

Artist How-To: Creating a Great Exhibition Proposal

What are art venues looking for?

by Luann Udell

What is an exhibition proposal? It's simply an artist's request for a show. A formal written proposal consists of a cover letter (introducing you, your work, and the theme of your proposal); images of your work (with titles, descriptions, and prices); a professional résumé or CV; and your contact information.

Let's say you've put such a proposal together. What happens *after* you send it, when it's reviewed by a gallery, art center, or museum? What do they look for in a proposal? And what makes a *great* proposal?

I took a peek behind the scenes and found insights that can help increase a proposal's chances of being accepted.

I interviewed executive director Susan Loring-Wells and store manager Linda Ruel Flynn of the Fiber Art Center, a regional arts organization in Amherst, Massachusetts. I sat in on a review session of proposals. I saw the submission of Massachusetts fiber artist Elizabeth Whyte Schulze. Her fall 2006 solo show, reviewed in the January/February 2007 issue of *Fiberarts*, came from that proposal.

I talked with Jane Sauer, fiber artist and owner of Jane Sauer (formerly Thirteen Moons) Gallery, a nationally known fine-craft



Jane Sauer, owner of Jane Sauer Gallery, Santa Fe.

gallery in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Vermont fiber artist JoAnne Russo, whose new basket work appeared in a small group show at the gallery in late 2006. I also spoke with Chris Rifkin, a board member at Fuller Craft Museum in Brockton, Massachusetts. And I made informal inquiries to other art venues along the way.

What I found is, there are no rules. No two places had exactly the same process or requirements.

Some receive countless proposals in a year. Others receive only a few proposals in a year or do not actively solicit proposals. Jane Sauer Gallery, for example, focuses only on the artists it already represents.

Some organizations, especially those inundated with submissions, have strict format requirements and procedures. Other, smaller venues are more informal and more willing to struggle through handwritten notes and cover letters.

Some review portfolios on a regular basis—once a month or twice a year, for example. Others review them “as soon as the pile gets too unwieldy” or “when I have time to read them.” Some have a formal review committee; others are more informal.

Such a wide range of review procedures may seem daunting. But all agreed on these tips for successful proposals.

1. DO GOOD WORK. Every person concurred: “It’s about the work.” It’s the single most important criterion for a successful proposal. High-quality, exciting, innovative artwork makes up for almost any other deficiency in presentation.

2. USE GREAT IMAGES. Your images may be the first, perhaps the *only*, introduction to your work the review committee will see. Bad or mediocre photography cannot do justice to good work. Your images may also be used to publicize the show in ads, brochures, and catalogs, so good photography is essential.

Since exhibits are often scheduled two to three years in advance, what if you are proposing a show based on work you haven’t made yet? No problem. Use images of past work and shows, along with sketches of your intended work. Schulze’s proposal for the Fiber Art Center included beautifully detailed sketches of new work. Her national reputation, her portfolio of past work, and an ongoing relationship with the center clinched the deal.

3. NEATNESS COUNTS. An organized, professional-looking proposal says a lot about you. “If the work is fabulous, we can forgive a lot,” says Loring-Wells at the Fiber Art Center. But a sloppy, amateurish proposal raises red flags—“difficult artist.” In other words, an artist who can’t be bothered to prepare a good proposal may also be imprecise about other details such as shipping dates, deadlines, and follow-up.

4. DO YOUR HOMEWORK. Research your target venues. Many post their guidelines on the Internet. You can also

check publications such as this magazine and *Art Calendar* for venues that are requesting portfolios and proposals for review. Read articles about gallery shows, research museums, and art organizations, and request information from targeted venues on submitting proposals. Talk with other artists for leads on promising venues.

Learn your target venue’s process, its focus, its mission statement. As with a grant proposal, aligning your proposal, your medium, and your subject with the venue’s mission statement and audience increases your chances of acceptance.

For example, the Fuller Craft Museum is currently committed to shows for established, regional artists whose work is nationally and internationally acclaimed. “This area is so rich in talented artists, we could go years and not exhaust our ‘talent pool,’” explains Rifkin.

Is the venue focusing on certain themes or trends? Perhaps it’s just had a fiber show and won’t do another for awhile. Or it hasn’t had a basket show recently and wants to round out its roster. Some venues balance easily accessible and cutting-edge work. A popular but “safe” show might appeal to a more general audience; a provocative show can generate tons of publicity and huge crowds.

“There are many business considerations to having an exhibit . . . not readily understood by the public,” Sauer says. “I

BELOW: Gallery views from the 2006 exhibition Daniel Clayman: Line, Form, Shadow at the Fuller Craft Museum in Brockton, Massachusetts. Clayman proposed this 16-foot-tall installation crafted from yellow paper and wire, which expanded on ideas of shape and translucency that he explores in his glass sculptures. Photos: Donna Eleyi.





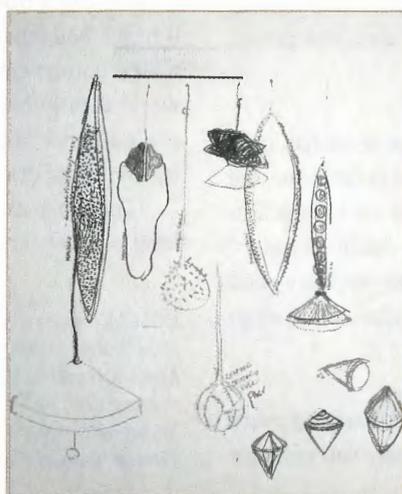
am a commercial gallery and not a nonprofit. I support the gallery with shows. I need to know the artists have work that's sellable in this environment."

A proposal that shows familiarity with a venue and its unique layout can be powerfully appealing. The Fuller Craft Museum has unusual wall space and display configurations. These are factors the staff considers when they evaluate proposals. Schulze created unique work for specific rooms and display areas at the Fiber Art Center, making her proposal even more irresistible.

Also, if your work is oversized or difficult to present (fragile, perishable, etc.), address those concerns in advance to keep your proposal on the table.

5. CREATE RELATIONSHIPS. It helps to have a history with a venue. Russo is represented by Jane Sauer Gallery, and when she asked Sauer for a show for her latest work, Sauer already knew the work would be fabulous. Russo proposed the show when her work took a new direction: her new pieces are larger in scale, are more sculptural, and incorporate more materials (such as hooks and eyes) and elements (such as beading) than her previous work. Schulze also had a track record: She has sold her work at past Fiber Art Center shows and lectured there, too. They know her and her work well and welcomed her proposal.

6. GET YOUR WORK OUT THERE. It helps to be visible. The Fuller Craft Museum's team often visits top-tier retail shows such as the Philadelphia Museum of Art Craft Show, the Smithsonian Craft Show, and CRAFTBOSTON to find exciting new artists and new work by established artists.



LEFT AND ABOVE: Elizabeth Whyte Schulze submitted sketches of possible installations with her exhibition proposal to the Fiber Art Center in Amherst, Massachusetts. The proposal resulted in a fall 2006 exhibition. Sketch photo: Olga Minkevitch. Gallery photo: John Polak.

Publicize the heck out of yourself. Get to know the curators, gallery owners, collectors, and other movers and shakers in your art/fine-craft world and medium. Put them on your mailing list. Send them postcards or notes when you win awards, get into prestigious shows, or are featured in magazines and newspapers.

7. FOCUS! Keep your cover letter succinct. Ask for what you want. (Do you want a show, representation, or simply feedback?) Keep your descriptions of process and themes short. Tell why you think your work is a good fit for the venue.

Does the proposal show a cohesive body of work and a distinctive style? Is the work itself varied enough to justify a solo show? If not, it can still be considered for a small group show.

8. START WHERE YOU ARE. Start small, and work your way up. Contact a local arts venue, and ask how to submit a proposal. It's easier to research a local facility, plus many such venues focus on local and regional talent. Or ask a store or gallery that already represents you for a solo show. Small solo shows build exposure and sales. As your reputation and following grow, target other venues further afield.

Or consider a group proposal. Group shows can be excellent, but take more time and work for any venue. Consider this innovative solution: In the mid-1990s, eight East Coast fiber artists banded together as "The Renegades" and created a group

portfolio that showcased each artist. The cover letter suggested several themes (women artists, fiber artists, etc.) that their work could target. It was a “group show in a box,” all packaged and ready to go. The approach generated several exhibitions.

9. BE VERSATILE. Find the venues for your medium—pitch fiber work to fiber venues. Conversely, find unusual tie-ins for your medium to other venues. Example: Jewelers who work in metal with fiber techniques (crocheting, weaving, etc.) could target fiber art organizations and galleries.

Museums, art organizations, and foundations need income, too. Proving you have a strong customer base with reliable sales can be a plus. Large, monumental pieces are dramatic but can be slow sellers. A variety of sizes in a body of work, with good price ranges, can be attractive.

Sometimes a major show gets cancelled, and there’s a scramble to fill a hole in the schedule. I had a small solo exhibit at a local college because of such a gap. I was asked if I could pull something together quickly, which I did. Years later, I still get comments from people who saw my work at that small show.

10. THINGS CHANGE. Even if you get a “no,” check back in occasionally. Venues change their focus, their personnel, and their processes.

In conclusion, it’s all about getting a good fit with the venue (Does the work fit its mission statement? Does it fit the venue schedule and budget? Will it fit in the space?) and a big leap of faith (Will the venue’s audience like it as much as the staff do? Will the artist come through with the work?). What venues want is art that says something, moves people, and makes us see the world differently. They want art that sets



hearts on fire (and opens up checkbooks, too). They want artists who will be responsible and do what it takes to make the show work. What makes a great proposal is, in the end, a great artist. ●



Websites for the venues and artists mentioned are www.fiberartcenter.com, www.jsauergallery.com, www.fullercraft.org, www.joannerusso.com, and www.elizabethwhyteschulze.com.

ABOVE: JoAnne Russo's work was exhibited by Jane Sauer (Thirteen Moons) Gallery in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in November/December 2006. This 2006 piece is titled She's Come Unraveled (35" x 12" x 12"). Photo: Jeff Baird. LEFT: Linda Behar: The Elemental Stitch, Photorealism in Thread was on view at the Fuller Craft Museum in Brockton, Massachusetts, July 1–October 22, 2006. Behar proposed this exhibition of her work, photographic images recreated in delicately embroidered canvases. Shown is Autumn Leaves I (4 3/8" x 5 7/8"). Courtesy of Mobilia Gallery. Photo: David Caras.