LAND YOUR FIRST MUSEUM SHOW

DON'T WAIT TO BE DISCOVERED

BY MARY EDWARDS

Most artists think that a museum show happens as a capstone to a career, when you're already famous (or even dead) and the Museum of Modern Art honors you with a retrospective. Or you're chosen for a national group show like the Whitney Biennial, included in that lucky group of "emerging" artists who are already on the radar of the art world. But what if you're like Phyllis Thelen (thelenart.com), a mid-career artist doing interesting work, but not yet well-known? How can you get a solo show at a museum?

FIND A MUSEUM THAT'S A MATCH.

First, you need a strategy. Find the museums that are right for you. Focus on local and regional museums in your geographic area. Since museums are nonprofit institutions, they state their mission and purpose right on their websites. Here's an example of a mission statement from the Fresno Art Museum in California:

The Fresno Art Museum's exhibition program is focused on work that is contemporary and is grounded in modernist sensibilities. The Museum highlights six areas of artwork:

- Women artists' work
- Professional mid-career, local and California artists' work
- Modern Masters
- Ethnographic art
- Emerging younger artists' work
- "Popular" art

1 *Journeys of the Imagination*, solo exhibition of works by Phyllis Thelen, 2014. Morris Graves Museum of Art, Eureka, California.

Study the artists the museum is showing. Where do they come from? What do they have in common? How does their background compare to your own? Notice the schedule of exhibitions. Some museums have a number of gallery spaces, where they show multiple exhibitions concurrently. The more exhibitions they show at once, the more artists they need, just to keep up with the demands of their schedule.

Next, find out if a museum accepts submissions. Many include submission guidelines on their websites. Look under "exhibitions," "contact," "about," or even "frequently asked questions." If you don't find any guidelines, but still think your work might be a good fit for a particular museum, call them.

GET ON THE PHONE.

Most artists cringe at this suggestion, and the introverts among us run for cover. Listen up. Museums are staffed with people who love art but sit behind desks doing paperwork all day. Often, they do take calls — taking a call from you, a member of the public, is part of their job. If you are brief, prepared and professional, you will get an intelligent answer to your question. Tell them your name, that you're an artist and where you're based, and ask: "Does the museum have a process for reviewing artists' work? I couldn't find any submission guidelines on your website." That's it. Read those two sentences from a script if you have to. Don't offer long explanations about your art career, why you love the museum, how you went there on a school trip when you were 12. Unless you are asked to talk about yourself, keep your inquiry focused and short.

> "BY CREATING A PROFESSIONAL PROPOSAL YOU DEMONSTRATE THAT YOU CAN WORK WITHIN THE MUSEUM'S WORLD.
>
> ~ MARY EDWARDS

Such inquiries helped identify 14 possible museums for Thelen. These museums asked for four kinds of information: a description of the proposed exhibition, logistical information, information about the artist's background and credentials, and images of the art.

WRITE YOUR PROPOSAL.

Thelen's next step was to create a proposal. It was based on guidelines from the Craft and Folk Art Museum in Los Angeles, one of Thelen's top choices. These guidelines included:

Summary of Proposed Exhibition*

Submit one to three paragraphs that describe the exhibition theme, subject matter and overall idea(s).

- What is the unique reason for this exhibition? Historical context, artistic innovation, creating a new connection, generating awareness for underrepresented art/artists, a retrospective?
- What will visitors learn from the exhibition? Is there an educational component that could be included?
- Why is this exhibition important for the public to see?
- Why is this exhibition a good fit for the Craft and Folk Art Museum?

**These guidelines were published by the Craft and Folk Art Museum in 2012.*

These questions will help you develop your own proposal. Many museums are less specific about what they want to know, but they are actually looking for answers to these same questions and will be impressed when you provide them.

MAKE IT PERSONAL.

So, how do you begin? Keep in mind that you will be sending a letter (not an email). Your letter is addressed to a specific person, usually an exhibition director or curator, whose name and title you will find on the museum's website. Introduce yourself by telling them who you are and where you live. Maybe you are a landscape painter from Atlanta or a ceramicist from Denver. This information matters to local and regional museums. True, they can find out who you are by looking at your resumé, but it makes sense to introduce yourself right away as a real person from a specific place.

Here's how Thelen's letter began:

"Enclosed are materials in support of a proposal for an exhibition of the work of Phyllis Thelen, a contemporary artist who creates sculptural forms out of organic materials. Thelen lives and works in the San Francisco Bay Area."

ALWAYS EXPLAIN 'WHY.'

The next section explains why the museum should consider your work. This is the core of your proposal and will take time to prepare. Here is what Thelen's proposal will say, customized for each museum:

An exhibition of Thelen's art is appropriate for (name of museum) for the following reasons:

- Her work appeals to a wide audience interested in art, craft and design.
- Her deceptively simple sculptural forms are both serious and playful, and appropriate for museum visitors of all ages.
- Her work speaks to the contemporary interest in the creative reuse of organic materials and found objects.
- Her work embraces the principles of *wabi-sabi*, the Japanese aesthetic that values the beauty of humble, rustic, natural materials.

Notice the first two statements address the museum's primary concerns: Who is the audience for the work? Why would they want to see it? The next two statements position the artist's work in a larger context of contemporary art trends and aesthetic principles.

The visual organization for this section is just as important as the content. By presenting dense abstract ideas in clear language, separated by bullet points and surrounded by white space, you make complex information easier to digest. Provide bite-sized yet compelling reasons why your art needs to be seen.

GET PRACTICAL.

Next, museums want to know about practical matters, so include a section on exhibition logistics that answers these questions:

- How will the artwork be grouped? Chronologically? Thematically?
- Does any artwork have special installation needs?
- From where will the artwork be shipped? Local lenders? Other museums or institutions? The artist's studio?

These questions tell you how museums think. Although they usually have an installer on staff, museums like to plan ahead.They want to know about any logistical challenges your work will present. If your art is difficult to transport, tell them how you will deliver or ship it. If it requires unusual installation materials, say so upfront and suggest the best approach.

Make it clear that you are willing to partner with museum staff to make the installation process as easy as possible.

2 ***Honker***, 2014, by Phyllis Thelen. Okra pod, bamboo, coconut fiber, paper, gingko pods, 26" x 22" x 9". 3 ***Jade Shrine***, 2013, by Phyllis Thelen. Paper, chopsticks, jade, calligraphy, wood, 12" x 10" x 6". 4 ***Fisherman's Retreat***, 2014, by Phyllis Thelen. Etching, paper, shells, beach glass, stalks, 8.5" x 9.5" x 9".

INFORM AND DOCUMENT.

For the “artist information and documentation” section, submit an artist statement and a short biography and resumé. If the museum has specific instructions, follow them. If not, include 10 to 20 high-resolution digital images of representative art work, on a CD, with documentation.

Send your resumé rather than a narrative biography, as it’s more professional. Make sure that it is up-to-date, and includes your education and other credentials. Your artist statement should be clear, well-written and less than a page in length. All documents need to include your contact information.

Currently, most museums are asking for images on a CD, and many have only recently set aside slide projectors. While technology changes rapidly, many museums adapt slowly, so be sure to double check a museum’s technical requirements.

Include a documentation list. This is a PDF showing thumbnail versions of the images on your CD, plus documentation (title, materials and dimensions). By providing this list, you make it easy for museum staff to meet with each other, look at your images projected on a screen and check the details on a printed page.

You may also send one or two printouts of your images. These are 8-by-11-inch high-resolution pictures of your work, each covered by a plastic sleeve. People who open your submission packet will see your art and get an immediate visual hit.

DETAILS MATTER.

At the end of your letter, list all the items you are including:

Enclosed are the following materials:

- Artist statement
- Resumé
- CD with 10 digital images
- List of images with documentation
- Sample color printouts

Providing a summary of enclosures is a standard business practice but an innovation for many artists. By submitting your materials in an orderly way, you respect the museum’s process. The curatorial committee will be reviewing 20 to 30 proposals at a time. Many artists unintentionally submit incomplete or disorganized materials. Since there are already too many good proposals for too few opportunities, these artists will be put aside for “later.” You don’t want to be in the “later” pile.

5 *Alive Again*, 2012, by Phyllis Thelen. Coconut palm branch, acrylic paint, beads, seed pods, 37” x 29” x 26”.

By creating a professional proposal you demonstrate that you can work within the museum's world. When they say "yes," the flood of paperwork really begins. You'll receive an exhibition checklist, exhibition requirements, loan agreement forms, a timeline for preparation and requests for publicity materials. You will need to respond to multiple requirements from different departments, all on a tight timeline. Your careful attention to detail right at the beginning says that you'll be easy to work with.

Museum people will never admit that this matters. "It's all about the art!" they say. That's true if you are already famous. No one cares about Damien Hirst's administrative ability. But if you're an unknown artist, at least to them, every detail counts.

PLAY THE WAITING GAME.

And now the waiting begins. For most museums, it will take four to six months to get a response. Sometimes it takes a year. Sometimes you don't hear anything. After three months, you may follow up with an email asking whether they have received your materials, or where they are in the review process.

A better use of your time is to keep sending out proposals. You have now created a model proposal that can be adapted for other museums. It's more than OK to have half a dozen proposals out at any one time. If you get more than one positive response, the actual exhibition will be in a year or two, so you will have time to accommodate more than one museum show.

And that's what happened for Thelen. She was offered two solo museum shows in California. *Spirit Vessels* was held at the San Luis Obispo Museum of Art in 2013 and *Journeys of the Imagination* took place a year later at the Morris Graves Museum of Art in Eureka.

A museum show is not an impossible dream for a mid-career artist. You don't have to wait for the art world to discover you. Do your homework, make a plan, follow the steps outlined here and be ready to be surprised. A gallery owner came to Thelen's show in San Luis Obispo, California, and that's how she got her first gallery representation. You never know what might happen for you. PA

Mary Edwards is a Career & Life Coach for Artists, based in the San Francisco Bay Area. She has a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan and received her coach training from the College of Executive Coaching. Mary brings a unique combination of business knowledge, art world experience, and professional coaching skill to her practice. She works with painters, sculptors, photographers, designers, and other creative people who are trying to reach the next level in their careers. For more information, visit coachingforartists.com.

Q+A WITH PHYLLIS THELEN

WHY DID YOU WANT TO HAVE A SOLO MUSEUM SHOW?

I had created so much work, and I wanted it to be seen. I make sculptures out of materials I find in nature: vessels, creatures and sanctuaries. People sometimes look at my art and think "my kid could do that." I knew that museums would attract a more serious audience for my work.

WHAT DID YOU ENJOY MOST ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE?

I loved visiting the towns and interacting with the public. Eureka, a small town [in California] at the edge of the ocean, is filled with artists and galleries, a whole new environment for me. During both shows, people were so interested in my work that they wanted to participate. They brought me unusual materials they found in nature, like a hornet's nest and a jawbone [from an animal].

WHAT DID YOU LEARN FROM YOUR TWO MUSEUM SHOWS?

I gained confidence in what I was already doing, that I really had something original to say. The shows were an affirmation of my work that has kept me going ever since. I also learned about technical details, from the point of view of an installer. I realized how each piece has to be clearly marked, how all the parts have to be identified. Clear communication with everyone at the museum was so important.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE ARTISTS WHO WOULD LIKE TO HAVE A MUSEUM SHOW?

I say go for it. So many opportunities seem to be for young people doing work that's hot right now. Museums don't care about your age. They are looking for mature artists, with an established body of work.