

Some Thoughts about Shows and Galleries

My wife and I like to visit art galleries. Ideally we like shows of fine contemporary craft and contemporary fine art, but not especially avant-garde or conceptual art. Medium matters. We're most often attracted to shows of glass and wood (no surprise there). Sculptural ceramics, fine furniture, and fiber interest us. Fiber art, in particular, seems to have recently transformed itself from a field dominated by conventional weaving and quilts to a world of fantastic three-dimensional knotted and tangled forms made from unheard-of space age materials. When we can find them, there seems to be no shortage of beautiful work being done by unknown or little known (to us) artists working in these areas. The problem is finding them.

Galleries are disappearing, especially small galleries. So we're left with a world of major galleries and museums who seem to show works by a small number of famous artists, over and over. It's not that I don't have great admiration for Dale Chihuly's glass chandeliers and sea-forms; or that I don't hold David Ellsworth's hollow-forms in awe. But they are everywhere; and one reaches a point that paid admission to another show of these great artists, well, just isn't worth the price. You've seen what's on display before – again and again – or something so similar that it might as well be the same.

And if one goes to the great and famous craft shows such as the Philadelphia Craft Show, the American Craft Council's Baltimore Craft Show, or the Smithsonian Craft Show one finds that the wonderful and innovative artists in a range of media that used to populate their booths are slowly disappearing. They are being replaced by countless jewelry makers and designers and makers of women's clothing. The visitors to these shows have come to be dominated by women with money to spend on jewelry and clothing but little interest in innovative glass or wild sculpture. The number of wood artists this year in Philadelphia had shrunk to a handful – a few who are perennial participants but whose work, as remarkable as it is, doesn't change; and a few whose work left me gasping at the lack of skilled craftsmanship as well as lack of invention. No matter, the thin crowds passed by all of them as they flocked to jewelry displays and tried on exotic jackets or hats. It was a dismal experience for someone who doesn't stop to look at the jewelry and clothing.

The disappearance of small galleries and the decline of traditional large shows is no mystery. The collectors of craft that supported them for decades have grown older, filled their shelves and closets, and are now looking at ways to dispose of their collections. At the same time, as the distinction between fine craft and fine art has become blurred, artists have become more ambitious in terms of their work and the prices of their work. Consequently, folks who were once would-be buyers have become, almost exclusively, lookers. Galleries can't survive, and don't. And avid lookers, who are occasional buyers, have fewer and fewer places to look.

This has an impact on makers such as ourselves. We now customarily pay sometimes hefty fees for the privilege of having our work judged for acceptance to a regional or local gallery show. If the show is labelled a "national" show, the gallery has cast a wider net to get more artists to pay fees. The more artists they get, the higher the gallery's income and the more "competitive" the show. We feel more proud of our acceptance and less stung by our rejection. Unfortunately, visitors after the opening reception are few. And sales are scant. Which, I'm convinced, isn't so important to the gallery. It is the financial support that they get from artists rather than customers that is critical to their survival. It may

be different for small galleries that depend on sales to pay the rent. These are the galleries that are increasingly hard to find even in communities known for their arts and crafts traditions.

So why do I still pay the fees to submit works to shows that I may or may not be accepted into or that may or may not sell much work? At one level, it is because I think it is truly important that local and regional galleries survive to display the work of local and regional artists. And if my fees and my membership dues help to make that survival possible, I'm glad to contribute. But more importantly for me, as a maker, I want at least a few people to see what I make. Local and regional gallery shows make that possible.

I've just answered a "call" to submit works to a winter show at a gallery in a small town. The show evidently is open to all artists who send works appropriate for the show's theme. For my entry fee, I'm in! But there's little likelihood that my expensive pieces will sell. Why do this? Well, I hope some visitors will see my work and feel good about it; that they'll feel good about the show and, in turn, about the gallery. Hopefully they'll buy something and the gallery will not only survive but thrive -- in tiny part because of my financial and artistic support. The town itself will also benefit in a small way since when I and others visit to see the show we will, at least, buy lunch.