INTERVIEW WITH ANA SAMOYLOVA

Establishing Gallery Relationships

Ana Samoylova is a Miami-based photographer whose work explores themes of environmentalism, consumerism, and the sublime image. She explores photography through prints and exhibition installations, and is currently represented by three galleries: Dot Fiftyone Gallery (Miami), Galerie Caroline O'Breen (Amsterdam), and Galerie Peter Sillem (Frankfurt). In this conversation, she candidly speaks about her involvement with galleries and navigating the muddy waters of representation.

LensCulture: I want to start by going back to your MFA studies, because it's a path that a lot of artists take in order to explore their work and bring a sense of legitimacy to their practice. When you were in school, did working with a gallery feel accessible to you? What was your perception of galleries at this stage in your career?

Ana Samoylova: It was all incredibly opaque. No one in my MFA program explained that world to us, and I think many graduate programs are like that. People generally understand the application of your MFA as either a pathway to teaching, or miraculously figuring out how to operate as an artist. In my experience, many people who do MFAs disappear and fade away. It's more common for people to not make it than to make it, and that opacity about galleries doesn't help.

LensCulture: How did you maintain involvement in the industry after your MFA came to an end?

Ana: As a student, I knew that it was up to me to do research and figure out the structure of the industry on my own. I got a teaching position right out of grad school, but I realized early on that I didn't want to teach full-time. There is the initial fantasy of getting a tenure track position, and when I achieved that, I quickly understood that it didn't fix my problems. I'm not the kind of person who can coast, so I was giving my best efforts to something that was essentially meaningless to me. In the same way, there's this fantasy that a gallery is going to solve your problems. As artists, there is an antiquated perception of galleries as dealers who apply for grants for you, giving you a spectacular show that's covered in the press, generating sales—ultimately, we think that galleries will make our careers sustainable. The truth is, those days are long gone.

LensCulture: How, then, did you begin partnering with galleries? What were the considerations you made before establishing a collaboration with them?

Ana: After my MFA, I started showing my work at a lot of juried events and open calls, which also meant I started getting a few sales. For galleries, working with an artist is a business partnership, because as an organization, they are also trying to survive. They need to believe that the work is strong in a conceptual sense, but they also need to be sure it is sellable, so being able to demonstrate that I had sales was crucial.

That being said, it took me some time to find the right fit. Once I started to see what was selling, I could have gone into tunnel vision, only focusing on making simpler things that appealed to buyers. We see this all the time at art fairs, which are never the best indicator of "good art"—a lot of it is really decorative. Some people want to move in that direction, but the important thing is understanding what you want for yourself. I have always made strange, challenging work, so when it sells, it's always a miracle for me. In the end, I would say the two main factors that helped me appeal to galleries were: getting my work into private collections, and then getting press coverage.

LensCulture: A lot of artists think that all press is good press, and there's a sense that getting your work paired with any text is good, even if it's a regurgitation of your own artist statement. What's your take on this notion?

Ana: Not all press matters. I have been approached by others to use my work in their publications, and they will literally copy and paste my artist statement. You have to be very conscientious of this kind of editing, and start asking yourself what the point of it is.

LensCulture: That's important for artists to know: you are allowed to have standards for how your work is presented. I think that maps on to working with galleries, as well. Good quality partnerships take patience and mutual understanding, and many artists simply focus on getting into *any* gallery. What were some of the criteria that were important for you when you were looking at galleries to partner with?

Ana: The fact is, there are way too many artists for the number of galleries that exist. And even then, there are too many galleries that end up being flukes. Many places do calls-for-entry where artists have to pay a fee, and that's when you start entering a grey area. But if we aren't thinking about those types of institutions, and you want to approach a gallery to be a permanent part of their program, you have to look at their existing artists. Are they artists with whom you've already shown your work, or artists who you've been compared to? Are there parallels without being too similar, so that you can remain distinct?

Usually galleries try to diversify, having mediums other than photography, but in a gallery that only represents photographers, they likely specialize in collectors who understand the medium. There are pros and cons to both of these situations. In a multimedia gallery, you might be one of a few photographers, meaning your images can stand out, but many of these galleries don't push photography as much as other pieces. In the general hierarchy of works of art, photography falls quite low on the spectrum of desirability for a typical collector who might understand a painting, but doesn't understand why an edition of five prints is as expensive. On the flip side, in a photo gallery, you are shown alongside a number of other photographers who might be more compelling for collectors interested in the medium.

LensCulture: There is so much information out there for photographers about how to pitch to curators, editors and galleries, and it often focuses on things like the length of a PDF, the length of an email, or the formality of your pitch. How do you approach your partnerships with galleries and other institutions?

Ana: Something I learned after I left the cozy bubble of academia was that outside of that world, nothing is guaranteed. You have to build a network for yourself, and I do hate that word because it sounds so business-like. But for me, it was actually about breaking down my own ego, where I thought things would just come to me. In reality, they don't. I'm from Moscow, and when I moved to the US I lived in the Midwest, but not Chicago; and then the Northwest, but not New York; and now I'm in the middle of the jungle in Miami. I realized that because of my location, things wouldn't come to me.

On top of that, I'm conditioned as a woman. There are some very aggressive players in this field, and that never felt natural to me—but there are ways to collaborate and meet people that are not aggressive. So when I say "network," I mean understanding that the career of an artist is not a solo endeavour. You also have to realize that your work is not for everyone. I have done my fair amount of reaching out, and if they don't respond, I don't take it personally! It's not about aggressively getting coverage for yourself. Rather, it's about framing your work as content for their publications, or a possible collaboration with you later on. And for the artist, the goal should be the contextualization of your work.

LensCulture: You've partnered with three different galleries, and I was wondering if you could speak about that decision. I remember when you were looking for your Amsterdam gallery, you did so much research.

Ana: I did! I went to Amsterdam while I was working on my project *FloodZone*, and I immediately noticed that the Netherlands has it figured out when it comes to photography. Amsterdam as a port for photography felt tangible, and that sparked my curiosity—there were so many museums specializing in the medium. I asked everyone I knew, with an understanding that there was a foundation of support for my medium, specifically. For example, I researched the same thing in Moscow, but the community just isn't there, and somewhere like France has particular tastes when it comes to photography. In the end, Amsterdam resonated with me when it came to what the institutions were doing. You have to find the right place.

I asked whoever I knew to put me in touch with people, and at some point a collector was visiting Art Basel in Miami Beach, and he came to my studio for a group visit. He was from Amsterdam, and I told him that I wanted something there that could keep me tied to the city. The next time I went to Amsterdam, I contacted him and he put me in touch with galleries directly. My advice is: go through collectors who buy from specific galleries, because their word weighs a hell of a lot more than cold calling, which I don't think works at all. He called up five galleries, and I had five meetings, and three out of the five gave me the green light. I went with my intuition when it came to who I settled with, which was the one that felt the kindest and most personable.

LensCulture: What are some red flags or things to keep in mind for photographers who are interested in working with a gallery?

Ana: This is why a network of peers is important. If anyone has strange stories about a particular place, it's important for you to know about them. I've had a lot of friends talk me out of galleries, too. Yes, galleries can be volatile, but galleries can also continue to operate and be successful after they have failed many people, even financially. There are so many cases where a work is sold and the artist is never paid.

LensCulture: That's so awful.

Ana: Exactly. So in that regard, you don't want to work with just anybody to get on the inside. You need to know where your losses could manifest. Are you responsible for shipping the work round trip? What happens if a piece is lost?

LensCulture: How has partnering with galleries affected your workload and your process, if at all?

Ana: It's not that I can just sit back, even with three galleries, and do nothing. In Europe, they have their own collector base, so they take on a lot of that promotion, but in the US I am very much hustling for my gallery. I bring my collectors to them, and they come to a show; I reach out to editors, and then I get press. Galleries don't have time to do all of that for you—they have their own contacts, and I have mine.

Again, my work is not formulaic, so it's not a minimal abstraction that anybody would want over their sofa. At the same time, I am not going to give up my complexity just to suit whatever sells, even though I have learned what sells with my work! So, it doesn't necessarily change your process, but it does validate your work, to an extent.

LensCulture: What are some final important points for photographers to consider about working with galleries?

Ana: It's important for people to understand that partnering with a gallery is a merging of contacts, and a gallery's contacts remain anonymous for the most part, while your contacts go in their rolodex. Once you start working with galleries, they expect you to not sell out of the studio, so if you have a history of studio sales, prepare to give up on that and prepare to have your cost consistent, because no gallery is going to work with an artist who slices half off the price in the studio while they are spending money promoting the artist. Once you are with galleries, you are selling through those galleries at a fixed price.

Interview by Cat Lachowskyj

INTERVIEW WITH RONGHUI CHEN

Artistic Evolution through Exhibiting

Ronghui Chen is a photographer based between Shanghai and New Haven, where he is currently pursuing an MFA at Yale University. He grew up in Lishui, a small village in China's Zheijang province, and started making photographs in high school. His project *Freezing Land*, recently published as a photobook by Jiazazhi, is an exploration of northeastern China's youth culture and the tension between rural seclusion and urbanization. In this conversation, he shares how exhibiting his work has helped him better understand his practice as an artist.

LensCulture: When you first started photographing, what was your understanding of galleries and exhibitions? Did they feel unattainable and distant?

Ronghui Chen: When I first started photographing in 2011, I thought that galleries and exhibitions were just about the art market and money. I never thought that I could show my work in a gallery or attend a fair like Photo London, and you couldn't find much photography in China's galleries at the time. If anything, I thought that my work might have the opportunity to be exhibited at a photography festival. In China, the local government is willing to invest in holding photography festivals because they can attract many visitors to a given region, and photographers have the opportunity to exhibit their work and receive rewards, like money or project support.

LensCulture: At what point did you realize that exhibitions could be an interesting way to present the subject matter in your work?

Ronghui: In 2015 I went to Austria, where a large retrospective on Joel Meyerowitz was on display. It was the first time I had ever seen an exhibition solely consisting of photographs, and it was also the first time I saw large-format photographs made so beautifully. I had only seen his work on the Internet before that point, which was so different than seeing it in real life.

Cover Images - LEFT: Untitled, (Doilies #1), 2016. From the series "Mental Maps" © Marina Font.
RIGHT: Cheese Balls, 2012, from the series "Emergent Behavior" © Thomas Jackson

LensCulture: When was your first exhibition? What did it look like?

Ronghui: In that same year, I had my first solo exhibition at a non-profit organization in Shanghai attached to a cafe. At first I felt a little frustrated, because it wasn't a traditional white cube, but I soon realized that there were more than enough possibilities for interesting interaction. I primarily exhibited news photos about the refugee crisis in Europe, and the integrated space minimized the distance between my photographs and the audience. I also held two sharing sessions to introduce my work, and the exhibition ended up attracting more than 10,000 people.

LensCulture: How have you exhibited your work since then, and what are the things you pay attention to when considering an exhibition of your work?

Ronghui: After the first exhibition, I started getting more exposure, and I held three solo exhibitions and participated in more than twenty group exhibitions around the world, from China to Arles, New York, Amsterdam, and Paris. Photographic exhibitions often need to re-export works, because transporting photos is very expensive, so I usually re-export photos locally. This means that I find a way to make samples for the curator, so that the output is more accurate, and then I make adjustments according to the venue. I pay more attention to the lighting conditions than the size of the wall, because the lighting in different scenes allows viewers to have multiple experiences of the work. For example, some of my exhibitions in the Netherlands and France were in churches or historical relics, so I make the works have a dialogue with these sites, and then I'll adjust the size and materials. If it is in a fully-enclosed white box, I choose my fixed output size and paper.

LensCulture: How has exhibiting your photographs changed how you think about your work?

Ronghui: I think that a photograph is complete only when it is finally printed, rather than when I press the shutter. When I work, I think about the exhibition situation, because that is how viewers interact with my photographs. I want people to see how I think and view things as an artist. Many details of an exhibition, such as the size, location, and sequence of images, slowly form in my mind as I walk through a space. Of course, sometimes when I have the opportunity to exhibit at a good museum or gallery, I wonder whether I have enough good work to present. When I was in New York, I would often visit bigger museums and galleries, and I would imagine that it was my exhibition on view, thinking about how I would present my work in the space, and how the audience would see my work.

LensCulture: So when you make images, do you think about how they will look exhibited?

Ronghui: I focus on ensuring that I am making a good photograph. Exhibiting is not the purpose of the artist's creation, but a way for the artist to display their work. As long as my work is good enough, I can definitely find a way to exhibit it. Good curators also help artists sort out a good context or sequence to display work. That being said, my creative methods determine certain exhibition factors. For example, I have always liked shooting with large-format cameras, so my print size is relatively large.

LensCulture: Do you think exhibiting your work shaped how you put together your first book, *Freezing Land*? Do you prefer seeing your work as a book or in exhibitions?

Ronghui: When I was first working on *Freezing Land*, I wanted to present it as an exhibition, not a photobook. In fact, I had the idea to make a photobook after quite a few exhibitions of the work. In this era of rapid change, publishing a photobook is even more difficult than making an exhibition. With a photobook, I have the opportunity to present my work in its entirety, which is different from an exhibition, where I only have the opportunity to show a small sample of my photographs. In an exhibition, I show new possibilities with each installation, such as adding archival materials, video, or some other multimedia interaction. I want everyone to find something new in the exhibition environment.

LensCulture: Have you ever thought about gallery representation? Do you think it is necessary for emerging artists?

Ronghui: I think it is a complicated situation. When I was in China, I was in contact with some galleries, and I also cooperated with some agencies. There, many people, including those in the art system, do not understand contemporary photography that much, so galleries are a good way to disseminate the idea that photography is an important medium in contemporary art. For me, working with galleries is a current choice, but it wasn't necessarily a goal.

I think the biggest advantage of gallery representation is more people seeing my work offline. Galleries participate in photography fairs and exhibitions, such as Photo London or AIPAD, and although the Internet is very convenient, offline viewing and online viewing are completely different experiences. I want to ensure that people can see the materiality of my photos, rather than experience them as electronic images.

LensCulture: What's next for you in terms of exhibitions? Is there anything you would like to try in an exhibition space that you haven't yet?

Ronghui: In my latest solo exhibition I added more media, including videos and text. I hope to find a more powerful way to present still photos in future exhibitions, because I think there are many possibilities for still images.

— Interview with Cat Lachowskyj

How to Approach a Gallery

INTERVIEW WITH KAYCEE OLSEN

Kaycee Olsen is an art advisor who designs exhibitions, coordinates museum acquisitions, and represents a myriad of photographers. Before Von Lintel, Olsen was the director of Kopeikin Gallery and ran her own gallery, Kaycee Olsen Gallery, also in Los Angeles. In this conversation, she speaks about fostering a relationship with a gallery and how to tell if your work has appeal.

Cover Images: From the series “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” © Jeff Sheng

LensCulture: What do you find rewarding about working with an artist?

Kaycee Olsen: I enjoy having a relationship with the artist and working on shows alongside them. It’s an incredible feeling when you work together to decide on the direction of an exhibition—such shows are very much the byproduct of that relationship. Also, as a gallerist, you form very close relationships with your collectors. Sometimes, the collectors even end up fostering the artists directly; they’ll be supportive about buying work from new shows to donate to museums, or they will help raise money to publish books. The life-cycle of an artist and an artwork is very interesting to me, so I truly enjoy that aspect of the job.

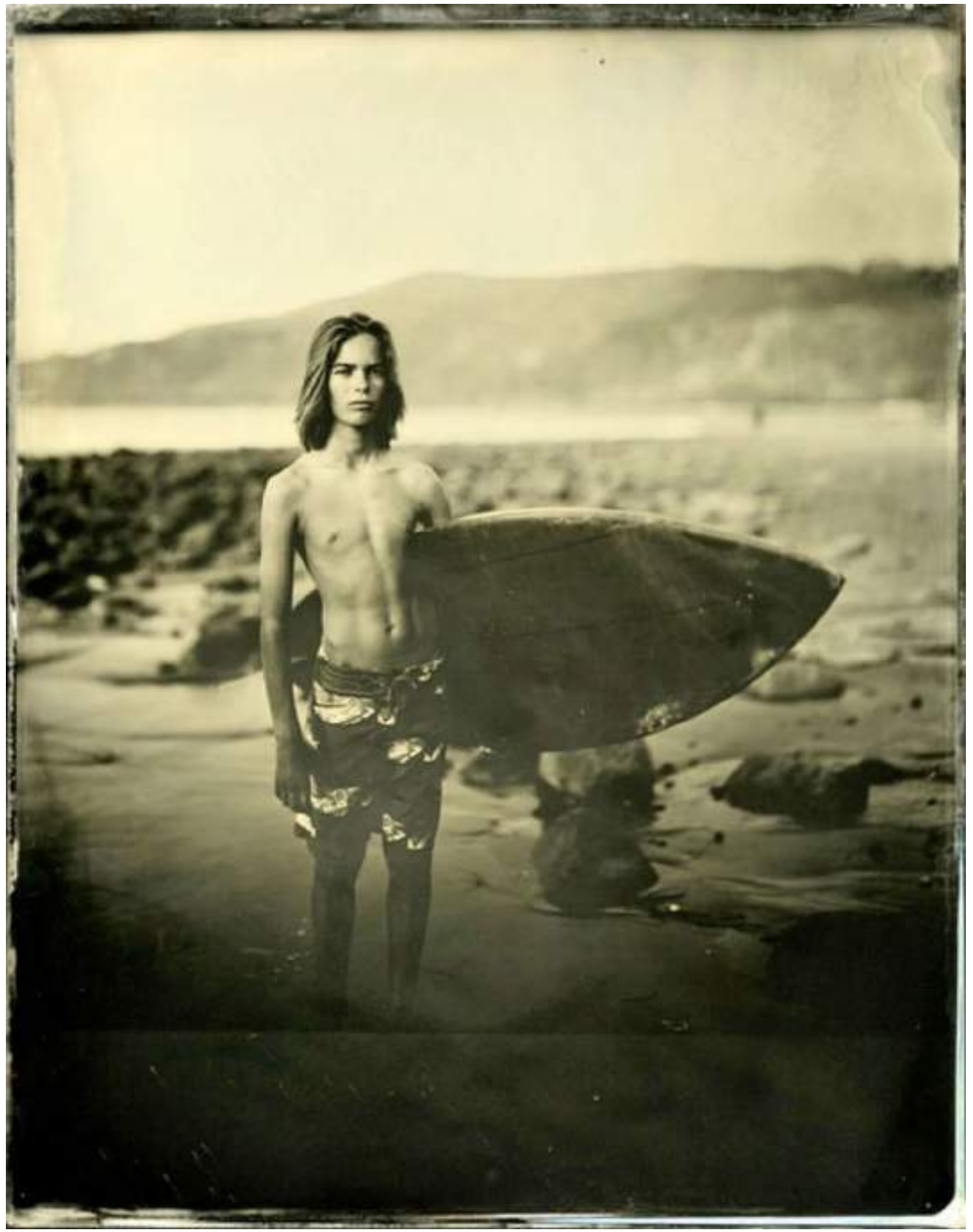
LensCulture: If a photographer does feel ready to start a relationship with a gallery, how should they go about it?

Kaycee: Here are my tips: first of all, you should go to the shows. It sounds simple but it helps a lot if the people working there recognize you. As a gallerist, one often receives cold calls or unsolicited submissions, and you can tell that these artists have never looked at the gallery’s program because they’re not a good fit at all. This is not a comment on the value of their work—but it’s essential to know your audience and who you’re showing your work to. Ultimately, the number one thing is that your photography should be a good fit for the gallery’s program. You should be able to say, “Yes, this makes sense in relation to their other artists.”

LensCulture: How do you tell if it makes sense?

Kaycee: When I worked for Von Lintel, almost every photographer we represented had an experimental process (with the exception of Edward Burtynsky). All of our artists pushed the medium in new directions—even Joni Sternbach, who uses a vintage process of wet-plate collodion, takes an old format and makes it new again. Klea McKenna is another great example. She's a camera-less photographer who makes photograms in all sorts of ways.

Another piece of advice is to make sure that your outreach is personal. If you can't make it to the gallery, make sure you're addressing the email to the Director, and make sure you know what you're talking about. How you approach a gallery is a very delicate process. It can make or break your relationship. I now have relationships with a lot of artists whom I met at portfolio reviews—I gave them feedback and then kept the door open to continue our conversation. At the time, none of them became people that we added to the program at Von Lintel, but if I meet someone who runs a gallery where they might be a good fit, I wouldn't hesitate to recommend an artist to that gallerist. In short: the more eyes you have on your work, the better.



15.01.29 #4 Henry (2015)

LensCulture: Did any of the galleries you have worked for have a system for appraising proposals from hopeful photographers? How does that process work?

Kaycee: It's very organic. Sometimes I would go to studio visits, and if I liked the work enough, I would share it with the owner of the gallery I worked at. I would also receive recommendations from our own artists, and that's honestly what I like best. I'm always asking the artists I work with, "Who are you into these days? What's new?"

LensCulture: Once you represent someone, how do you decide which series or which pieces are sellable or a good fit for the gallery?

Kaycee: Usually, galleries carry the artist's most recent work. That's generally the case for shows as well. At Von Lintel, if we saw something recent that we liked, we'd say "We'd like to do a show of that work," and then give them parameters for when we thought the show would take place. Then, they continued to work on the series and we would move things forward in the gallery. Sometimes an artist goes in another direction, and that's fine, but if we've already agreed on a show, we would often say directly, "Hey, this is great, but for the show I'd like to see something more in the direction we discussed before."

Galleries are usually not afraid to make suggestions. We never liked to give anyone firm directions, but everyone likes to know what is going to sell, and if we have an idea about that, we'll definitely vocalize it.

Konstrukt 83 (2012)

© Klea McKenna. Image courtesy of the artist and Von Lintel Gallery

LensCulture: And some collectors will also donate to museums, right?

Kaycee: Yes. When I worked at Von Lintel, we were very fortunate to have good relationships with collectors in town, and we knew that everything they bought would eventually end up at the Getty or at LACMA. We had a great relationship with the curators at those institutions—they're thrilled to receive the work. Sometimes a collector will even say, "Tell the curator to come and pick whatever piece they want for the museum collection." That's a best-case scenario!

—Excerpt of an interview with Coralie Kraft, updated by Serge J-F. Levy

Navigating the Artist-Gallery Relationship

INTERVIEW WITH DINA MITRANI

Dina Mitrani is the founder & director of Mitrani Gallery in Miami, Florida. After more than 20 years in the fine art world—both in Miami and New York—Dina decided to open a gallery focusing exclusively on photography in November 2008. In addition to running the gallery, Dina also served as an art consultant and advisor for both novice and established collectors at private and public institutions. In this interview, she offers advice on how to advance your photography practice, including tips about creating an eye-catching CV, working with collectors and clients, and more.

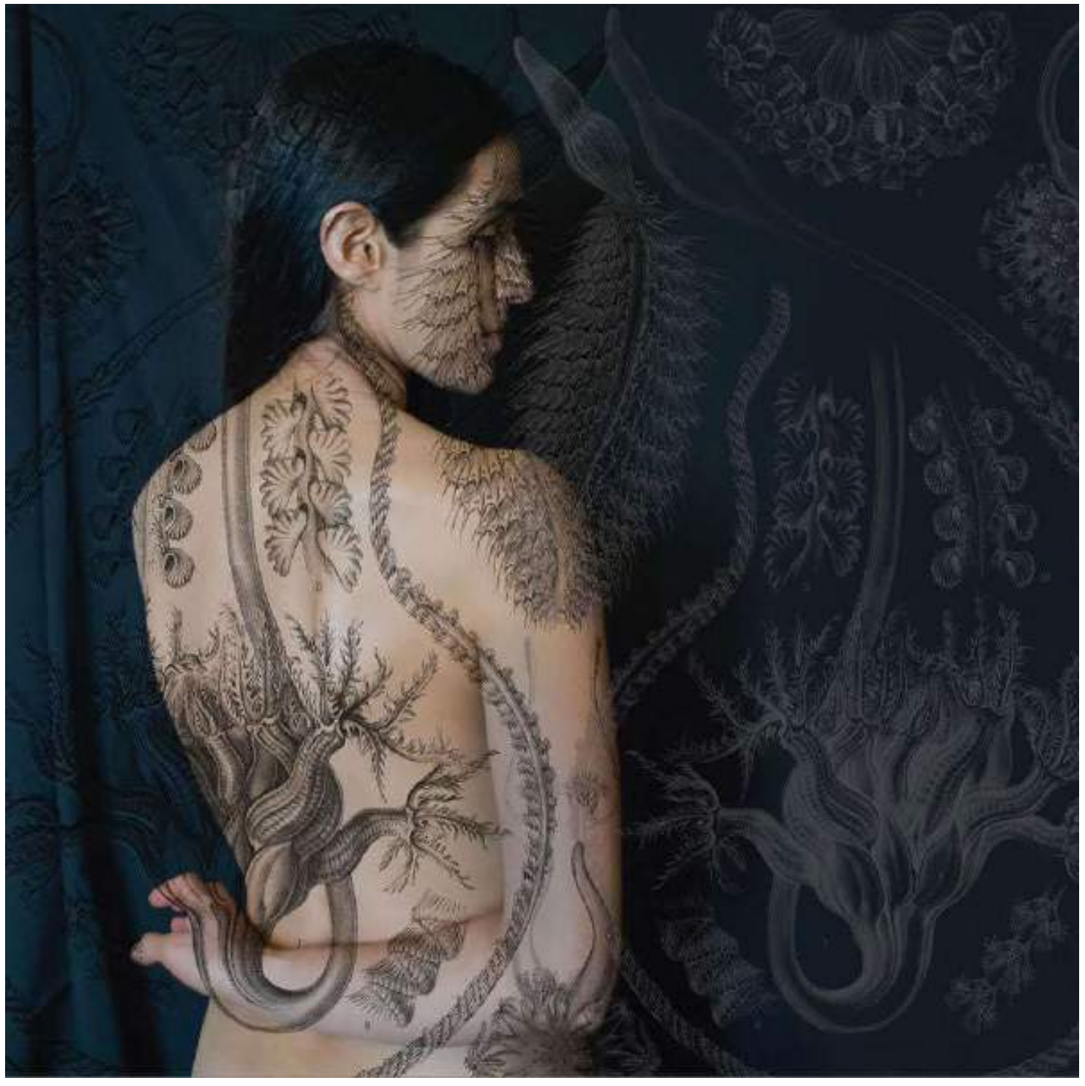
LensCulture: You've worked with experienced and inexperienced collectors and clients. How do you match a client with a piece of artwork?

Dina Mitrani: First, I need to understand the client's aesthetic sensibility—what are they looking for and why. I also need to consider where the work will be placed, what size would be best, and what their budget is. After all of those considerations, it's a process of making suggestions that I think might work. Sometimes a client knows exactly what they want; other times, it's a longer process of looking. In every case, I say that the image must be something the client loves to look at.

Clients should also consider an artist's career trajectory. A photographer's CV should show active participation in competitions, group shows, local museum events and exhibitions, photo-magazines, juried competitions and blogs, and anything that will show that the artist is not only making work, but also making sure that the work gets seen by their peers, professionals, and the general public. This is usually the most difficult thing for artists to do, especially introverted ones, but necessary to exemplify the artist's efforts to further their career. Even if the artwork is really good, it will not receive the recognition it deserves if it stays in the studio.

On the client side, I advise inexperienced collectors to start looking at art—not only in commercial galleries, but in museums and art studio complexes, where the artists are always happy to talk about what they do and how they make their work. All of these experiences help inform a client's choices. It's a process, but it's fun!

Cover Images - LEFT: Untitled, (Doilies #1), 2016. From the series "Mental Maps" © Marina Font.
RIGHT: Cheese Balls, 2012, from the series "Emergent Behavior" © Thomas Jackson



Universus #26, 2014 © Tatiana Parcero

LensCulture: Do you ever source photography for clients outside of your gallery? If so, how do you find it?

Dina: Having run the gallery for nine years, I have met many artists locally as well as throughout the country at photography festivals where I review portfolios. Sometimes, I see work that may not quite fit within my gallery's program, but it's still good, so I keep files on these artists. At times I have corporate curatorial projects like hotels, and I may include their work in those projects. I also occasionally receive inquiries from designers looking for specific images for a client's home. Many times, if my gallery artists don't fit what they are looking for, I may offer work by artists that I do not specifically "represent."

LensCulture: Is there anything you wish more photographers understood about the art market?

Dina: The art market is a complex place, and can be frustrating, but do not give up. Make your work and continue to promote it. Apply to festivals, group exhibitions, and online competitions. And remember that too many editions or sizes of one image is not better. Less is more. Also, an easy-to-navigate website is very important, as is the updated CV. If there is an artist I am interested in, I usually ask to have 10 to 15 low-resolution jpegs to add to a file on my computer. When I am looking for something in particular for a client, I usually scan all those files to see if something fits.

LensCulture: What do you look for in a project or photographer when you're considering them for your gallery? How do you find the majority of the photographers you work with?

Dina: Since I opened the gallery, the program has narrowed to focus on more conceptual and narrative photography. I am also interested in pushing the boundaries of the photograph and presenting works that combine different methods of art-making, like when a photograph is intervened with thread, paint, or drawing, and the final image is harmonious and impactful. Most of the time, the image itself must have a sort of visceral impact—something that enters my eyes and continues into my gut. Then the cerebral element must work. The artist's intention must come through the work. For me, art must have some element of the emotional—it should be moving.

LensCulture: Is there anything that will make you quickly dismiss a project? Is there anything photographers should steadfastly avoid when it comes to presentation or approaching you?

Dina: A person's manner, attitude, honesty and gratitude is very important. Many times, I may have an initial response to the work, but the personality of the artist is just as essential. The relationship between a gallerist and an artist is very much a partnership where both work together to produce an exhibition, hang the show, market, and ultimately sell the work to both private and public collectors. This means open, honest and easy communication is crucial. It's a bit like a marriage, which means both sides should give and get something from the arrangement.

Untitled (coffee cup), 2004 © Peggy Levison Nolan

—Excerpt of an interview with Coralie Kraft

05. WRAP UP

Congratulations! You have reached the end of our *Photographers' Guide to Working with Galleries*, a mighty resource for getting started with galleries. No matter where you're at with your gallery journey, we hope you arrive on this page feeling clearer about your direction and goals, and more confident in your work and professional materials.

Over the last four chapters, you've learned about

+ the different gallery types and how they work
+ what gallery is right for you and your career goals
+ how to prepare your portfolio and written materials to be seen by gallery professionals
+ strategies for making yourself known & building a community around your work

By completing each task, you have

+ become more clear on your career goals
+ discovered several galleries to approach with your work now or in the future
+ created or refreshed important professional texts to support your work
+ benefited from professional written feedback on your bio and project statement (optional)
+ allowed yourself the time to consider your portfolio deeply and prepare your images for presentation
+ identified ways to connect with galleries and your photography community

Well done! Working on the professional side of your practice is vital for your photography career. Investing time and thought via a methodical process of reflection, feedback and action will set you up for increased success, no matter the direction you choose to take it. With that in mind, be sure to take a moment to reflect on everything you have discovered through the chapters and tasks of this guide, and feel proud of the work you've completed. Bravo!

Enjoy the journey

Photographers' Guide to Working with Galleries provides a unique insight into the process of getting started with galleries, but we are fully aware that there is more than one path to success, and success itself is how you define it. The research and interviews we conducted while making this guide highlight how intimidating the gallery world can be for photographers, and perhaps even reading this guide makes you feel like there are many things to get right (or potentially get wrong) as you develop your own approach. With that in mind, we want to finish with a reminder to breathe, enjoy the process. and take things at your own pace. The most important thing is that you be yourself and make work that feels good for you. Take time to celebrate yourself, and if you're ever unsure of what step to take, always return to the thinking you did about your work and goals in the first task of this guide.

LAST CHANCE

LensCulture Fine Art Project Review

Before we say say goodbye, we'd like to remind you one last time about our *LensCulture Fine Art Project Review*.

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+ Your project images
+ Your project statement
+ You artist bio

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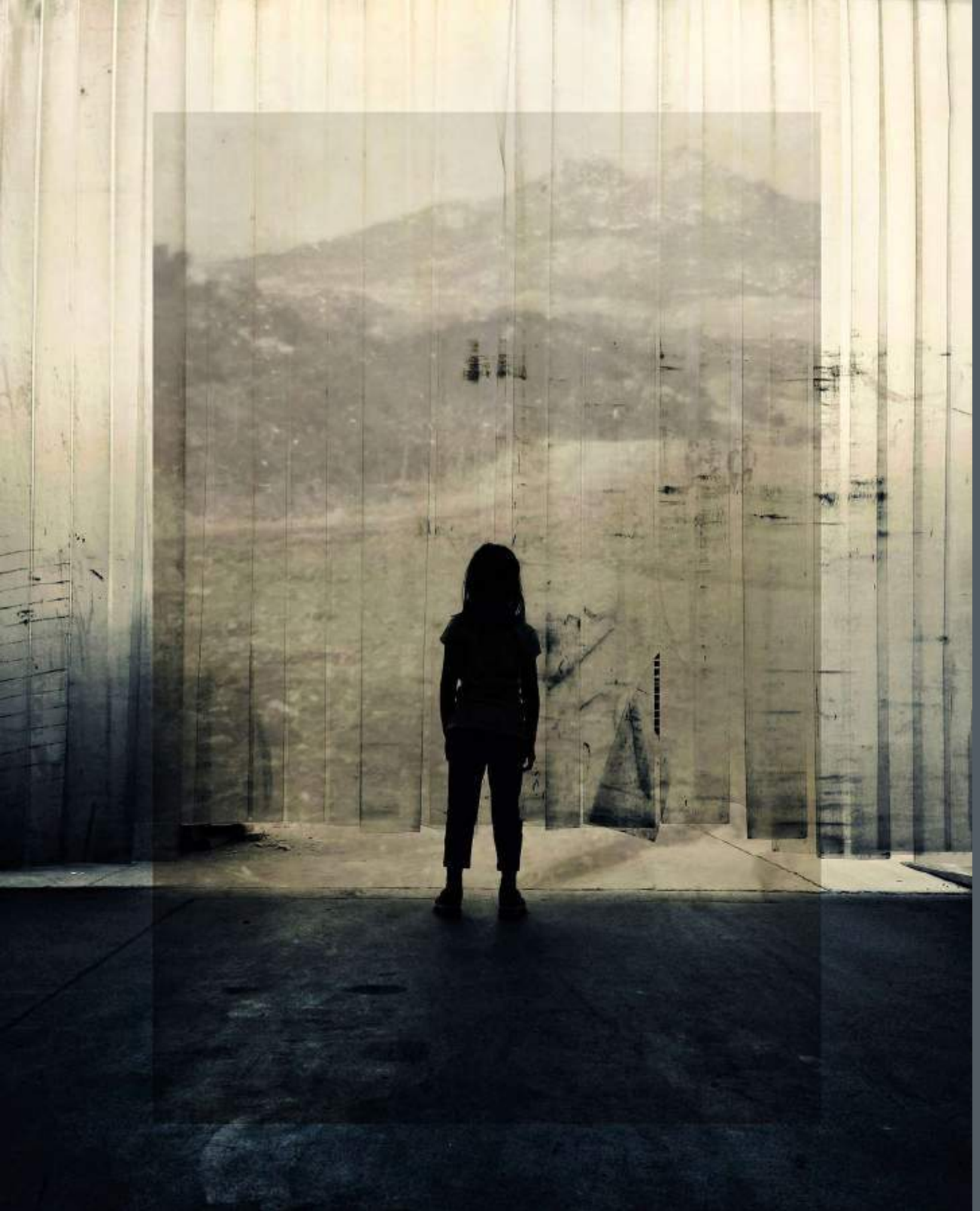
PROJECT REVIEW



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