

LAUNCHING YOUR ART CAREER:
A Practical Guide for Artists

By Alix Sloan

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For Katherine Chapin.
The only thing she appreciated more than a
compelling work of art, was the artist who created it.

Part One: *Getting Started*

Chapter One

What To Expect From This Book

After two decades in the art world as a curator, consultant, private dealer and gallerist, I've seen hundreds of careers skyrocket, plummet, stall, ebb and flow. I can tell you with absolute confidence that there is no secret handshake, no magical pixie dust, no certified road map to success. I won't reveal any of those shortcuts here because they don't exist. But if you are making art you believe in, and willing to work hard and stick with it, this guide does contain advice and tools that will help you:

- Understand and navigate the art world.
- Find and create opportunities.
- Exhibit and sell your work.
- Be prepared and professional.
- Build and advance your career.

One of the challenges I find many artists face is accepting that the art world is a business. I know that can be a depressing thought. We don't have to dwell on it. But by choosing to exhibit and sell your work you are agreeing to participate in a system that is, at the end of the day, an industry. You are your own business. If that is something you struggle with, consider this - How many people get the chance to do what they love and get paid for it? Far too few. You have an opportunity to do

what you love, share it with others, and hopefully make a living. That's something to be excited about, not put off by.

This book is broken down into eight sections. After this intro, you'll find a list of basic terms. Give those a glance, just to make sure you're clear on the terminology I'll be using.

Sections two through six take you from more general concepts like setting goals and networking, to more practical information about creating effective support materials and running your studio, to information about tackling the challenges of getting your work out there, surviving and thriving. You'll get the most out of those sections if you read them in order, as they start with laying a foundation and then build from there.

Because none of us has all of the answers, and everyone has a different experience, I reached out to some of my colleagues - working artists, many of whom are well-respected teachers, and also art dealers who work with emerging to mid-career artists - and asked them to each share one piece of advice with you. You'll find their varied and inspiring contributions in section seven.

In the final section, I wrap things up with a few reminders, a few requests and a list of additional resources you can access online.

At the very end of this guide you'll find more information about me if you're curious. The short version is, I've been honored, inspired and educated by working with hundreds of artists throughout my career. I know that everyone who reads this book will be approaching building their career from a different place. But my hope is that by sharing what I've observed and learned, I can provide you with the information, motivation and inspiration you need to start, restart or continue your life as a working artist, with the best possible experience and results.

Chapter Two

Some Basic Terms

As you interact with larger and larger galleries, there will be more and more people involved in its day-to-day operations. For the purposes of this book, here's a short list of people and terms you're likely to run into right away:

- **Gallerist** - A gallerist is the person who owns or runs a commercial gallery. It's common at a small to medium-sized gallery for the gallerist or owner to also be the gallery director. Often these terms are used interchangeably.
- **Gallery Director** - This person makes decisions about exhibitions, looks for new artists, engages with the art world, collectors, and makes sales. The gallery director will most likely be your primary contact at a gallery.
- **Gallery Manager** - A gallery manager usually runs the more practical day-to-day aspects of the gallery, but is not involved in curating shows or making decisions about who exhibits at the gallery.
- **Art Handler** - This person is employed full time or freelance by a gallery or art handling company. Art handlers carefully and professionally pack, install, and transport your art.
- **Curator** - This is the person who comes up with the idea for a

show and puts it together. In a traditional gallery setting, this may be the gallerist or director. Sometimes a gallery will bring in an outside curator to organize a special exhibition. Nonprofit spaces and arts organizations use outside curators regularly.

- Juror - In the case of an open call or juried show, this is the person who looks through submissions and picks the art for a show. This person is also sometimes the curator.
- Consultant - This is a very loose term for someone who gets paid in some way to have an opinion about art. Many private and corporate collectors employ consultants to help them select and purchase art.
- Art Dealer - This is probably the most general term for someone who sells art. Gallerists are art dealers. Consultants who sell work are art dealers. If an interior designer sells a client a piece of your art, they are acting as your art dealer in that moment. I use dealer and gallerist pretty interchangeably throughout the book, but mostly gallerist because it's the term I'm most accustomed to using.
- Commercial Gallery - By commercial gallery I mean a gallery that exhibits and sells artwork, not a nonprofit space. There is an extraordinarily broad range of galleries within this category. You can usually get a pretty good idea of the general vibe of a space by researching what they show, where they are, how they market and present the gallery and exhibitions, and general word of mouth.
- Nonprofit Galleries, Centers & Organizations - A nonprofit raises money from various sources including sales, fundraisers and donations. It then puts that money back into funding its programs. As with commercial galleries, you will come across a wide range of professionalism and cachet within this category.
- Art Fairs - An art fair, for the purposes of this book, is an organized event where galleries exhibit and sell art by the artists

with whom they work. There are many different types and levels of art fairs. They are held in cities and countries all over the world. Galleries apply, and pay, to participate in these curated fairs.

- Community Art Fairs & Festivals - These are organized events where artists or artists' representatives can sell art. They are often held in conjunction with other local events such as a wine, food or music festival.

Part Two: *Preparing For Success*

Chapter Three

Setting Goals

This section will help you lay the foundation for launching, relaunching or advancing your art career. I know there is a temptation to jump ahead and dive into the information about showing and selling your work. But I really believe that the steps in this section are just as important. Artists who make smart decisions based on their goals, maintain a healthy community and network, and take the time to create excellent support materials, are the most successful.

One of the questions I ask any artist I consider working with is, “What are your goals?” The response I get most frequently is, “I never really thought about it.” If you’re not sure what your goals are, now is a good time to think about it. Dedicating your life to your art is a brave, exciting, powerful choice. But no matter how talented you are; it’s not going to be an easy journey. Why not tip the odds in your favor? Ask yourself what you really want. Then make decisions along the way with those goals in mind. There’s no wrong answer to this question as long as it’s honest. And it doesn’t have to be your forever answer. Your right now answer will do. I’ve heard everything from “I want to make good work and support myself with my art” to “I want to inspire others and create community through my work” to “I want to make art and live in Europe” to “I want to see my art in a museum” to “I want to be

famous.” I’ve heard it all.

By determining what your goals and desires are, you can be clear with yourself and others as you navigate the great big, amorphous art world. And then you can - and this is just as important - *keep those goals in mind every time you make a decision*. Ask yourself “Does this decision support my goals? And if not, why am I doing it?” By making consistent choices that support your goals, you can avoid wasting time and energy on things that don’t matter to you.

So before you proceed any further, take a minute to really think about what you care about and how you imagine your life and career. Don’t worry about judgments or get hung up on eloquence. No one else needs to hear it. Just make sure you’re honest about what you want and your vision is in alignment with your values. What are your goals for the immediate future? Five years from now? Ten years from now?

For the immediate future (let’s say the next twelve months), consider this as a starting point: “To make good work and share it.” It’s vague but it’s also simple, direct and allows a lot of room for exploration and success.

For your longer term goals, get more specific. I’ll say this again and again; the art world is vast and varied. If your singular goal is to make a living as an artist, that opens up a broader range of options for you to pursue. For instance, there are plenty of retail based commercial galleries in high traffic locations that mainly sell art to clients who walk in off the street. There is nothing wrong with that. And with the right relationship you can make a good living. But that kind of gallery is not a good fit for someone who is determined to participate in, and make an impact on, the contemporary dialogue. If making a mark on the art world is your goal, you should work towards showing with galleries that are more focused on trying to place work in influential collections.

It’s OK if you just aren’t sure about the long-term goal right now. If that’s the case, just roll with “To make good work and share it,” or

whatever your immediate goals are, for now. After a few months or a year, revisit the topic with more perspective. And whatever goals you set, don't forget to keep tabs on them. Throughout your career, once a year or whenever you hit a really big milestone, revisit and consider revising your goals. Cross off the goals you accomplished, and replace them with new aspirations.

Chapter Four

Community & Networking

The life of a studio artist can be lonely. But you are not alone. If you think globally, there are millions of artists just like you out there, making art to share with the world. Your artist friends, colleagues and acquaintances are your lifeline to sanity, perspective, encouragement, and opportunity. I promise you, dedicating even a small amount of your time and energy to supporting your community and building a network will enrich your experience and reap tremendous rewards.

Consider your *community* your “real friends.” These are people you really know. Someone you might go to an opening with, ask to come by for a studio visit, or just touch base with when you need a pep talk or advice. Your *network* consists of colleagues, casual online friends, people you run into at shows but don’t know well. An artist recently said to me “I don’t want to make friends with people just because I might get something out of it.” That’s not what I’m talking about here. I’m encouraging you to develop sincere, reciprocal relationships with other artists and art professionals that are enjoyable, productive for everyone, and enrich your life.

If you’re fortunate enough to already have a community of artist friends, not just acquaintances but close friends, get a group together over coffee or drinks to talk about ways you can support each other.

Share your goals. Make a commitment to let each other know if you spot an interesting opportunity. Help each other out with feedback when asked. Plan a museum or gallery outing. I know one group of artists that meets once a month just to share progress and keep each other motivated. Being accountable to each other helps all of them accomplish more between meetings. Consider setting up your own regular get-together. You can even do it over email if need be. Most of us can spare a few moments or hours once a month to give and receive encouragement and feedback.

If you don't have a community, and even if you do, start looking for new ways to network and connect with other artists in real life. Attend openings whenever possible. You don't even have to talk to anyone at first. Everyone wants a good turnout at their show. Showing up, even for an artist you don't know, is a really nice thing to do. Just start getting out there. If there's an affordable class you are interested in, that's another great way to meet people. I'm not saying you have to pick up a bunch of new pals, but by opening yourself up to new people and experiences within the art world, you will be putting yourself in the path of inspiration, interaction and opportunity.

Then, of course, there's the internet. Look for artists whose work you find interesting, send them friend requests, "like" their pages and posts, follow them on Instagram, Twitter, whatever is popular at this particular moment. Many artists share information online about open calls for shows, resources for materials, grants and residencies. It's a great way to keep up on what's going on. And you should do the same. Share images of your work and information about exhibitions featuring your work. But don't use social media solely as a promotional tool. Did you see a great show recently or come across a new favorite artist? Did you read an interesting article or learn about a great opportunity? This type of sharing is helpful, reciprocal and appreciated. If you get in the habit of sharing information, people will want to network with you.

And keep in mind, your personal identity and your identity as an artist are intertwined online and that line will blur more and more as your career develops. Don't use social media as an outlet for negativity and frustration. Don't pick apart other people's work or trash talk online. It isn't amusing or provocative. It's unprofessional, unproductive and destructive. Simply put, no one wants to work with a jerk. If you're a bit of a jerk in real life, I recommend trying to keep that fact to yourself. When engaging with others online, do your best to keep it positive, helpful and interesting.

So the next thing I'm going to ask you to do, immediately, is to start participating more actively with your close community and building up your network of wonderful artists and arts professionals. Keep in mind what you can do to be helpful. If you hear about an open call your friend's work would be perfect for, forward the information. If a friend is included in an exhibition, show up to the opening and congratulate them. If it's an online friend you've never met in person, say hello. If someone asks you to do a studio visit and give them feedback, make time and be constructive. If someone is too shy to attend an opening alone, tag along. If you find a great resource for frames or stumble on a fabulous art supply sale, spread the word. You should never demand anything in return. If you build a network and engage in a healthy and positive way, I think you'll be pleased and surprised by the amount of good will and opportunity that will begin flowing your way.

I'd be remiss not to end this section with a quick note about career progress. Referencing other artists' experiences and prices when you are starting out can be helpful. But every career develops at its own pace. I can think of so many artists who have come up together and whose careers have gone in completely different directions. Don't get caught up in comparing yourself to others. Don't begrudge anyone else's success. Don't take your success for granted or let it go to your head. Make good work. Build, honor and support your community. And never

stop growing your network.

Chapter Five

Support Materials

Yes, making art is the most important part of your job. But maintaining clear, attractive, appropriate materials that support your art is key to getting your work, and your ideas, out to an audience. Every artist should have, at minimum, a website, an up-to-date resume (also referred to as a CV or Curriculum Vitae), a bio, an artist's statement, an "elevator pitch" and a simple business card with your name, website and contact information. Every time you have a solo show, you'll also need to write something about that particular body of work.

I know there are those of you who like to "let the work speak for itself." But if you expect art dealers to try to sell your work, or engage critics or curators, you've got to give them something to talk about. Give them nothing and there's not much they can do. Arm a gallery with terrific work and helpful information about you and your intentions, and that gallery is one step closer to making some magic happen. Once you have clear, concise, terrific support materials; you can get right back to making art. So your next step in this process is to get your support materials together.

Website

I highly recommend you create and maintain your own website using

one of the many available platforms such as Squarespace, Other People's Pixels or Wix. Explore what's out there and see what you like best. If you've never made a website before, and need to get help building it, just make sure you have all of the access and information you need, and understand how, to update the site yourself. You do not want to be dependent on anyone else for changes.

Your website should highlight your work. If you don't have a website already, keep the guidelines below in mind as you create yours. If you do have a website, and it doesn't meet the criteria below, revise and relaunch.

- The minimum your website should include is images of your work, a CV and a way to contact you. Decide for yourself if you want to include your phone number. Some artists choose not to - and that's OK - but always include an email address or contact form. You can also include your bio (with or without your picture), artist statement, a section with news updates, even a blog. Many artists include links to their Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. which is a great idea. Some artists who sell merchandise have a store component. You can also share links to friends' websites. And finally, I love to see an invitation to join an artist's mailing list on their site. A form the visitor can fill out is best, but even if it's just the words "Send me an email if you'd like to be added to my email list" on your contact page, it's terrific to have a call to action. But the three things you absolutely must include are images, a CV and contact information. If you're overwhelmed, just start there.
- The design should be simple - really, really simple. Avoid using distracting colors or a decorative background that competes with your work. I prefer a simple, white background. The idea here is to highlight your artwork, not your personal style or design skills.
- The site and images should load quickly. Navigation should also

be quick, clear and easy. Curators and gallerists are busy. If you're fortunate to have someone want to visit your website, they need to be able to access the information they are looking for in the first few seconds. Don't make anyone work for it with slow images or confusing navigation.

- Your website should not be an archive of every single piece of art you've made since kindergarten. It should include your absolute best work and work that represents what you are doing now. Better to have a website with ten great images and leave a curator wanting to see more, than junk it up with older, less impressive work or work that isn't relevant to what you're doing now. That said, make sure you *do* maintain an archive offline of every piece you've ever made (maybe not since kindergarten but since you started making art seriously).
- Be sure to include the title, size, medium and dimensions of each piece on your website. Someone might be looking for works in a particular size range or medium. You don't want to miss an opportunity because that information wasn't available.
- If you want to exhibit in galleries, do not include prices of your original artwork, or sell your original artwork, on your website. If you have a store with merchandise, that's fine. However, I strongly discourage you from selling or pricing your original artwork online. This will turn galleries off immediately and you will miss opportunities to exhibit as a result. If someone is really interested in your original art and wants to buy something, find out prices, or know how to make a purchase, they will email you and ask.

Resume / CV

As far as your CV is concerned, take a look at other artists' resumes online. You'll notice that content and formatting varies drastically.

Whatever font and layout you choose:

- Make sure your CV is well organized and easy to read.
- Your CV should include, at a minimum, your education (if you have a degree or training), solo exhibitions and group exhibitions. For the exhibition listings include the year the show took place, the title of the show, and the name and location of the venue or gallery. If a show was curated by somebody particularly well known or interesting, you might want to consider including that information also.
- Beyond education and exhibitions, you can also include your date and place of birth and where you live, if you like. If you have won any awards, been written up or included in any catalogs, list those also. Right now you probably need to fluff your CV up a bit. Go ahead and list everything. You can always edit your CV as time wears on. And you *will* want to edit it. Hopefully your resume will fill up quickly. Then you can start to omit the less impressive shows to make room for recent and better ones. As with your image archive, make sure you always keep a complete version of your CV, one that includes every single show you've ever been in, for yourself. You are your own record keeper and you'll be surprised how easy it is to forget the name of a group show or a gallery that's been closed for five years. It's important to keep track. You never know when you'll need to access information about a long ago exhibition.
- And if you've never been in any exhibition and have no formal training, don't worry. Just include a bio on your website for now and keep these guidelines in mind as you build your CV.

Bio & Artist Statements

When it comes to your bio and statements, don't get too hung up on sounding smart or using a lot of art speak. Most people just want to

understand and learn about you and what you're doing. They don't need to be dazzled with obscure art historical references and four-syllable words. I'm not saying those things aren't nice if they are relevant and make sense in the context of what you're writing. But don't make yourself crazy. A clear communication of what you are doing is worth more than a jumble of polysyllabic nonsense.

If the idea of doing this terrifies you, consider asking a friend who writes well to help you. They can listen to what you want to communicate and write it up for you. Or ask them to edit a draft you write. Depending on how well you know them, ask for help as a favor, offer to buy them a meal, pay them in cash or even trade them for a small piece of art. Whatever you have to do, make sure you have a professional bio, and statement you feel comfortable with, ready to go at all times.

A bio should include where you were born and grew up, where you went to school and any important or interesting exhibitions or experience. It's kind of a longhand version of your resume, often with a bit more info. An artist statement is more about what your influences are and what you are trying to accomplish or say with your work. More and more I'm seeing artists fuse the two into sort of a this-is-who-I-am-and-what-my-work-is-about hybrid. I think that works well. Again, your best resource for reference is checking out other artists' bios and statements online. If you see one you like, use the basic structure as a template, swapping out their information and writing style with your own.

If you are fortunate enough to secure a solo exhibition, most galleries will ask for a statement specific to the body of work you plan to show. They will use this as a basis for the press release and to educate themselves and their staff. Even if nobody asks you for a statement, I recommend writing one. The experience of putting your thoughts to paper will help you clarify concepts in your mind so you can better speak about the work. You'll also have the information on hand if

anyone asks for a statement last minute. Some galleries will write a statement for you based on a conversation about the work. It just depends on the relationship and situation. However it gets done, just try to have fun with the process and focus on communicating your ideas. What inspired you to create this body of work? What were your influences and/or references? What are you trying to share, accomplish, inspire or express?

Elevator Pitch & Business Card

An elevator pitch is a business term for a short, concise, engaging description of a product, service or idea. You are supposed to be able to deliver it in the time it takes to ride in an elevator with someone you want to impress. It's a cheesy term, I know. But being prepared with a quick, compelling description of your work will come in handy in many situations. Consider this:

You're at an opening, your sister's wedding, a bar, wherever. Someone asks you "What do you do?" You reply, "I'm an artist." Most of the time the response will be "That's cool." But every once in a while someone will take an interest. You should be able to express clearly in just a few sentences what medium you work in and what your work is about. The last thing you want is to be introduced to an artist you admire or a gallerist, dealer or curator you'd like to have a conversation with and stumble over your words. So, picking up where we left off... You respond to the interested art lover with your elevator pitch. Something like...

"I create large charcoal works on paper exploring man's innate, yet ultimately self-destructive drive to dominate the natural world."

Maybe they ask you a few more questions and it evolves into a real conversation. Maybe not. But hopefully, at some point, an interested person will ask if you have a website. That's when you hand them your simple, elegant, funky or freaky - as long as it's easy to read - business

card. Minutes, hours or days later they will find the card, visit the wonderful website you worked so hard to create, and just possibly become a fan of your work. Maybe they'll even sign up for your email list.

Whenever you are included in an exhibition, you can expand your elevator pitch with a bit more information. If it's a group show, add a sentence about the particular piece or pieces in the show. If you have a solo show, add a bit about the body of work as a whole and possibly even a few individual pieces. For instance "I create large charcoal works on paper exploring man's innate, yet ultimately self-destructive drive to dominate the natural world. This piece refers to the recent developments..." Or "... This body of work was inspired by a trip I took to... where I saw..." You get what I mean. Showing up at an opening prepared with talking points will help make your evening more enjoyable and less nerve-racking.

Thank you exploring this preview of “Launching Your Art Career: A Practical Guide for Artists.” If you found it helpful and you’d like to purchase the complete paperback or eBook, you can find it at [Amazon](#), [Barnes & Noble](#), [Kobo](#) and [iBooks](#). Additional topics covered in the remaining sections include finding & creating exhibition opportunities, selling & pricing your art, working with galleries and managing your studio. There’s also advice from over forty working artists and art dealers and a recommended resource list.

If you’d like to learn more about me and/or join my email list to receive occasional updates, information and advice for artists, please visit my website at alixsloan.com.

Have a great day!

Alix Sloan