the facts as I know them.

First, I want to assure you in the most whole-hearted way possible, that most of the negative situations you must ultimately face when dealing with galleries are well within your control and do not have to occur in the first place. To be honest, though, there are a few situations that you cannot control or predict no matter how bright or street smart you are. I will try to point out these different circumstances so that you will know what to expect. I will start with the ones that can be controlled.

First and foremost is the fear a gallery will want to change the type of art you produce. This is hardly ever the case, especially if you have done your homework beforehand and found the right gallery to represent your particular style of work. It may be true that some gallery owners, once they take you into their stable, might try to suggest certain things that, in their mind, might enhance your work. This can be a precarious place for an artist to find him or herself. The artist now has to act very carefully and deliberately, taking the time to know exactly what is going on. It could be that this dealer who has been in the business for more years than you have lived may actually have a valid, constructive critique that might just benefit you. On the other hand, it could be that he is concerned with only one thing and that is making the sale. And yes, that could have the result of bringing your work down to the level of *mass appeal*. You now have the dilemma of going with or going against what you think is ultimately right for you and

your art. A reputable dealer will abide and respect whatever decision you make. If they do not, then it is time to find another gallery.

The second biggest fear involves the feeling of being taken advantage of. Let's say for the last five years you have been selling from art festivals and the only overhead you have had is the onetime cost of your tent and the entry fees. Now a gallery expects you to give up fifty percent of what you have been receiving full price for. Well no one said it was going to be easy! As mentioned in chapter 4, selling art is not easy. A good gallery earns that fifty percent for many reasons. They take on a tremendous risk when they decide to represent you. After all, they have a very large overhead to cover before they can even begin to make a living for themselves. Subsequently their livelihoods rest on whether your work and the art of the other artists they have chosen to represent sells or not. Do not forget the gallery's rent. This figure can be enormous depending on its location and it is a sum which never goes down; oh contraire, it goes up and up with every passing year. Then there are the improvements and maintenance, as well as salaries and commissions. On top of all that, they often, but not always, bear the full costs of openings and advertising. It is a miracle any of them make any money at all. The fact is, a lot of them do not. My experience has been that many are in the gallery business because they love art. Whatever the case, you can begin to appreciate the huge monetary burden they bear. Conversely, all you have to worry about is the overhead of your studio space and materials. This leaves you free to produce your best work. From this perspective it can definitely be worth the fifty percent. There may be other areas over which you may feel taken advantage of, but most all of these can be ironed out with a good contract and proper consignment records. This I will go into in depth in Book Two.

Now we come to the things that may or may not be within your power to control. For example, you cannot always know the solvency of a gallery. You have heard horror stories of galleries just closing up and going bankrupt with all the artwork held up in litigation. This does happen, and it is something to be really fearful about. It almost happened to me, but I was fortunate to have paid attention to my sixth sense, and collected all my work out of the gallery one week before they closed. The rest of the

artists were not so lucky. They had to wait over a year for the case to be settled, and then they had to actually buy back their paintings for a percentage of their value. Some of them couldn't afford it and just had to chalk it up as a loss. Some states are much better than others, and it may behoove you to look into what your state's consignment laws are. Instead of Consignment Laws, you might have to ask about the state's Uniform Commercial Code or their UCC laws. More about this is found in chapter 29, which covers a lot of the aspects of copyright and consignment law you will need to know as an artist. Your consignment contract can also be a great source of protection for you, as long as it is worded correctly. I will go into this in chapter 27, "Written Agreements."

Another analogy of exactly how unfair this type of situation can be, is the scenario of taking a very expensive watch, perhaps an extremely coveted family heirloom, to a jeweler for repair. Before your watch is repaired, the jeweler goes out of business. Do you get your beloved watch back? The answer is maybe, maybe not. It might depend on what is owed to the watchmaker's creditors. You may in fact have to buy it back! Doesn't sound fair? Well it isn't, but that is why you really need to check people out thoroughly before you do business with them.

Luckily, this kind of horror story does not happen everyday. The reason I listened to my sixth sense was that I used my other five senses to reason it out. For one thing, the gallery had only been in existence a little over a year. Secondly, they were spending money like there was no tomorrow, and so, I just knew the bubble had to burst. Now most galleries will have a track record. A gallery that has been around for more than ten years is not likely to fold overnight. However, if you do have concerns, such as if they are expanding suddenly, enlarging or opening multiple galleries in different locations, or perhaps they have been established for less than a year, whatever the reason, you should do your research and continue to keep a vigilant eye on the situation.

You can see how some of these real life tales of woe can be completely avoided with the use of some practical common sense and some wise precautions. Therefore, do not let a few bad stories keep you from succeeding as an artist. There are not many avenues that

can make your success happen faster than a good relationship with a fine and reputable gallery. They can expose you to the proper buyers who will ultimately become your collectors. They can advertise your work and arrange for other types of publicity you might find difficult to do on your own. Most importantly, they provide you with a reason d'être. Without representation, an outlet for your work, let's face it, you may produce only half of what you are capable of. It keeps you going even when your energy level is low, because just thinking about that one-person show coming up in six months, makes you work hard to produce your best work. This type of working towards a significant goal can feel so good and purposeful, that unless you have experienced it, words cannot describe it.

After all this, you say to me, "But that is not what I fear the most about the gallery system. It is approaching them in the first place that scares me to death." Well there is the reason for reading the rest of this book, especially, Book Two. After following the step- by-step approach laid out in that section, many, if not all of your fears, will be put aside.