

## Selling in Art Shows

Text and photography copyright Youssef Ismail. All rights reserved.

We all love taking photos, and that is why we are involved here at NPN. We sometimes see questions posed in discussion forums about 'what is next' or 'why photograph'. One answer is to get your photographic work out among the public to share your vision and passion, and hopefully to find that others find your work exciting, and maybe even want to own some it. There are many other reasons as well why one would want to start selling photography in art shows. Regardless of the reasons, there are many factors to consider before starting this endeavor. This article will touch upon some of those considerations.

### Assembling a Collection of Photos

Before one can start selling their photos, it helps to assemble a cohesive set of photographs that can be presented in a show setting. The body of work should concentrate on a given theme or a given location or subject. Twelve to fifteen photos makes a nice selection to work with. Possible themes could be water, fall color, or the seashore. As far as subjects, you might consider looking at trees for example, of a locality and photographed throughout the year showing them in different light. Or you could concentrate on a given location like a specific beach, or a larger scope like a national park, or even an entire state. I have tried a few different approaches, but have finally settled on just California landscapes. The images in my shows are all varied in subject matter and theme, but are linked to each other in that they all show one facet of the California landscape. Once you decide on the photos to include, they need to be printed, matted and framed. As a minimum, the photos you put on display should be at least

16x20 in size, matted, and framed. Matting and framing is subjective and varies from artist to artist. However, the standard matting among the art gallery and museum world is white cotton rag. I find it difficult to match matt colors to the photos. Furthermore, you never know if what you pick will match a patron's décor in their home. Keeping the matting as neutral as possible is the best bet. Frames are a personal choice as well. Again, keeping the frames simple and low key allows the patron's attention to fall on the photo and not the frame. I use simple black brushed anodized aluminum frames for their durability during transportation from show to show. In addition to the framed photos, having a selection of smaller matted photos is also a good idea. A collection of matted 8x10 and 11x14 enlargements allows for a choice in price and size that many patrons appreciate. In fact, the majority of my patrons purchase the smaller matted photos. It is common to see two to three smaller prints in each size of the framed photos that are hanging on display.



### Keeping it Legal

Once a collection of your photos have been chosen and printed, matted, framed and ready for sale, you must contact your local city and state governmental offices to file for a business license and/or a sellers permit. This will of course vary from place to place, but in most cases, a business license is required to operate as a business entity in most cities or counties. Furthermore, if merchants in a given state collect sales tax, then you will need to apply for a seller's permit and start collecting tax at the time you make a sale. Now this might seem taxing (pun intended), but having a sellers permit also allows you to make purchases of the raw materials needed to produce your photos tax-free. Items from the photo enlargements, to frame hanging hardware can be purchased at wholesale prices tax-free provided they become part of the final item for sale. You then charge the sales tax at the time of sale.

It would also be a good idea to seek out the services of reputable accountant as many of the expenses involved with photography can be shown as a tax write-off if approached properly. However, because photography is so wide spread as a hobby, the IRS is

very weary of persons trying to write-off their costly photographic equipment purchases in pursuit of their hobby. An accountant hired to file the tax returns, registering yourself as a business entity and obtaining a sellers permit all bring legitimacy to your endeavor and should not be made light of.

## Finding Art Shows

Now that you have established your business and filled your inventory, you are ready to take your work to market. The easiest market to get into is the Art and Wine street festival circuit. They literally litter the weekend landscapes and can be found most weekends across the country in the large and mid sized cities. Usually you will find these art fairs sponsored by local chambers of commerce, and once the promoter is identified, a telephone call or email soliciting an artist application gets the ball rolling. Keep in mind, that most of these art shows take place during fair weather months, and so most applications need to be sent in about 4 to 6 months in advance of the show. Thus, a summer show in June will need to be applied for in December of the previous year. Another great resource for finding shows is the Art Fair Source Book, which lists shows across the county and also ranks them in terms of sales. It gives the artist additional information about the show, such as what sells there, what sells well and what price range patrons of that show are willing to pay.

One thing to keep in mind with respect to these street fairs is that the promoters need to see your work as many of these shows are juried. The promoters want high quality work in the shows they promote. They will usually ask for 4 to 5 images of your work whether as small prints or as slides. I have my best selling images made in to 4x6 prints and duplicate slides that I send out with my applications. In addition to the images of your work, they will also usually ask for a photo of you in your studio creating your work. So get a friend or your wife, like I did, to photograph you at work in your studio matting or framing a photo, or of you, photographing whatever it is that you photograph. Lastly, they will also ask for a photo of your show booth. So now, you will need to search out and purchase some kind of portable show canopy. The styles of displaying in the street fairs are as varied as the artists who show in them. But by far the most common canopy is the collapsible show tent made by either Caravan or EZ-Up. These can be found online or from some wholesale outlets like Costco. So, shop around and find a good quality canopy that will give you years of reliable service. I would also suggest you purchase one that truly can be set up and taken down by a single person, since you usually have to do so single handedly. You will also need to have some kind of portable wall system used to hang the photos on during the show. You can try to make your own like I did in the beginning, but in the end I ended up purchasing a set of 9 cloth covered display walls from ProPanels. These walls are by far the most common walls used in the street fairs. They are lightweight, come in various widths, heights and colors and are actually quite attractive. They are a bit pricey, but at the same time if cared for properly can last years, so in the long term they are quite economical. I have had my set for nearly five years now, and they still look and function as well as they did when new. Do not forget you will also need a table for the smaller matted prints, with some display boxes or some print bins that can be purchased from art supply superstores like Dick Blick. These print bins are very nice, folding down for compact transport, and come in various sizes for a variety of print sizes. Once you have accumulated all the display equipment, set it all up in your backyard and then photograph it and include a photo of it with your application.



If you don't want to go through the hassle of purchasing all this display equipment and applying for the street fairs, then you could also search out local art museums and galleries that run open juried art shows. They are not as abundant as the street fairs and the jurying process is stricter. These shows also do not bring in the same number of patrons as the street fairs do but at the same time those who do frequent these shows are more serious art buyers than the street fair shopper and more likely to purchase a framed piece. The jurying process for this type of show is done in person, or in the least is made by viewing the actual framed piece or pieces being entered. In addition, these shows have some strict criteria as to the theme of the show and what art will or will not be allowed to enter.

## At the Show

Once you have managed to get through the jurying process and are accepted in a show the real work begins. First, you will need to



descend into the jungle of half assembled show canopies and the maze of vehicles cluttering and blocking access along the street the show is held on. I cannot over emphasize that the key to your surviving this phase is a good disposition and patience, not to mention arriving early – as early as the promoter will allow. The sooner you can arrive on site, the easier it will be for you to unload your vehicle, move it out to the parking area, and set up. Also be very courteous to your neighbors and help them out if they need it. A little good karma at this stage goes a long way. Most shows will give the artists about 2 to 3 hours to set up before the start of the show. And in some cases, the setup is done the day before the show. This tends to be much more relaxed than having to set up the morning of the show.

Once you are set up, take some time to relax and walk the length of the show and see what your fellow artists have to offer. If you find the same level of quality and price as your own work, you will be in good shape for making sales. I walk every show I enter, and look for all the photographers in the show. I examine their work briefly and what they are charging for their work. I do this for several reasons. First is to know what other photos are being offered in the show. If someone comes in to my booth, does not find what they are looking for, and asks me for something I do not have, I can direct them to another photographer who might have what they are looking for. At the same time, I ask the patron to let the other photographer know I sent them there. I feel this creates a very cooperative environment amongst my fellow photographers and would hope that they will react in kind as well when they do not have a photo of a subject that I have. Over time, you will find that you and the same group of photographers are in several shows together.

During the show, the name of the game is salesmanship. You should look professional by dressing appropriately. You should keep you booth as clean as you can and constantly keep you print bins from become disheveled. Greet your patrons when they come in. Let them know that you are open to answering any questions they might have, and then let them have some space to look at your work. Selling techniques vary from person to person, and I usually do not pressure anyone into a sale. If someone wants an image you have, they will purchase it. At the same time, it is not unusual to see the same person coming into your booth two or three times during the course of a show looking at the same photo. This usually means they are serious about a purchase and need just a little nudge to close the sale. If I see the same person in my booth three times, I will approach them and ask what they think of the photo, or I will ask them where they picture it hanging in there home. It gets a conversation started and in most cases a sale results. Show that you are interested in your patrons and be forthcoming. In some cases I have even let them take the photo home, if they are local, to let them try it out. Of course, I ask that they leave a credit card or their driver's license with me. I tell them if they like it, to keep it and just come back to pay for it, and if not just bring it back. Works like a charm.

Taking payment is a whole other ball of wax. Definitely, get a merchant account set up with your bank or with a credit card merchant service. The ability to make credit sales will most definitely increase your sales. At least 95% of my sales are credit card sales. You can go all out, getting the latest wireless equipment to process the card in real time right at the show or a simple card imprinter, and process the receipts later. Both have pros and cons, which should be evident. The wireless set up allows instant payment and receipting as well as knowing if a card is rejected or stolen, but all this comes at a steep service price as well as equipment cost. The old knuckle buster, as the imprinter is lovingly called, is very economical, but you never know if the card is good without having to call into the card processing center for authorization which takes time and could be inconvenient if sales are brisk.



At the end of the show, everyone is tired, some are very grumpy from having a poor show and everyone wants to get out of there as quickly as possible. However, I have found that if you just take your time and disassemble you booth and move it off of the street and wait until the chaos subsides, you can drive your vehicle in without hassle and load it up without the pressure of getting out of the way of some other irate artist. Yes, it will require you to be there longer and keeps you up longer than the others, but for me it is much less stressful and conducive to committing long term to this style of business.

## Post Show

Now that you have finally returned home, you will no doubt experience what some art show artists call “show lag”. It is a kind of ‘tired-don’t-feel-like-doing-anything-now-that-its-over’ feeling. However, this is not the time to slack off. In fact, if you have any other shows lined up in the near future, you will have to get ready for them by replenishing your inventory. You will need to reprint, mat and frame anything that was sold. You will also need to follow up with processing any credit card purchases, if you actually want to be paid for the photos you sold. Also of great importance is to start developing a database of patrons from each show you do. This will become invaluable in following years by being able to send them advance notice of upcoming shows in their area that you will

exhibit in. Furthermore, for any patron who made a large purchase, it is a good idea to follow up with them about a week or so after the sale with a letter of thanks for the purchase and even possibly sending them a smaller gift photo as a thank you. You would be amazed at the return business you can get from such simple things.

## Conclusion

What next? Making a living selling photography, like any other profession, takes a lot of work. Whether it is through the art show circuit, galleries or through the publishing world, you will have your work cut out for you. Make no mistake about it, the investment involved in getting to a show is real and you need to be serious about following through for at least a year to three years to start seeing a return on your investment. There are many great photographers out there and as we have read here in previous articles, finding a way to distinguish yourself from the rest will sometimes be the deciding factor of making it or not. The same is true in the art show world. Being unique with never-seen-before images will certainly help with sales. Presenting your work in a unique and distinguished manner also helps. In the end, however, your showmanship really makes the difference. Just like the ancient story of the candy merchant and his neighbor the vinegar seller. The candy seller was always grumpy and never greeted his customers with respect or treated them nicely, while the vinegar seller constantly out sold him everyday with a smiling face and respecting his customers as they came into his shop. Then one day the candy man asked the vinegar seller how it can be that he can sell more vinegar than he could sell candy, candy is sweet and vinegar is sour. The vinegar seller replied, "you my friend sell candy with a vinegar face, while I sell vinegar with a candy face."

## Resources

- Art Fair Source Book - [www.artfairsource.com](http://www.artfairsource.com)
- Caravan Canopies - [www.caravancanopies.com](http://www.caravancanopies.com)
- EZ-Up Canopies - [www.ezup.com](http://www.ezup.com)
- Pro Panel Display Walls - [www.propanels.com](http://www.propanels.com)
- Art Supplies (Dick Blick) - [www.dickblick.com](http://www.dickblick.com)

## YI-NPN 1234

Comments on NPN nature photography articles? Send them to the [editor](#).

[Site Map](#) • [NPN Membership](#) • [Front Page](#) • [Reader's Forum](#) • [Links](#) • [Gift Shoppe](#) • [Terms of Use](#)

Copyright 2000 - 2005, Nature Photographers Online Magazine, Inc. All rights reserved.