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Putting on a show

Staging an exhibition to sell your photographs is one of the most rewarding yet challenging experiences. Photographer **Sarah Howe** and gallery sales executive **Clemency Cooke** give **Oliver Atwell** some tips

CREATING a body of work that you are proud of is surely one of the most satisfying things a photographer can experience. You've sweated and toiled over each shot and produced a series of images that represent the zenith of your creativity, but what do you do now?

There are a vast number of photographic exhibitions and festivals around the UK, some of which have established themselves as serious cultural events. As more and more exclusively photographic spaces open up, it's clear that photography is now accepted as a worthy and viable art form. This is great news for photographers looking to establish themselves in the photographic arena, and perhaps even make that first step from being an amateur to becoming a print-selling professional. As you'll see, approaching a gallery is perhaps a little more straightforward than you imagine. It's just knowing the best way to go about it.

But why should you spend your time and effort printing and mounting your pictures when you could just as easily show your work on Flickr? Many photographers will tell you that the reason for putting on an exhibition isn't necessarily the exhibition itself: it's what happens after. Exhibitions are a great way to get your name into the public domain.

However, there is a lot more to an exhibition than just hanging pictures on the wall. You have to consider which gallery will be right for you and how you approach the owners. How should the work be presented and how much will it cost? How many prints should you show and how much should each one sell for? Should you provide red wine, white wine or both? All these things require serious thought and here we talk to two people who can offer a little insight into the process of putting on an exhibition and approaching your chosen gallery.

Sarah Howe



THIS YEAR,

23-year-old Sarah Howe put together her first exhibition displaying a body of work that she created during a trip to New York. The

journey found her photographing burlesque performers that she encountered when out and about around the city. The project's colour images were shot in the performers' own homes while they were dressed in the regalia they would wear while performing on stage.

'My reasons for wanting to display my work in a gallery were fairly simple,' says Sarah. 'The fact is, I don't favour showing my work online. For me, a photograph is a physical thing. Many

Above: 'Martina Markota', Sarah Howe, July 2011





times I'll go out and take photos, and at the end of the day feel like the images I've collected in-camera aren't really worth anything. But once they're in my hands it's a different story.'

Perhaps Sarah's most important reason for wanting to show her work in a public space was the fact that displaying your work to your peers can be a great way of getting your name out into the world.

'I thought an exhibition would be a good way to get more work,' says Sarah. 'Exhibitions give you the opportunity to meet lots of fantastic people, plus it gives you a little more credibility when you can tell people that you've put on a show. I was heavily involved in the advertising and marketing side of the show, so I was able to invite people who I thought could really offer me some good opportunities. That's a good bit of advice – don't just invite your mates. See an exhibition as a business opportunity.'

CHOOSING THE GALLERY

A big part of the planning process is deciding which gallery will best complement the work on display. With so many choices throughout the UK it can seem overwhelming, but Sarah eventually decided on the Foundry Gallery in Chelsea, London (visit www.facebook.com/foundrygallery or call 0207 351 5456), a space that was set up in 2010 and prides itself on the fact that it supports emerging artists.

'I wanted to print some of my images fairly

'Exhibitions give you the opportunity to meet lots of fantastic people, plus it gives you a little more credibility'

large, so it was necessary to find a space that could accommodate that,' says Sarah. 'Foundry is quite a small space, but I didn't have a vast amount of work in the show so it was perfect. It felt right to me. I think that is a large part of it. It just has to feel right. The people who work there weren't in the least bit intimidating and tried their hardest to understand how I wanted to present my work.'

Once Sarah had chosen the right gallery, she had to work out how best to approach them. She decided to treat the situation almost as if it were a job interview.

'The first stage was to send them an application,' says Sarah. 'That took the form of an email. It was done in quite a formal way by writing an artist statement. I included some details about my background and a little about my degree in photography. The fact that I had the education and was using it to pursue a career gave me a little weight. After they'd considered my email, they invited me to come and have a chat. Then, in time, we set about putting together an exhibition.'

While that initial email was important

Above: 'Jenny C'est Quoi', Sarah Howe, July 2011

Sarah believes that it's crucial to allow the images to do the talking and attach some low-res JPEGs to your email.

'It's all very well explaining everything, but you should also make sure that your images are strong enough to speak for themselves,' she explains. 'It could be that you're not a terribly eloquent person but if people can see that you've created a strong set of images then you've got their attention. Just be clear and concise, and allow your images to breath without smothering them in justifications.'

AFTER THE SHOW

As is often the case, the pay-off from Sarah's exhibition was slight but undoubtedly beneficial. While she didn't sell any prints, there were other bonuses. The publicity she received was impressive and she was featured in *Time Out*.

'It was a really positive experience and definitely the highlight of my year so far,' she says. 'I'm so happy I did it. I got quite a bit of publicity, even as far as Sheffield, which is my home town. It was an event that propelled me forward, professionally and personally. Funnily enough, the best thing I learned from the whole experience was to make sure I have a comments book. 'You never know who may make their mark. I actually had a lovely comment from someone from the Saatchi Gallery in London. So, just by having that book, I've made a significant contact.'



Clemency Cooke



THE Michael Hoppen Contemporary Gallery in London opened its doors in 2000, and in just over a decade it has established itself as a major player in the

international photography market. This is the second gallery to carry the name of photographer and art collector Michael Hoppen. The first was set up in 1993 and gallery staff pushed hard to ensure that photography found its place within the world of fine art.

While Michael Hoppen Contemporary carries older and vintage work, it deals predominantly with contemporary photography – not just from established names, but also from emerging artists. Many people imagine that an established gallery such as Michael Hoppen would have its doors closed to new talent, but this is simply not the case.

'We foster new and emerging talent,' says Clemency Cooke, sales executive at Michael Hoppen. 'That's a huge part of what we do. We'll happily display the work of a major photographic name such as Daido Moriyama right next door to a fresh young face such as Lucas Foglia.'

While other galleries may have a stringent system for seeking out fresh talent, Michael Hoppen takes a different approach. Part of this involves Michael seeking out the talent himself by travelling around the world and attending various festivals and shows. However, much of the talent that the gallery finds itself representing comes to them.

'We get hundreds and thousands of people applying to the gallery,' says Clemency. 'They do it on foot or via telephone and email. If we think the work has potential, we'll invite them in so they can show their portfolio to Michael. As with any application, you're looking to make yourself stand out among an ocean of contenders. That's why it can be embarrassing when



someone flies all the way over from, say, the Netherlands without having made an appointment, only to be told that their work isn't right for the gallery.'

With that in mind – and in keeping with the advice offered by Sarah – the best approach is always via email. 'Send an email and if we like it we'll book the time to see you,' says Clemency. 'It's so much cleaner and easier that way. Send us your work in a digital format with a covering letter that will rouse our curiosity. Don't send us a crate full of prints – it comes across as arrogant.'

ALL IN THE WORK

So, what is a gallery looking for when it considers someone's work? Of course, personal taste plays a big part but Clemency is clear that there are some qualities that nearly all galleries will be keen to see.

'I think the story is the key ingredient of a successful set of images,' says Clemency. 'Your body of work needs to hold together as a narrative if you're looking to put on an exhibition. We'd much rather see images that support one concept and idea. Also, it must always be distinctly yours from a stylistic standpoint.'

So with that in mind, it is not enough simply to produce a series of pretty images. As Clemency points out, photography was a genre born into narrative. They told stories from the off and now there is a fine-art context where meaning is as important as composition and lighting. Anyone can make a pretty picture!

Top: Michael Hoppen Contemporary represents established artists as well as emerging talent

Above: A project's consistency of style and narrative is the key to getting a gallery's attention

'The story is the key to a successful set of images. Your body of work needs to hold together as a narrative'

COLLECTIBILITY

The word 'collectible' is tinged with as much mystery as it is with excitement. Being a collectible photographer's work, we are putting our name behind them. Then people buy that work. As soon as a print edition sells out and it's no longer available, that implies there is an audience who wants it.'

'A gallery can make someone collectible just by the act of promoting them,' says Clemency. 'If we show a young up-and-coming photographer's work, we are putting our name behind them. Then people buy that work. As soon as a print edition sells out and it's no longer available, that implies there is an audience who wants it.'

Once the work is within the walls of the Michael Hoppen Gallery, there is another consideration that has to be taken into account – how much should the work sell for? As Clemency says, there are several factors that can influence the decision.

'The first thing to consider is how much press coverage they have received,' says Clemency. 'We also have to think about how

much it actually costs to put the project together and how much the prints cost to make. Then there's the scale. If they're bigger, obviously they'll sell for more. How many editions are there? Maybe there's just three in one size and ten in something a little smaller. There are a lot of things to think about.'

As a sales executive, Clemency has to deal with the vast majority of people walking through the doors looking to purchase work. It's not an easy task pinning down exactly what the collector wants. Collectors purchase work for a variety of reasons.

'There's a broad demographic who just purchase prints to invest,' says Clemency. 'They do it in a very cold and dispassionate way, particularly now we're in a recession. They know the things they purchase will either maintain or increase in value. That can be a little boring to deal with. Equally, we have people looking for the next big thing. Those people tend to collect other forms of art as well, such as sculpture, painting and video. Others can be historically orientated. I have one collector at the moment who only collects war photography. So, basically, collectors all have different reasons for collecting. You never know, one day one of these guys could have your work hanging on their living-room wall.' **AP**

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