

# BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

Director, Bridgette Mayer was interviewed by Farrel Levenson- a student at the University of Pennsylvania who is currently taking an art and economics course. Studying the effects of the recession on the art market and other pertinent topics in the art industry, Farrel asked some interesting questions that pertain to the past several years of Mayer's business. Read on for an insightful look into gallery practices, pre, during and post-recession.

**Farrell Levenson:** What is your background/connection to art?

**Bridgette Mayer:** I studied studio art and art history at Bucknell University. I worked at the gallery there for four years to pay for my books and other expenses and I fell in love with the gallery job.

**FL:** What made you decide to open a gallery in 2001? What experiences prepared you to do so?

**BM:** I was living in Philadelphia and feeling very frustrated by working at a gallery where I did not like the art I was selling. I could not find a local gallery to work in that had the type of art I wanted to be around and to sell. I turned that frustration into an art consulting business and within a few months I had found some great Philadelphia artists and had sold their work (even to a cab driver!) and I realized I needed to go public and have a gallery space and not a private consulting firm.

**FL:** What has been the biggest challenge and greatest benefit of running a gallery?

**BM:** As of May 1<sup>st</sup> I will have been in business for thirteen years. I have had many challenges during that time. One of the initial challenges was that I was twenty-seven when I opened the gallery but I looked like I was twenty! I had a very impressive resume that I always had to explain to people to make them feel comfortable in buying art from me. I think when I reached the five year threshold of having the gallery some of those early people had become my best clients and continue to be to this day. Another challenge was understanding the accounting and financials around my business. I have a background in art history and marketing which is so different from understanding the financials in a business. I cannot even believe I did my own business taxes the first year. I remember feeling nervous that I screwed something up and that the IRS would be calling me. I hired an accountant the following year and a bookkeeper. I did everything in my business the first four years: all of the marketing and mailings, answering phones, hanging the shows and calling the clients, etc. I took me a while to be able to hire an assistant. Now I have four employees and a crew of part time vendors that work with me. I was working all the time – people would walk by and see me in my office at 2 or 3am.

The greatest benefit of running my gallery is that I drive the success and have a great team around me that works with me to achieve all of our outcomes. If myself or a team member shows up with an idea we can test it out immediately and that is really rewarding. The other aspect that I love is that I get to work with phenomenal artists and curate their works into the exhibitions that we put on. Finally, I love working with my clients and to really help them create their vision of an art collection. I have seen art transform people's lives, homes and work spaces. It is incredible to me.

**FL:** Have you survived a recession before? How does the experience of earlier recessions (for example the burst of the dot-com bubble in the beginning of 2001) compare to the recession of 2008?

**BM:** I have been in business now for almost thirteen years so I have survived two recessions and a lot of ups and downs. I opened my gallery in the spring of 2001 - our first opening was June 1<sup>st</sup>. We had a great month and then everyone cleared out of the city for the summer to go to the beach. When they came back

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in September we all dealt with 9/11 and business stopped for a few months for me. No one wanted to buy art. I sold one 400.00 print and made 200.00 that September. I paid my electric and phone bill that month and freaked out a bit as I was majorly eating into my savings. It took a few months for everyone to start coming out again and thinking about buying art. In 2008 I had several corporate projects happening that helped me tremendously. It really spoke to the quality of my clients and how they have built up over time because I was working with people that were not being affected by the recession which ultimately helped me to not be affected.

**FL:** What impact has the recession of '08 had on your decision to participate in ten exhibitions per year?

**BM:** My exhibition schedule has nothing to do with the recession. Most galleries do fewer exhibitions than us. We do one a month except January and August as our staff takes vacations. We also do art fairs nationally and are now going to be expanding into exhibiting in international art fairs. I don't focus at all on the word "recession". I find it creates fear for many people and I can't sell art if I am fearful or my clients are fearful. I am lucky to work with clients who are strong financially and who are not affected by the recession.

**FL:** Do your artists themselves behave differently during recessions? Do any exit, or, to the extent of your knowledge, take secondary jobs?

**BM:** A lot of my gallery artists have jobs that help them pay for materials and studio expenses. Some of them have experienced slower sales months, but conversely, they will have very high sales months as well. A lot of them are set up well financially and save their money when they are doing really well which helps them when sales are slow.

**FL:** What kind of art is most affected by the economy? Of the paintings, sculptures, and photography which the Bridgette Mayer Gallery exhibits, are all mediums equally affected?

**BM:** I don't think it is the kind of art that is affected by the economy it is the kind of business that is affected. A lot of my peers and colleagues have had to dramatically decrease their advertising, exhibitions and their presence. We have continued to grow - especially the past five years. I closed two years ago to gut out and renovate my gallery building and increased our square footage to 3,000 sq feet in a state of the art building.

**FL:** During recessions, what changes in art do you see? Does the quality or size differ?

**BM:** I observe my peers quite a bit and I do see a change in the quality of exhibitions and perhaps some artists create smaller artworks to be able to have people afford them. My gallery has continued to grow in the opposite direction. I have been bringing international artists to Philadelphia and shipping their works in which can get quite expensive. I have also continued to do more art fairs and I have just launched my first international artist in residency program.

**FL:** Has the gallery created financing methods for the customers?

**BM:** Yes. We allow people to place deposits down to hold art and some pay over time.

**FL:** If prices have changed, has this primarily affected the artist or gallery commission?

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**BM:** My pricing structure has not changed. Prices have gone up dramatically the past two years as I have added into my program internationally known artists – one recent artist has shown at the Venice Biennale and his price points are 5K to 65K. I almost sold out his show last February.

**FL:** What have you found the most effective strategy to be in encouraging business during a recession?

**BM:** Marketing.

## About the Author:



Farrell Levenson is a sophomore at the University of Pennsylvania planning to major in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics and minor in Consumer Psychology. As a part of her major, she is currently enrolled in a course called Art and Economics with Professor Gizem Saka. The course uses the perspectives and tools of economics to analyze questions arising in connection with culture and the arts.