

ARTSY

6 Keys to a Good Artist-Gallerist Relationship

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Kate MacGarry and B. Wurtz. Image courtesy of B. Wurtz.



Jessica Silverman and Davina Semo. Image courtesy of Davina Semo.

There is no single archetype of the art dealer. Many gallerists are known for their selflessness and devotion to the creative process, but there are certainly bad apples, infamous for running glorified racketeering schemes. It can present a tricky dilemma for a young artist seeking representation—eager to take her career to the next stage, but wary of locking herself into a relationship that might not pay off. What are some of the factors that lead to lasting bonds between artists and their dealers? *Artsy* spoke with five artists, at various career stages, to glean some insights into this exciting but fraught process.

“Take it slow”

Remember, only fools rush in. If you’re thinking of building a long-term partnership with a gallerist, there’s no need to feel pressured into a contract. “The business aspect of working with galleries can feel a little shady, especially for those of us that, since childhood, knew it was a calling—not a decision,” said Jennie C. Jones, an artist who shows her work regularly, but didn’t formalize any gallery representation until she was 45. She now has found a supportive partner with Patron in Chicago.

Many of the artists interviewed for this story stressed the importance of a trial run—a solo exhibition in advance of proper representation, to see how the arrangement works for everyone involved. “Take it slow,” counseled Davina Semo, a San Francisco-based artist represented by that city’s Jessica Silverman Gallery, as well as Marlborough Contemporary in New York and Ribordy Thetaz in Geneva. Semo added that representation is a two-way street: “I think gallerists should also be careful taking on an artist.” Like all

relationships, it comes down to chemistry, shared values, and open dialogue about what both the artist and the dealer are looking for in a partnership.

“The basis for a strong dealer–artist relationship is trust and communication,” said Tessa Perutz, a New York–based painter who isn’t formally represented by a dealer, but has shown previously with galleries including Pablo’s Birthday in New York and Stems in Brussels. “There should be nurturing and sensitivity, with a strong backbone of respect,” she said.

Understand the nature of the relationship

The art world is a notoriously social environment, one that’s punctuated by parties, international travel, and plenty of booze. That means the lines between business and pleasure can often blur—or dissolve entirely. And while it’s nice to enjoy the company of your gallerist, should a young artist be looking for a friend, a business manager, or some elusive combination of both?

“It’s a balance,” offered Josh Reames, a painter currently represented by Andrew Rafacz Gallery in Chicago, Luis de Jesus Gallery in Los Angeles, and Brand New in Milan. “It’s ideal to have a friendship, but also keep it professional.” He acknowledged that this can be easier said than done, leading to “the awkwardness of a purely business relationship where you don’t connect at all, personally,” or “the flip side, where a gallerist is great personally, but toxic business-wise.” In other words: Your dealer might be a witty raconteur and an unbeatable drinking buddy, but that won’t help an artist pay the rent if she’s waiting 18 months to be paid for work that sold at NADA in Miami Beach.

Still, the nature of the art world means that the personal and the professional will mingle more so than in other industries—and that can be a great thing. Semo met Bob Linder—her partner, and the eventual father of her child—via a show she staged at his space, Capital Gallery. Meanwhile, her broader network of dealers has been a vital support after she gave birth.

“The night I was in labor with my son, Jessica Silverman offered me our first exhibition together,” Semo recalled. “When I returned home from the hospital, there were flowers from Max and Pascal at Marlborough, and messages from Stéphane [Ribordy]. I was never truly worried that people would think I was going to give up on my work and only want to be a mother, but there was still a bit of that fear—and these small gestures of support meant so much to me.”

Believe in the work, first and foremost

The art world can often seem like a cynical place, one in which dealers circulate like money-hungry sharks. (That reputation is only cemented by flat-footed satires like *Velvet Buzzsaw* that sketch a milieu in which the only thing worth talking about is how much the art is worth.) But a gallerist whose heart is in the right place will appreciate what an artwork conveys, before worrying about the price it might command.

“The nicest thing a gallerist has done for me is to truly be present with the work, to see and sit with it,” Jones said, “and not be overly concerned with logistics and planning when doing a studio visit...not to overstep by suggesting upscaling or pushing for more of whatever just sold, if the artist is exploring new directions. The most honest thing a gallerist has ever done for me was to be brought to tears by a piece upon leaving them in the space to consider things without my presence.”

“I was never a cash cow, so to speak,” said B. Wurtz, who is represented by Metro Pictures in New York, Kate MacGarry in London, and Office Baroque in Brussels, among other international galleries. “It was about liking the art. For me, that was a dream come true; for them, it was kind of flying in the face of good business practice. But that’s what is wonderful about most galleries: They aren’t normal businesses.”

Wurtz admitted that not all of his peers have enjoyed the same level of understanding with their dealers. “I know artists who have told me that their gallery is completely sales-oriented, to the point of not really even talking about the art,” he continued. “That’s not what I have or want. I want a personal relationship. It’s certainly more fun and makes life more interesting. The ideal is for everyone to do what they really want—and *happen* to make money.”

Be transparent (and don’t ghost your artists)

I’ve heard plenty of horror stories from bitter artists over the years. One now-defunct gallery—which was later sued by someone it represented—refused to even divulge the names of collectors to the artist whose work it had sold. Transparency is key, both as a good business practice and a sign of basic respect. “In what other business would your agent or representative not be completely transparent?” Reames asked. “For all the moving parts to run smoothly, there has to be an open line of communication. I’m currently on the roster of a gallery that hasn’t had an exhibition in a year now, but has also become completely opaque with communication. All of the other artists that I know who also work with the gallery are equally in the dark, and it’s maddening.”

But even in situations that are less dire, clear communication is key. Artists are stressed enough after wrestling with their creative demons in the studio; it’s the job of the gallerist to stay on top of the business side of things, keeping everyone else happily in the loop.

“There isn’t much to be gained from withholding information,” Perutz said. “It all comes back to a foundation based on trust—I’d go so far as to call it faith. It’s important to know where the works go and to keep an up-to-date database of such information. It’s helpful in the long term, and if you lend works to museums or institutions.”

Transparency should also apply when potential discounts come into play. Jones, for instance, suggested that anything beyond a 10-percent discount should ideally be broached with the artist in advance. And while regular updates are generally beneficial, she noted that sometimes it’s better for dealers *not* to share every potential development or opportunity that comes down the pipeline.

“Galleries should keep some prospects to themselves, until they’re real,” she said. “Artists have grand imaginations. When a project or placement of a work is mentioned as a possibility, the imagination can run wild: a little validation, encouragement, funds that might help chip away at student loans, health insurance, or allow a leave from teaching. This is the only time a gallery should take pause—and wait until things are confirmed.”

Respect your artists—and *pay* them

This golden rule should be simple, but anecdotal evidence proves how much trouble certain dealers have holding up their end of the bargain: paying for artwork that has been sold. It helps to trust the whisper network here, whether online or among peers; if a certain gallerist seems eternally swarmed by rumors, you might want to avoid being the next artist to get burned. “I don’t think every single complaint should be a big red flag—artists can be unreasonable at times—but when there’s smoke, there’s usually fire,” Reames said. “There are a couple of times I should have listened more to my peers. I would have saved myself a lot of headaches.”

The accepted industry sales split is almost always 50/50, and in a healthy working relationship, the artist should not feel slighted by that profit sharing. “It’s important to point out that the galleries deserve every bit of that money, as they do an enormous amount of work,” Wurtz said. “I really don’t know how any artist would expect to have a career without a gallery. When one begins showing with a gallery, it soon becomes clear what all that work entails: rent, publicity, keeping records, storage, on and on.”

"I'm a sculptor, and so production costs can be significant in my practice; it's important for me to split those costs with the gallery," Semo said. "There is a lot of overhead in running a gallery, just as there is in keeping a studio practice. Some people think that galleries get too much in the 50/50 split, but when I consider all the work that my gallerists do for me, I've never felt that they were undeserving of that percentage."

Everyone I spoke to had different ideas about what exactly to expect from a dealer: An *Artforum* ad? A flashy Lower East Side opening dinner for 40 close friends and industry insiders? "I think gallerists need to make it their mission to seed archives with work by women and artists of color, to fill in that narrative," Jones said. "That means more in the long term than fancy dinners and cocktails with collectors."

Being a supportive dealer often comes down to investing in an artist for the long term, making them feel valued on a personal level. Jones recalled a pivotal museum survey that, while it constituted a milestone in her own career, didn't seem to be a top priority for her gallery. "Beyond one partner flying in for the opening night reception, I was solo, in the art trenches for a week prior," she said. "Not having a cohort during the install, public programs, dinners, and walkthroughs was hard. During the run of the show, I felt there wasn't a substantial attempt at creating excitement around the exhibition as a platform to introduce the work to new collectors or institutions." It certainly doesn't help to cut corners when an artist's own self-worth hangs in the balance.

Look towards the future, not just the next five months

Being an artist can be intensely stressful; success (and sales) can be ephemeral, especially in a system that privileges novelty. "Fresh-out-of-grad-school artists can sell works at such high prices that it's unsustainable," Jones said. "I've pointed this out particularly to students of color entering the art world....Longevity is important, and young artists of color will pop like popcorn at an art fair, and be gone by 40. Many galleries may not be mindful of pacing if someone is coming onto the scene hot: exploitation and evaporation."

"In terms of service to my career, nothing beats feeling understood, and having the courage [that] artmaking takes be truly seen, understood, and hence supported," she added. "That is a powerful connection and a solid place to begin."

But if the very thought of committing to representation makes you nervous, it might be time to consider an open relationship. Plenty of galleries operate within a model that eschews formal representation in favor of individual projects and more flexible arrangements.

"It's more and more common to show in multiple galleries and not be represented, and I think it's super healthy, as well," Perutz said. "If you can work with galleries in a respectful and mutually beneficial way that is not totally exclusive, then there is no harm done, and it can often help solidify and strengthen new relationships. It's all about cultivating spheres of influence and invigorating existing relationships with new energy."