

Cracking the Code

Written by Lenny Campello



In these days of economic woes across the nation, around the Greater DC area a running commentary is how the bleak economic issues haven't had the same disastrous effects on the area's economy. The usual reasons given are the large number of government employees in the area, as well as the equally large amount of government contractors making a good living by working indirectly from Uncle Sam. Add a few gazillion lawyers and a googolplex of hi tech jobs, and our area has not been as adversely affected as the rest of the country.

However, an area which has been directly hammered by our wobbly economy has been the capital region's commercial art venues, several of which have closed their physical locations, and either said goodbye forever or gone completely virtual in a proven path to save high rent expenses.

All galleries everywhere, including fabled places like New York and LA, struggle to survive and sell work in order to pay the artists, pay rent, pay for publicity, pay for openings, pay for

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electricity, pay for websites, pay for the plumber the 2-3 times a year that somebody flushes a sanitary napkin (or one of those indestructible hand towels) down the toilet at an opening and clogs the pipes, etc.

Selling art is not an easy task for the most adept of galleries and gallerists. The tales of sold out shows and shows that sell out before the openings are sometimes true, but also sometimes exaggerated as a publicity stunt. I know for a fact of a former DC area gallery (no longer around) that used that storytelling line to create this "sold out" aura that was fabricated most of the times.

Selling art in the Greater DC region is an especially difficult task, and a hard one to understand considering this area's share of very, very wealthy people. 50% of the top 20 highest income counties in the United States are located around our region – 50%!

But cracking the code and getting people with disposable income to actually buy a piece of original artwork is a very difficult process, and unfortunately for the galleries and for artists, they only control a small part of it.

The most difficult part is getting people to actually know that there are galleries, and openings, etc. Getting the potential buyer to the gallery, or aware of the gallery or artist, is the key, and of course the most difficult part. But even though that our area is home to some of the most powerful media outlets on the planet, the local visual arts are most often ignored, so the "message" doesn't get across about the wealth of art and artists in our area.

And the apathy shown by DC area media towards art galleries and visual artists is multiplied by a thousand if you happen to be a cooperative gallery.

Art critics, writers who write about art, art bloggers, and other assorted scribes in the art scene tend to ignore cooperative galleries and their artist members. It is immensely unfair and short-sighted, and reflects an interesting sort of neo-conservative tendency in an otherwise very liberal crowd. Like the same group's general dislike and distrust of any artist who is liked by the public in general; or public art that the public likes. It's an interesting paradox that has always intrigued me.

I've never been a member of a coop gallery, but I have juried shows for coop galleries many, many times, and intimately know artists who have been and are members of cooperatives. Running an art gallery is not an easy task – as former *Washington Post* Arts editor John Pancake once told me, it is a "heroic act."

Running a gallery by committee, as coops by default are run (and non-profits are supposed to

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be run), must be the task from art hell. And like any committee running anything, 10% of the people usually end up doing 90% of the work.

It's a paradox of its own. The same strength (equitable distribution of expenses among artist members) that makes a coop nearly invincible to the economic forces that makes opening an art gallery the second riskiest business proposition in the nation (restaurants are first), is its most visible weakness (direction by committee).

Trying to convince 20 or 30 voting members to agree on what colors to paint the gallery walls must rank up there with trying to get any Presidential candidate to answer a "yes or no" question with a "yes" or "no."

Nonetheless, we are lucky in our area to have some of the best coops in the nation. I say this after having seen the sort of art that coops from other parts of the country bring to art fairs in Miami, New York, etc.

Co-op galleries such as Gallery West and Multiple Exposures Gallery in Old Town Alexandria; Waverly Street Gallery in Bethesda, Maryland; Touchstone, Capitol Hill Arts Workshop, Foundry, Washington Printmakers, and Studio Gallery in the District; and Artists' Undertaking in Occoquan, Virginia have been around for decades and testify not only to the staying power of coops, but the high quality of the art that they offer to the public.

Illustrating this article, you can see some of the excellent work currently on display around some of these venues. Go see (and buy) some art!