



Artexpo New York City

Artexpo New York CEO Eric Smith discusses the background of Artexpo and the benefits of trade shows for artists, collectors, and galleries.

Can you share the story of how you got involved with Artexpo New York?

Eric Smith: I grew up racing and riding motorcycles, and in the mid-'80s I worked for Bell motorcycle helmets. The motorcycle industry was in decline at the time, so my brother-in-law — who owned an art and framing gallery — said to me, “You know, the art industry is a really fun industry. There’s this terrific gallery called Martin Lawrence Galleries, and if you’re thinking of changing fields I suggest you interview with them.” The rest is history.

I got involved with running retail locations, publishing, and even selling names like Warhol and Keith Haring. During that time, I really developed a deeper appreciation for the arts, fell in love with fine art, and started my own private collection, which I am still adding to. Martin Lawrence happened to exhibit annually at Artexpo, so from 1990 on I became a part of Artexpo, never thinking that one day I would actually own the show. Really, it was Martin Lawrence that started my ride with Artexpo.

How has Artexpo evolved over the years?

As the art world has changed, so has Artexpo. In fact, I can remember when traditional publishers occupied 80 percent of the show floor, and there weren’t any giclées or digital print images on display. Everything was paintings, serigraphs, and lithographs. With today’s technology, it’s much easier to reproduce your art, so the barrier of entry is lowered and many more artists are able to participate, which really diversifies the offerings and makes the shows that much more exciting. There’s always something new to see.

One of the biggest developments with Artexpo is that we now have many artists in the show representing themselves independently, especially in our SOLO pavilion. It’s a less expensive booth space that’s designed for emerging and career artists to put their work on a national stage in front of art industry experts, buyers, and consumers. From the perspective





of someone running the show, it's a wonderful thing to see an artist get discovered, and in the SOLO pavilion we've had many, many artists who've been discovered.

That's the point of exhibiting: to have somebody find you, take you under their wing, publish you, represent you in their gallery. We really do have a huge turnover. A lot of our SOLO artists get discovered, and they don't come back because they now have representation by galleries and publishers. Some of them do come back, though — for instance, if they've found two galleries to represent them, and now they want 10.

What is the role of trade shows like Artexpo and SOLO in the digital age?

Trade shows serve a purpose for prospective galleries and buyers to be able to see the work with their own eyes, to feel it, to have personal interactions with the artist. There's nothing more crucial than personal interactions when it comes to selling art, and it's hard to get that online.

Trade shows are a proven ground for any product, not just art. As an artist, there's no better way to sell a piece you've just painted than by standing in front of it, meeting a gallery owner, and telling your story about the piece right there. Every work of art has a story behind it, and that's a really strong part of the appeal. Then there are the colors and textures of the piece. Seeing a work of art in person versus on-screen is a whole different



world. There's nothing better than seeing it person.

Throughout your career, you've sold some pretty big names in art, including Rosenquist, Rauschenberg, Oldenburg, and





others. What is the most important thing you've learned about selling art?

Here's an interesting story: Back when I was with Martin Lawrence, we once found a young artist and purchased some of her paintings. Right off the bat, we did really well with them. People absolutely loved her work. We immediately signed a publishing contract with her to produce serigraphs, and I think we had about six finished when we decided to have a show along with a collection of some original paintings she had recently done. This was going to be our first show with this young artist.

We hung the gallery and did our marketing, and we had a huge turnout. Immediately after the show opened, somebody asked me if they could meet the artist, and I introduced them. The gentleman asked the young artist a question, "Why, specifically, did you paint this scene from this particular vantage point?" The artist responded, "I don't know. I just felt like it." Right then, I realized she came across as having zero personality, and this would really hamper her sales. I had to train her how to be personable.

My point is that an artist is really somebody that the rest of the world looks at — and rightly so — as having a special talent, and they want to hear how the artist creates his or her work, what inspires them, how they translate their talent into the work on the canvas. As an artist, you have to vocalize yourself, communicate to buyers, tell a story about every piece of art.





What would you tell an artist who is on the fence about exhibiting at a trade show?

I would tell them that trade shows offer invaluable opportunities for face-to-face marketing and networking. At SOLO, for instance, exhibiting artists will not only see the trade and consumer attendees at their booth, they'll see the many publishers and exhibitors, like Nan Miller and Editions Limited, that participate at the main floor and also shop the SOLO pavilion and look for new talent. We're in our sixth year of SOLO shows, and the track record has been very, very good for our exhibiting artists.

If artists feel they're not quite ready to exhibit, I recommend they come as an attendee and get the lay of the land. They'll see how to set up a booth, get a sense for the traffic, what kinds of work people are selling, how they market themselves, and so on. Typically, when artists see how much traffic is at the show, they immediately sign up for the next year. And we're happy to talk things over with prospective exhibitors. Financially, the model of our business is to fill up a trade show with booth space, but we are also here to hold the hands of artists and walk them through the process. If we think you're not ready to attend Artexpo, we'll tell you.

What words of advice would you give to an artist who is planning to exhibit at an upcoming trade show?

Plan ahead. Use every tool that you can to market yourself and make sure to maximize your time at the show. For example, on the

Artexpo website, we can rotate in pictures of exhibiting artists' paintings right on our homepage slideshow. We offer logos on the site for artists to use in their marketing materials and invites. Most trade shows offer all manner of resources to help you promote your exhibit. Make sure you work closely with the organizers and get your name out there well in advance.

At the show itself, the most important thing you can do is stand up in your booth and invite people to look at the art. Engage people, start conversations about your work. The one thing I hate to see is people sitting at their tables looking bored, not smiling. It's just not very inviting to the people walking by.

How is the buying market at art trade shows in light of the recession?

It's actually the best time to exhibit! There's no better time to exhibit at a trade show than in a bad economy. The majority of our February 2009 exhibitors really did well this year, partly because there were fewer exhibitors. And all economic indicators are pointing for a much better 2010. Besides, art and music are two timeless commodities. As long as artists continue to create beautiful, inspiring pieces, there will be an audience there to enjoy, collect, and purchase their works.

Freelance writer Christine Schrum interviewed Artexpo New York CEO Eric Smith for this article.

