

# How to sell your own artwork

Advice on documenting, pricing, marketing, and selling your own art by RJ Supa with illustrations by Qiong Li.



*It should be said in the first line of this guide that selling art is not easy. Whether through a gallery, through an online platform, or out of your own studio, making a sale of your own work will be challenging—but it can also be exciting.*

*I've been selling art for more than seven years, first as an independent curator showing art in whatever space I could find, then as the co-owner and director of Louis B. James Gallery, and now at the gallery yours mine & ours. The main thing I've learned over the years is just how much time and energy it can take to get someone to commit to acquiring an artwork. While this guide will give you a lay of the land for selling your own art, it's important to know that just as everyone's personality is different, each artist's experience selling their work will also be different. So as you experiment with different ways to sell your artwork to different collectors, remember to be flexible, be yourself, and try to have some fun in the process.*

— RJ Supa

*Editor's note: This guide is part of a series on making a living.*

## Marketing yourself and your work

The question I'm most often asked by artists who want to sell their own work is, "How do I get people to know that I make art in the first place?" This is a good question, because the first step in getting people to see (and eventually buy) your work is by letting them know that there is work to be seen.



### Promoting yourself on social media

These days, the most obvious way to let people know that you make art is by promoting your practice on social media. It's free to use, fairly easy to figure out, and can start getting your work on people's radar immediately. I know lots of artists who had never shown in a gallery before, but who were able to generate business solely through their Instagram account.

Personally, I prefer to follow social media accounts that reflect an artist's unique personality, and which don't just feel like a grid of paintings. Taking a more casual approach to your social media posts will

also free you up to just be you, and will alleviate the fear that you need to craft an image on social media that isn't true to who you really are.

Beyond simply posting about your artwork, there are lots of ways to bring your social media audiences into the fold of your practice. I strongly believe that anything art-related can (and should) be posted, whether it's a formal review of your work, an event flier about an upcoming group show, or a candid snap from your senior crit.

### **Putting yourself [physically] out there**

While social media is amazing for reaching a large audience quickly, another effective way to put your work on people's radar is to physically put yourself out there. This means being as social as you can be, and always introducing yourself as an artist first and foremost—even if you're paying the bills by waiting tables, answering phones, or teaching four adjunct classes at your local community college.

What it comes down to is that **you are your own best marketer**. Simply letting people know that you make work will lead to questions about what it is, and where it can be seen. In turn, this creates an opportunity to invite someone into your studio to see what you make.

*Editor's note: For more tips on promoting your own art, read [A creative person's guide to thoughtful promotion](#).*

### **Showcasing available works on your website**

Having a website to showcase your work (especially your available work) is also a necessity. You don't need it to be fancy, just factual. Personally, when I've decided to seek out an artist's website, I'm ready to get down to business. I want to see clearly labeled photographs of individual works, an up-to-date CV, any relevant press, and a brief statement that sums up their practice. In my opinion, the best artist websites are easy to scroll or click through, so an interested viewer can browse between artworks without difficulty.

### **Documenting your work**

If you don't have a good camera and can't take great images of your work, find someone who can. You must resist the temptation to only document your work via your smartphone's camera. If you can't afford a professional photographer for every piece you make—and many artists can't—do a trade. Ask a photographer friend if she'll trade documentation of your work for a piece or two. There are lots of creative ways to help yourself along that

don't have to cost a lot of money.

If some of your works are difficult to photograph, make sure there are plenty of detail shots available on your website so the viewer can get a sense of the work's surface and overall composition. Also, include photographs from multiple angles. If your goal is to get people interested in your art through images, they need to do a good job showcasing the work, in all of its nuanced glory.

One more note on documentation: always make sure each artwork has been photographed before it leaves your studio. Who knows what will happen to your career in 10 years, and what that one specific artwork will come to mean. Down the line, you may need documentation of the piece for your first museum retrospective. Or, you may never see the work again because the collector won't let it leave their house. Either way, you'll want an image on file for your catalog raisonné.

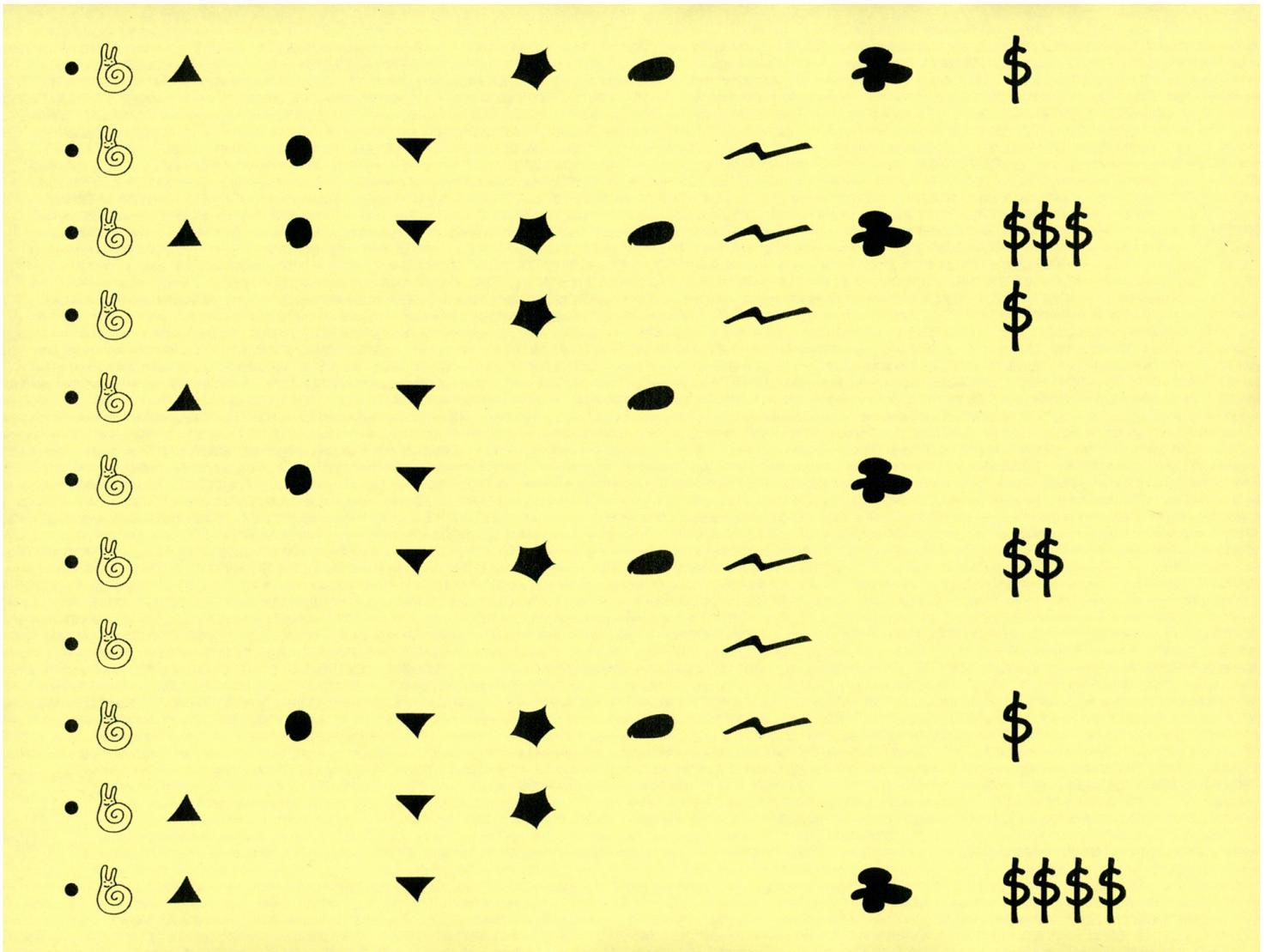
### **Selling art straight through your website**

The easiest way to make your work available to potential buyers on your website is by putting up a simple statement like: "For inquiries on purchasing an artwork, please contact me at [your email address]." For this purpose specifically, always make sure your contact information is clear, up to date, and easy to find on your site. If someone finds you online and becomes interested in purchasing a work, don't add friction to the process by burying your email address.

If you want to get fancy, you may choose to sell your work through an online store. This is a bit more difficult to set up, and if you plan to let customers pay for works right through your website, you'll end up giving away a percentage of your profit to payment processors like PayPal or Square. However, enabling website visitors to make purchases without directly emailing you does have its benefits. For one, detailing your available works and their prices in an online shop allows interested buyers to easily see which of your works are for sale, and get a sense of your prices without the awkwardness of emailing to inquire. Either way, as you design your website, be sure to separate your store from the documentation of your work, so your website doesn't feel like a digital garage sale.

Having an online store dedicated to selling cheaper items (such as editions, prints, zines, pins, t-shirts, or posters) can also help to get your name out in the world. A lot more people can buy a \$5 zine than a \$500 painting, after all.

Editor's note: For more tips on what an artist's website can be, read an essay on the topic by Laurel Schwulst.



## How to price your art

In the art world, pricing is set with a very flexible formula of **exhibition history, previous sales, size of work, and your costs**. However, it helps to know that there is really no right or wrong way to price your work.

As a general rule of thumb for making sales as an emerging artist, keep the works in your online store cheap. People are going to be much more inclined to spend \$50 on a 10-by-10-inch drawing than on a \$1,000, 40-by-40-inch painting, especially without having seen it in person first.

As you and your work evolve from undergrad to grad school and beyond, your prices should increase slowly. Once you're out of school—or if you never attended school—you are a working artist, and your prices can reflect this.

The more you exhibit and the more people buy, the more you can increase your prices, but again, do this very gradually.

As you begin to make more sales, be prepared to be flexible. For example, if you have 10 40-by-40-inch paintings for sale at \$1,000 each, and someone wants to buy two, offering a substantial discount (perhaps \$1,500 for both) can help seal the deal. Even as a gallerist, I tell each artist I work with that there will be a guaranteed 10% discount for collectors buying one work, a 15% discount for those interested in buying two works, and a 20% discount for collectors interested in purchasing three or more. And, even this formula is flexible depending on the collector and the work.

Finally, consider your costs—including the cost of your time. If each new drawing costs you \$20 to make because of materials, and takes a couple days of your time to produce, then a \$50 price point clearly doesn't make sense.

It can be tricky to decide on prices, so talk to your friends, ask art dealers or professors you know for their tips, and just talk to others who have made sales themselves. Another good way to get a sense for how your work should be priced is by directly researching the prices of other artists whose work and experience levels are comparable to yours. You can do this by browsing available works on their website (if their site lists prices), or when you're at their gallery show, ask to see the price list. Try to find out how these artists appear to be doing with sales, and use that as a foundation to plan your own pricing.

## **On selling your work with an advisor's help**

Art advisors can work for an individual, a family, or a corporation to help them build an art collection. Often this happens when a collector is too busy to see many shows, do studio visits, or search for new artists on their own. If this is the case, collectors may seek out a trusted expert to advise and educate them, and to help them find up-and-coming artists to work with. Banks, hotels, hospitals, and restaurants are among a number of businesses that often work with advisors to collect artwork by buying directly from artists.

If you're hoping to work with an art advisor, the most important thing you need to do is make your work as discoverable as possible. This is where the right hashtag on social media can be a real boon. On more than one occasion, I've searched Instagram for a specific client or advisor using the #abstractpainting #sculpture #outdoorsculpture, etc tags. So know that if you build it, and properly label/promote it, they will come. Additionally, when you're out in the world at openings and other art events, you're likely to meet art advisors, as going to these types of events is a big

part of their job. If you meet an art advisor, having a business card on hand with simple contact information (name, phone, email, website) will allow them to quickly search your site and see if any of your work might make sense for their clients.

If an advisor offers to help sell your work, make sure you understand the terms up front. Many advisors get paid by their clients (the collector), but some will take a percentage of the sale (generally between 10%–20%). All of this is industry standard, but it's necessary that you understand this before your work is offered for sale. You never want to be in a place where a collector is trying to move forward with purchasing your work, and you're still trying to negotiate the financial aspects of the deal.



## **On working with galleries**

When working directly with a gallery, know that you'll have to split the profits from any sales. Generally, the gallery will take about 50% of a work's sale price. While it may seem crazy to give away half of your money, galleries will be able to get your work out to a larger audience than you'll be able to reach on your own. They may also be able to sell a drawing that you would have sold out of your studio for \$200 for \$2,000, since they know their clients' interests best, and can help lend credibility to your practice.

When you get the chance to work with a gallery for a group show, art fair, or via the gallery's online store, make sure you get all the details of the relationship in writing. Ask them for a consignment agreement that covers the price that they'll list your work for sale at, the length of time they'll have your work on consignment, the terms of sale, and how any potential discounts will be shared. If a work is sold by a gallery, you should also expect to receive a form with the buyer's information so you can keep it on record in your own files. Check out "documentation" below (in the pricing section) to further explore what should be on any consignment agreement or invoice.

*Editor's note: For more on this subject, consult the guide, [How to work with galleries and collectors as an emerging artist](#).*

## **On commissions, loans, and gift-giving**

### **Commissions**

If you're ever asked to do a commission (for example, a portrait of a collector's dog, a sculpture in a particular location, or a performance for a collector's wedding, etc), the first thing to do is to make sure the terms are written down and agreed to. You'll also want to make sure that once the work is started, there can be no refund on the down payment, and that once the work is completed, the work cannot be returned if the collector doesn't like it.

Once a contract for a commission is signed, you should always require a 50% down payment of the final sale price. In my opinion, this is non-negotiable. In the terms sheet, it should also be stated that if the commission is canceled, changed, etc, the down payment is non-refundable. And while it's possible to change the scope of the commission while it's in progress, make sure your contract notes that any changes could result in charging the collector extra money to cover your time and any additional expenses.

## **Loans**

Often, art shows can take place in hotel rooms, coffee shops, bank lobbies, or at friends' houses. In these instances, there might not be a huge opportunity for sales, since it's more of a curatorial undertaking. But who knows what can happen! Whenever you loan out your work—whether it's for a casual show at a friend's pop-up store, or for something more established—make sure you get or provide a consignment agreement. This agreement should always detail the length of the loan, and (should a sales opportunity arise) the details of how a transaction can work. For instance, will the friend who's hosting a show in his living room take a percentage of the sale if their roommate buys your work?

## **Gifts**

You can gift your work to anyone you want, even institutions (although there's no guarantee that they'll take it). Often, nonprofits, cultural institutions, or friends will seek out artists to donate works for their fundraisers and benefits. This is a great way to get your name and work seen by a larger collector base and raise money for a cause you care about. And, you can write off the value of the work when you do your taxes. If you make a gift of your work for one of these occasions, always try to negotiate a ticket or two to the event, as these are usually a great opportunity to network.

With anything that's leaving the studio, you'll want to have a proper paper trail and documentation (think: high-quality photographs) of the piece or pieces. And, even with gifts, you'll want to keep records of the transaction. Your career will be in a different place in five, 10, or 15 years and the more information you have at your disposal about who has your works, the better.



## **Selling your art through online platforms**

In addition to creating your own online store, there are many other ways to sell your art online. From Artsy to Etsy, Paddle 8 to Deviant Art, there are a plethora of platforms that can help showcase your work to a wider community.

Some sites require that your work is already shown through a gallery or fair (like Artsy), while others (like Paddle 8) are generally looking for works by artists with name recognition so they can more easily market it to their audiences.

As you weigh your options, know that each platform will have its own cost and/or commission model, so do your research and get a sense of the pros/cons of each site. These days, it seems like almost every online retailer is dipping its toe into the art world, so as you do your research, you might also want to check out the options on non-traditional platforms like Ebay and Amazon. Finding the right online platform is about choosing the

space that fits the needs of you and your work, and about recognizing where it'll be the easiest to find people who like (and who want to buy) your art.

While they aren't sales platforms, online artist registries are another type of platform that can help lead collectors to you. White Columns has, arguably, the best-known registry. You usually have to apply and be approved to be a part of a registry, but many art world people use these lists to find new works, and they've been a good launching ground for a number of great artists. Personally, I've discovered artists on these sites who I've then gone on to represent at the gallery.

## **On getting paid**

One you've done all the self-promotion, studio visits, and emailing back and forth and you've finally made a sale (!), the next step is getting your money. It should go without saying that **you should never turn over an artwork without having received payment in full**. Once a check has cleared, then you should get the piece wrapped and ready to go. Of course, you can also request payment via Venmo, PayPal, or whatever works best for you. That's the easy part! Before this happens, though, be sure to have all the following in place when closing a sale.

### **Documentation of sale & invoice**

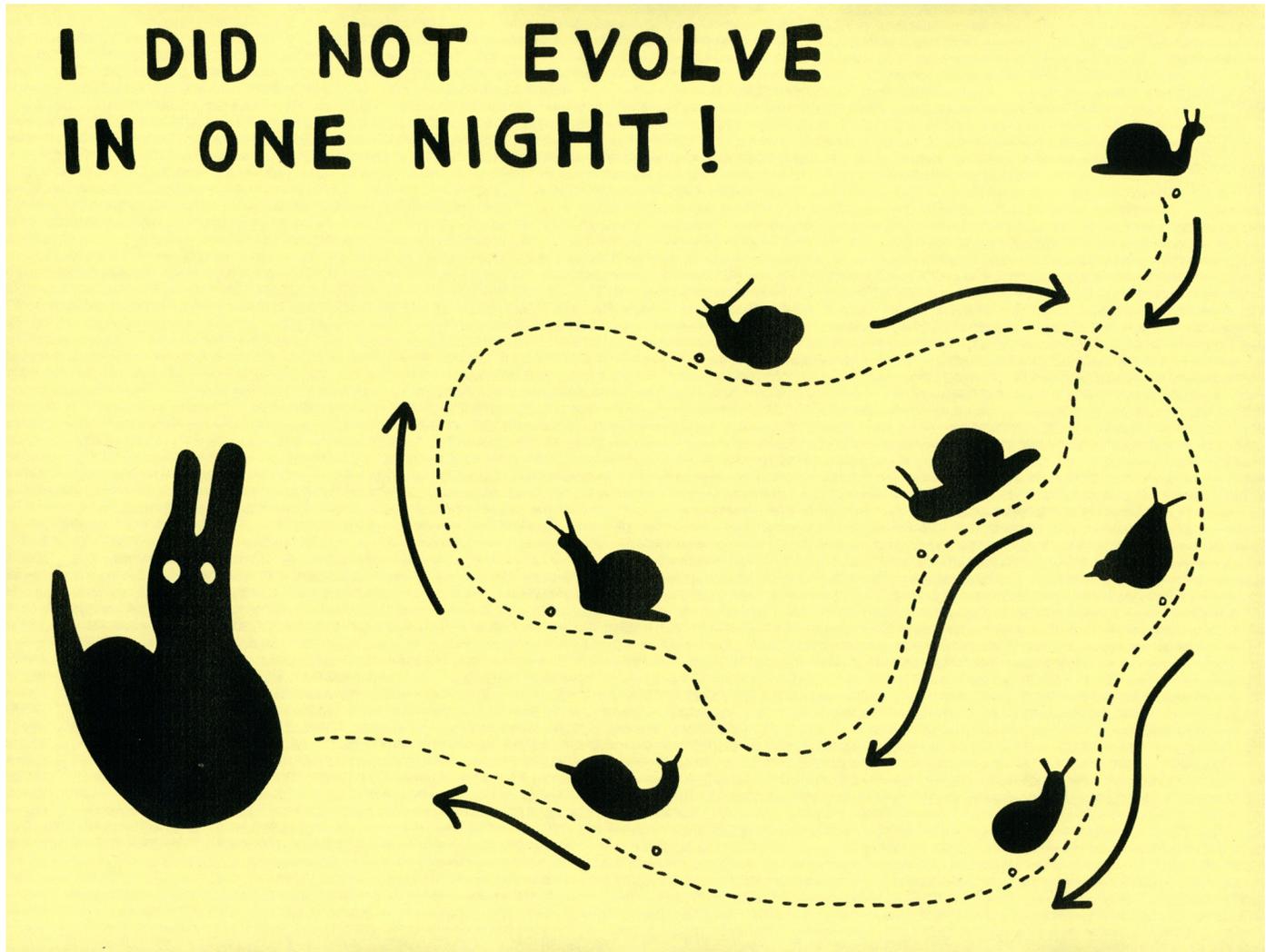
For your records, any time you make a sale you'll want to generate an invoice that clearly details what was purchased, how much was paid, whether or not there was a discount, and the terms of the sale. It's always a good idea to put "no refunds, no returns" on the invoice, and to stipulate how much the piece was valued at versus how much it sold for (for example, if the retail value was \$1,000, but it was bought for \$600, noting the 40% discount ensures that the documented value of the work remains at \$1,000).

In your invoice, you should also include a copyright section. This is because if the collector ever decides to publish an image of your work or exhibit it in a show, you'll want to be given proper credit. The copyright section can be as simple as detailing the work's title, creation date, and your name. However, if you want to be sure an image of your work doesn't end up on a tote bag or t-shirt without your explicit permission (and without giving you a cut of the profits!), you'll also want to include a statement of rights. A little online sleuthing can help you find some canned language that feels like the right amount of copyright protection for you and your artwork.

It's also a good idea to include a brief sentence or two about being able to borrow back the work for a future exhibition or retrospective.

Finally, many galleries include "the right of first refusal" on their invoices. This protects you and your artwork and allows the seller—in this case, you—to buy back the work if it ever gets to the point where the collector wants to sell.

Before you close out the sale, both parties should sign a copy of the invoice for your personal records.



### **In Summary...**

Overall, selling artwork is about developing good communication skills and being patient. Putting yourself out there as an artist is the first step. Spending time at galleries, open studios, and other related events will help to establish you as a member of the community and lead to introductions, studio visits, and eventually, sales.

One last thing to keep in mind: even if no one is buying your art now, there's no reason they won't be in a year, or even in a month or two. Keep

making connections, and keep your community informed about all that's going on with you and your practice. Let people know that your work is for sale, and where/how they can collect it. And as you continue to develop your deal-sealing skills, ask questions, don't be afraid to f\*ck up, and be flexible. Every collector, artist, friend, art gallery, independent curator or art advisor will work differently based on their own individual needs, and the best way to work with them is to be upfront and transparent about your own needs.

Now get back to the studio and start networking!



RJ Supa is the co-owner and director of yours mine & ours gallery in New York. Previously he owned and ran Louis B. James gallery for five years. He is also an independent curator and artist, and has exhibited and performed internationally at such spaces as Salon 94, Cuevas Tilleard, New Release, the Kunshtalle in Baden-Baden, Germany and Steirischer Herbst in Graz, Austria. His work was most recently reviewed in The New Yorker for a group exhibition, titled Mother's House.