

10 Biggest Mistakes Artists Make in Their Exhibiting Careers

AND HOW NOT TO MAKE THEM
IN YOURS



LAUREN MARCHAND

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About the Author

THE FORMAL BIO

Laureen Marchand lives and works in Val Marie, Saskatchewan, Canada at the gateway to Grasslands National Park. Inspired by the region's subtlety and fragile beauty, her paintings reflect on the importance of the daily experiences we take for granted. Her paintings have been recognized by SK Arts and the Canada Council, are held in many public and private collections, and have been represented in exhibition catalogues and reviewed in newspapers and magazines. She has been artist in residence at the Leighton Studios/Banff Centre for the Arts, Tyrone Guthrie Centre, Ireland, and Ragdale Foundation, USA, among others. Laureen has contributed widely to Canada's artistic community as teacher, mentor, writer, curator, and cultural facilitator. She holds the Canadian Artists Representation "Tony" Award for service to the visual arts in Saskatchewan and the Centennial Leadership Award for Service to the Province of Saskatchewan. Laureen is represented by Nouveau Gallery in Regina, and on her own website.

THE MORE CHATTY, PERSONAL VERSION

Hi, I'm Laureen. I'm a full-time working artist, and I've been one a long time. Since I was in my 20s, it's been the only thing I really wanted to do. But since there aren't very many artists who spend their careers just making art, I've had a lot of other jobs as well, from running a record shop and three art galleries and a summer art school in Ireland; to working as an arts administrator, a marketing manager, a freelance writer and a barista; to getting a graduate degree in librarianship that allowed me to work in public, academic, and specialized libraries, as well as being a library consultant. And many stops in between! Because my experience has been so varied, I bring a wide range of knowledge and skills to my artist mentoring practice. If you'd like some help in figuring out what you can and could do next, my mentoring group with Mastrius might be just what you need. I'm here to help.



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LAUREENARTIST



The 10 Biggest Mistakes Artists Make in Their Exhibiting Careers

AND NOW NOT TO MAKE THEM
IN YOURS

The artist has a demanding job description. From your brain and heart and skill you make something that didn't exist before, that would never have existed without your imagination and commitment. You re-create your identity every time you work at your art and you rarely feel that you're entirely capable of what you've set out to do. Sometimes you wonder whether, if your occasional uncertainty of purpose took over and you never made art again, anyone would really notice.

If you stop making art, you won't have an exhibiting career to worry about. Don't fall prey to mistakes 1 and 2.

MISTAKE 1: QUITTING

Many more students graduate from fine arts programs than go on to make a profession of their calling. Relatively few artists are still practising 20 or 30 years later. If you stop making art, no matter how compelling the reason, you won't have an exhibiting career to wonder about, and no other mistakes will matter.

If you want to show your work, no matter whether that's in the near or distant future or steadily between now and then, you need to keep on making it. This won't always be easy. (See intro paragraph page 1.) It will always be worth it. Every time you stop, you're making it that much more difficult to get going again. Don't quit.

MISTAKE 2: WAITING FOR CIRCUMSTANCES TO BE PERFECT

You're human in the 21st Century. This means you experience an almost unrelenting onslaught of sales pitches, implied criticism, opinions, distractions, and pushing. Most of it wants you to say/do/be something different from what you are now, and much of that is to get you to spend money.

You're also an artist, and that means you're a member of one of the few remaining professions on the planet whose public profile was formed 200 years ago. You know – the Romantic artist, living a dream, abandoning everything for artistic integrity and independence. Or, contrariwise, the once-principled artist who “sells out”, abandoning artistic integrity for worldly success.

And sometimes, trapped as we are in both the arguments of the present and the stories of the past, even the most realistic artist could be forgiven for thinking that you'll never get it right. That there's some ideal way you should be conducting your art-making and exhibiting career, and you don't know what it is.

I'd like to ask you a question: Is this thought helping you? And if it isn't, how can you change the thought?



**I have news for you. The ideal studio?
No conflicting demands? Enough
time? Permission? It isn't going to
happen.**

If you think you need days in a row with no other commitments before you can make worthwhile artwork, have you tried alternatives?

If you think you have to wait until your kids or grandkids no longer need someone to look after them, your parents are more settled in their newly retired state, your community has enough other volunteers for important projects, your job is less demanding, or the news requires you to spend fewer hours a day keeping up with it, what date are you putting on that?

If you think you need people to recognize your art's importance before you commit yourself to it, have you taken steps to find those people? Or are you surrounding yourself with groups who don't and won't think about the value of art?

If you think you can't make art in

short blocks of available time in a corner of a room in your house, what can you do instead?

Can you find an empty closet, an unused table, a room in your basement?

Can you shut the door, turn off the Internet, decide the laundry can wait?

Can you grab 20 minutes a day or two hours a week, set a timer or an alarm, use your vacation days differently, exchange childcare or lawn mowing or meal prep?

Can you find someone to show your art or report your progress to, or who can act as a mentor? Can you decide that the only person whose consent you need is your own?

Don't wait. Start where you are. Give yourself the gift of doing this thing that you know has value.

Now you have a regular studio habit and a developing collection of artworks. What are you going to do next? If you want your artwork to be seen, don't make mistake 3.

MISTAKE 3: WAITING TO BE DISCOVERED

It's another of those bits of folklore we still secretly cling to: that somewhere, somehow, some genius artist just keeps producing in obscurity until the miracle happens – their talent, their hard work and skills, and the objects of beauty they make, are recognized and celebrated and the artist never need suffer again.

When the story is written down like that, it's easy to see how much it's a product of Hollywood mixed with more 19th Century Romanticism. And while the story might come true once in a while, do you want to base your art career and exhibiting plans on the possibilities in a fairy tale?

If you wait for your potential audience to approach you, you aren't taking full responsibility for the success of your own career. If your audience isn't aware of your work, they can't help you. Making sure your work finds its audience is part of being professional.

You may struggle with the need to make your work known. You might not want to take time away from the studio. You may want your work to be appreciated without having to “pitch” it. You might get tired of the effort required.

All this may be true. Nonetheless, for most artists, an active public-facing career doesn't happen by itself. You will need to create and maintain it. You will need to spend time and energy approaching and re-approaching audiences, including buyers and exhibition spaces, throughout your working life. Make plans to do so.



But if you want to show or sell and your career isn't following the path you want it to, you need to think about why that is. Many times, it's because you're making one of mistakes 4 through 7.

MISTAKE 4: NOT KNOWING WHAT YOU WANT

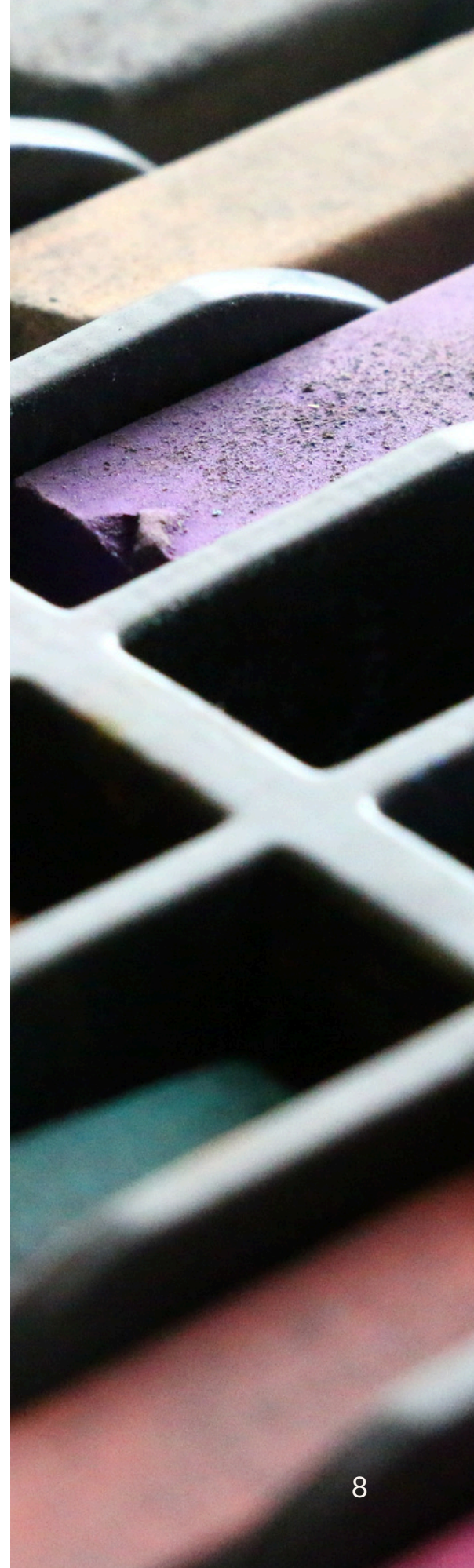
What is it that you want to happen? Do you want to connect? Receive feedback? Get validation or reinforcement? Do you want to contribute to a community? Do you want to sell artwork or related products? Satisfy professional ambition?

It may be possible that you can get what you want without knowing what it is. It's just less likely. So before you decide that your exhibiting career isn't performing the way it ought to, what do you want from it?

You can think about your viewers. Who might they be? What is their interest in looking at your artwork? Do you want a sophisticated audience who will see your artwork in context with the most experimental in your location? Do you want to reach people who don't go to art galleries but will appreciate some brightness in their lives at a difficult time? Do you want viewers who see the world the same way you do?

You can think about communication. Do you want to exchange ideas? Change someone's mind? Create new avenues of understanding? Spark emotion?

You can think about sales of art. Is the idea of someone paying money for what you've made important to you? Do you have to sell to go on making? Is selling your primary goal or just a pleasant add-on?



You can think about your career trajectory. Do you need growth? In audience, in sales, in importance, in the amount of attention you receive? If so, how much change do you want to see? Or are you happy where you are at your stage of art and happy to stay there.

Your exhibiting career can provide you with response, information, fulfillment, and new opportunities to go on creating. And if you know what you want from each experience in your career, you're much more likely to get it.

MISTAKE 5: TARGETING THE WRONG AUDIENCES

Are you offering works for sale and no one is buying? Sending out exhibition submissions and proposals and not having them accepted? Be sure that you're targeting the audiences that are right for your work, whether the audience is the immediate viewer or the gallery itself.

Different types of audiences and exhibition spaces have different characteristics, approaches, needs. Can those you're focusing on provide what you need? Can you provide what they need?

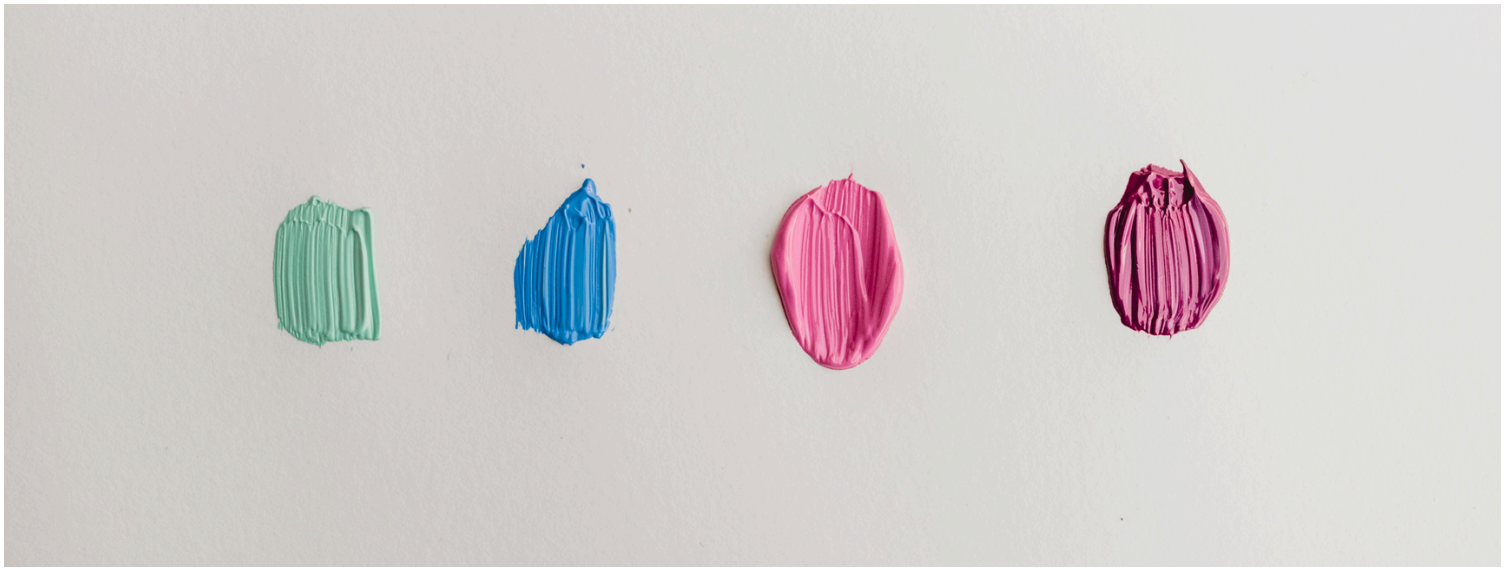
The artist who has been selling and exhibiting for years may appeal to audiences and exhibition venues that vary from those of the emerging artist. The artist who is experimenting and breaking new ground may find viewers who are unlike those of the artist working in established media and methods.

At the same time, the gallery that shows to serious and well-funded collectors may look for different artists and artworks than the gallery whose main purpose is connection to its local community. And the gallery or exhibition that focuses on a particular medium, form or subject will accept proposals from artists who meet those requirements rather than from artists who don't.

Do your research. Visit the venue and look at its website. Talk to other artists or to a mentor.



**Think hard about whether your conclusions
are based on what's there
or only on what you want to see.**



MISTAKE 6: SHOWING INCONSISTENT ARTWORK

The work you offer needs to be cohesive. It doesn't have to be repetitive or predictable, but it must show you have a vision, concentration, and focus. If you demonstrate that you have a real understanding of the way you have chosen to work, you will gain more respect and attention than if you express more superficial knowledge of several unrelated themes and forms.

Of course, this doesn't mean that your art can't and won't change, or that you can never explore new subjects or mediums. It does mean that the audience who sees your art at any one time has a better chance of understanding and appreciating it if you help them do so.

How does this work in practical terms? If you decide your exhibition is going to be about the value of an undisturbed natural environment, and you're going to say this in oil paints because of their richness of colour, and on small sized

canvases to draw the viewer in, don't add two large portraits of historical figures important to the region and one piece of pottery made from local clay. The pieces that don't fit are distracting and will take away from the viewer's ability to go with you into your landscape.

If your exhibition is a retrospective of your last ten years' work in abstract welded steel, but you've recently followed your heart into an exploration of the sculpted head in bronze, save these works for the next show. Your audience hasn't had the time you have to make a transition and will find it confusing.

If you need 12 works for an exhibition and you've got 10 pieces you know are really good and two that aren't resolved yet but they'll make up the numbers, have a smaller exhibition and spread the pieces further out in the space. Every exhibition deserves your best work.

If you still aren't sure, talk to a respected advisor, whether that's an artist whose opinion you trust, or a gallery professional. Or a mentor.



Make it as easy for the gallery or curator as possible

MISTAKE 7: NOT FOLLOWING THE INSTRUCTIONS

If the exhibition venue or experience you're interested in provides guidelines on how to submit artwork or what to submit, follow them. Your motto needs to be: Make it as easy for the dealer or curator as possible. Because the opposite - making the curator's or dealer's task more difficult - won't make your artwork stand out or seem more attractive. Even if the exhibition venue doesn't state guidelines, that doesn't mean it doesn't have preferences. Find out what they are.

Some possible options:

- How does the gallery or exhibition want to receive your submission? In a web form, an email, a letter?
- How many images are required?
- What format should your images be in?
- What size files?
- Is an image list required?
- What information needs to be on it?
- Is your image list in the same numerical order as your artworks? (It should be!)
- Do your images represent your artworks fairly? Are the photos sharp and clear? Is the colour accurate?
- Do you need to provide details of the pieces as well as complete images?
- Does the artwork need to be currently available, or is a representative sample okay?
- Do you need to provide support material, such as a CV, bio, website URL, or social media links?
- Is there anything else you need to find out? Follow the instructions.

Whether your exhibition experiences always run smoothly or not quite so much as you wanted, you can make your exhibiting career better if you don't make mistakes 8, 9 and 10.

MISTAKE 8: MAKING ASSUMPTIONS

It doesn't matter whether you're dealing with exhibition submission preferences, or responsibilities in a contract, or expectations for action. Do not guess. Discuss everything. Clarify. Ask questions. If you aren't sure what's required, find out. If you develop new questions or concerns over time, state them. Neither you nor the exhibition space can provide what isn't asked for.

Please be assured that none of this needs to be aggressive. You and this gallery or exhibition have a business relationship, whether it's a brief encounter or long term. All you need to do is find out what is expected. Then you can consider whether this is an expectation you're able to meet. If it isn't, why not? Is there anything that can be adjusted? Not every unmet expectation is a relationship breaker.

Remember that you can always come back and ask more questions. You never have to get everything right the first time. Remember also that the same goes for the gallery. Everyone makes a mistake sooner or later. The best relationships develop through trial and error and goodwill.

And never assume that because one relationship doesn't work out, or you hear one "no" from one exhibiting venue, this is what will happen everywhere. Don't decide that you'll never fit into the gallery world. Don't decide that because one place turned down your proposal, they all will. There's an audience for every artwork and a place for every artist. Part of your job is to find it.



MISTAKE 9: ASCRIBING INTENT TO THE UNINTENTIONAL ACTIONS OF OTHERS

The gallery that hasn't got back to you? The owner just found out that the building the gallery has been in for 14 years is being torn down and the gallery has to move. She isn't even sure if the gallery will be operational in six months.

That juried exhibition you didn't get into? It had space for five artists and 40 submitted really good proposals. The jurors liked your work. They just couldn't take everyone and they felt really badly about it.

That exhibition opening reception that wasn't as well attended as you had hoped? The organizers did everything they could think of to promote it and actually thought the turnout was good, given you live out of town and your art isn't well-known in their area. They wish you appreciated what they tried to do.

Almost no one in your exhibiting career will set out deliberately to thwart you. Happy exhibiting artists don't take things personally.

MISTAKE 10: BEING DIFFICULT

If you get a reputation for being argumentative, dissatisfied, ungrateful, self-centred or unreliable, that reputation will follow you. As in most careers, talent and hard work are better served with good relationships than with poor ones. Building those relationships can be one of the most effective things you do.

You don't need to change your vision or be a doormat or abandon your principles.

But if you pay attention, honour your commitments, respect the venue's knowledge and expertise, and recognize that other people care as much as you, you can help to give your artwork its best chance possible.



Be nice. The world is a small town.

(Austin Kleon, *Steal Like an Artist*, Workman, 2012)

Final Words

It's true that your career as an artist will depend on others, as well as on you. But as a world full of therapists, life coaches, and twelve-step programs will tell you, the only person whose actions you can control are your own. If you maintain your art practice, make it easy for exhibition venues to find and exhibit the art you make, and act professionally, your exhibiting career can be as rich, fulfilling, and rewarding as you've always wanted it to be.

Do you want more help?

I love offering my familiarity with all aspects of the artist's career to others who just need some gentle guidance to make their next art career step a successful one. If you'd like to work within a supportive and collegial mentorship group through Mastrius, it would be great to see you there.



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Notes