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# IS THE ART WORLD BIASED AGAINST COMMERCIAL PHOTOGRAPHERS?

While some gallerists, curators and collectors continue to look down on photographers with successful commercial and editorial careers, open-minded gallerists say those photographers develop skills and assets that can help them succeed in fine-art careers. BY CONOR RISCH





BOTH PHOTOS © ANDY FREEBERG

If you've been to a portfolio review, you've probably seen photographers with successful commercial and editorial careers sharing their personal work with curators and gallerists. For myriad reasons, many photographers who first established themselves by shooting assignment work want to build fine art careers.

While there are several examples of commercial and editorial photographers who've also shown and sold their work in galleries, it's more common to see artists doing commercial work. And the path to a career that balances both art and commerce is elusive. While they aren't as entrenched as they once were, biases in the art world against photographers with commercial backgrounds persist. The quote unquote art world can be full of very snooty, elitist people, notes gallerist Peter Fetterman.

There are some galleries that won't take on an artist that has a commercial component to their career; it's just something they can't see past, says Sarah Hasted of Hasted Kraeutler Gallery.

But aspiring fine art photographers shouldn't let those biases deter them, several gallerists and photographers tell *PDN*. On the contrary, commercial careers can actually benefit aspiring fine art photographers in a number of ways: by providing them income and the financial means to produce personal work; and by affording them opportunities to develop their craft. Many gallerists are open to representing photographers with commercial and editorial careers,

and value their skills and experience.

I think a lot of commercial and editorial photographers think that [all] gallerists are opposed to representing them based on that decision they've made [to build a commercial career], Hasted says, but that's really not the case.

It's of no concern to me the backstory or the history of the photographer, states Fetterman. It's about whether the photographer has created something special.

The first and most important step for a photographer breaking into the fine art market is to create original work that interest gallerists and their clients.

Andy Freeberg began his career as an editorial photographer and has spent the past eight years building a fine art practice. He recalls speaking with a photo editor friend several years ago as he contemplated doing fine art work. Andy, do you know any magazine photographer that has ever become an art photographer? the friend asked. We couldn't really come up with anybody, Freeberg recalls.

When Freeberg first took his personal work black and white street photographs to the Houston Fotofest portfolio reviews, people liked it, but it wasn't going to get to the next level, he recalls. Freeberg did learn something, however. He saw the work of photographers who got picked up he says. You really need to have something unique.

Freeberg observed something else in Houston that was encouraging: If you have something [great], there are people here who are interested.... These are people that are really passionate about photography and they want to see what's out there.

A couple of years later, Freeberg started to photograph the desks and gallery assistants at the entrances of art galleries because he

**ABOVE:** *The Artist*, Art Miami Basel 2010, Artist: Kehinde Wiley  
**FROM** Andy Freeberg series *Art Fare*  
**OPPOSITE PAGE:** *Metropolitan Pictures*, 2006, from Freeberg series *Entry*



thought it was funny. He showed a few of the images to his photo editor friend, who told him he was onto something. The Sentry images depict the white, tall front desks in major art galleries. Behind the desks the viewer can just make out the tops of the heads of the gallery workers who tend them. The work pokes fun at the unapproachability of the art world.

Through contacts he'd made at Fotofest, he showed the work to gallerists in New York; Jrg Colberg shared the work on Conscientious, his photography website; then gallerist James Danziger reached out and said he wanted to exhibit Freeberg's photographs.

One show does not a career make, however. Freeberg recalls that despite good press and interest in the work from curators and collectors, "They were like, Who is this guy? They weren't ready to buy. Feeling the need to quickly come up with another body of work to build on his first, Freeberg went to Russia and created Guardians, a series that depicts women who monitor galleries in Russian museums. He's since followed that with a series depicting gallerists in their booths at art fairs. It's now eight years since I had that [first] show in New York and I'm just getting to the point where I feel like I can do this full time," Freeberg says.

Lack of time can be a problem for commercial and editorial photographers interested in creating fine art projects: "It is like having two careers," Freeberg says.

Though she had studied art at the Rhode Island School of Design and interned at Pace/MacGill gallery, early in her career Jill Greenberg chose to build her commercial career "so that I could support myself," she recalls. "I really wanted to do both," she says, but felt she needed "to make a decision. As her commercial career grew, it trumped her personal work. I was working nights and weekends to establish myself as a commercial photographer," she says. "It is sort of hard to do both."

Commercial success eventually afforded Greenberg the resources to do the personal work that established her as a fine art photographer. One of her first solo exhibitions, Monkey Portraits, opened in 2004 at Kopeikin Gallery in Los Angeles. "I wouldn't have been able to do the [portraits of] monkeys or the bears or the horses if I didn't have a commercial career," she says. "Those are really expensive shoots."

Brian Paul Clamp, who shows Greenberg's work in New York, says he likes "that an artist may be doing commercial work for a number of reasons. If they're a successful photographer, it helps financially to fuel their fine art," Clamp says. Commercial work also helps get the photographer's name out there, and "takes a little pressure off me not being their sole source of income," he adds.

Technical ability and professionalism are other benefits commercial and editorial photographers can bring to their fine art work. "[Assignment work] makes them more knowledgeable about lighting; it makes them more knowledgeable about color palette and it in a lot of ways makes them more professional when you're working with them," explains Hasted.

LEFT: 50505 Painting 017 (2015) from Jill Greenberg's Paintings series. TOP: SC\_687 (2010), from her series Glass Ceiling

BOTH PHOTOS © JILL GREENBERG

Because she is used to getting a lot done in a day, Greenberg says, I'll work really hard when I'm my own boss because that day is on me. If I'm spending \$30,000 to do a shoot, I am going to make sure I get lots of pictures.

Being able to make work on tight deadlines forced me to think about how to make my artwork better, says Kevin Cooley, who simultaneously built art and editorial careers after he graduated from the School of Visual Arts in 2000. When you're sent somewhere you have to make a picture no matter what the context is. That is a skill that I think as an artist is pretty hard to obtain.

Thanks to editorial assignments, Cooley also was able to travel on his clients' dime and make personal work while on location. He also learned how to work as hard on his personal work as he does on his work for clients. There'd be lots of time where I'd say to myself, Why don't I always treat my own artwork as seriously as I would treat the assignment? That sort of discipline really benefitted my artwork.

As Cooley's career has grown, his assignment work has often been based on my artwork, he says. For instance, Avinor the Norwegian airport authority hired him to create work based on his *Nachtflüge* series of long exposure images that show commercial airline flight patterns at night.

Many commercial photographers make the mistake of thinking they have to create art that is completely unlike their assignment work.

They have this expectation of what people going into a gallery want to see, and the truth is, what people going into a gallery want to see is an artist's voice and their vision, Hasted says. It's when they're trying too hard that it comes across as insincere or inauthentic.



**ABOVE:** Part of a series commissioned from Kevin Cooley by Avinor, the Norwegian government organization that operates civilian airports in the country. This work was based on Cooley's *Nachtflüge* fine art series.

**BELOW:** *ROL5 Spy Satellite Launch* from Cooley's series *Explored Territory*

If I see another image of a nude on a rock, I'm going to throw up, Fetterman says.

Hasted points out that Erwin Olaf, one of the artists she represents, has always had a successful commercial career, but they always look like Erwin Olaf photographs. Collectors have even requested to buy certain of his commercial images, she says.

Martin Schoeller, another of the artists Hasted represents, has also found a home in the fine art world. Some of the first work he showed was close-up portraits of celebrities he made for himself while shooting magazine assignments. Martin has a unique way of seeing, Hasted says. I don't think people hold it against him that he has taken these great editorial images of these famous people. I think they embrace it with certain artists.

Hasted admits that some collectors and curators may still look down on photographers with successful commercial careers, but, Fetterman notes, real collectors want to collect what moves them, whether it comes from Madison Avenue or Timbuktu.

The reality is that commercial and editorial photographers who want to build fine art careers don't face a more difficult road than any other aspiring artist. But scoring big success in the fine art world is like going to Vegas, Fetterman says. You may win or you may not win.

[Great work] can come from left field, he adds. What keeps all of us engaged in this field involved and excited [is the idea] that we're going to find the new, great, original voice. And it can happen. **pdn**



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