

Women of Substance: These Three Established Art Gallery Owners Are On Common Ground

Even in the relatively enlightened era of the early 21st century, it's still not a given that the business realm is operating on a level playing field where gender is concerned. Happily, the contemporary gallery world is one area where the sex of the owner is irrelevant, and the glass ceiling virtually nonexistent. Dallas has a long history as a home to many female-owned for-profit commercial galleries, and in this inaugural issue of *Patron* we take a look at three high-profile gallerists, all members of Contemporary Art Dealers of Dallas (CADD), who just happen to be women.

Conduit Gallery's Nancy Whitenack has always been a trailblazer, someone who's able to read the handwriting on the wall even before it's visible. A case in point was her establishment of the original conduit in 1984 in Deep Ellum, the then-decaying neighborhood on the cusp of a remarkable urban rehabilitation. At the time, Deep Ellum's motorcycle shops and transients held sway, but low rents and expansive loft spaces had begun to attract artists and the boho elite. She opened in the 2800 block of Elm Street, concurrent with the now-fabled music renaissance that was taking shape; the zeitgeist was palpable.

"It was a time with a really healthy art activity in Deep Ellum," Whitenack recalls. "With all of the artist studios there was a great mix of everything". In 1999 she relocated nearby at 3200 Main Street. A few years later, she converted a large closet there into a smaller exhibition area and called it The Annex; it was designed to introduce up-and-coming artists to her clientele. "It allowed us to show artists we didn't represent, and probably wouldn't have a connection with beyond that," she explains. "It was a chance to find something totally off the wall, very experimental, that hadn't been seen before".

But with rents soaring, artists left the neighborhood and Deep Ellum morphed into a glorified tourist destination. Ready for another migration, in 2002 Whitenack took a leap of faith and landed with Conduit Gallery in the Design District. It was a bold move. "I was the first exhibition gallery to come here to do retail in the Design District," she says. "It was a scary thing... I had good friends who question what my reputation might be if I moved here, and if people would think that Conduit had moved to the side of decorative art". Once again, the trailblazing paid off. Whitenack's experiment quickly established a beachhead for fine art in the neighborhood, and other commercial galleries soon followed. At this location, The Annex was renamed The Project Room, and now is the province of Conduit's Assistant Director, Danette Dufilho. "She's incredible, and finds amazing works," Whitenack enthuses. "She's really good at it".

Is there a through-line that connects her eclectic roster? And what speaks to her artistically? "I have to be really engaged with work, I have to believe that there's something so powerful about it that it brings some new thinking to the whole history," Whitenack assesses. "In a lot of the work I show there's a degree of mastery, of accomplishment with the materials the artist's working with. Michael Tole is a good example of that. And I'm also fascinated with somebody using materials in some strange way, and how they put it together". Today Conduit Gallery represents 38 artists; roughly half of those are Texan and the rest span the country. Many of the elsewhere are actually expats, artists Nancy began repping when they were in Texas. Her current roster includes Susan Kae Grant, Robert Jessup, Joan Winter, Kirk Hayes, Billy Hassell, Susie Phillips, and Vincent Falsetta, while Roberto Manguia, James Sullivan and Robert

Barsamian are still with her, dating all the way back to her initial stable of a dozen. “I have a great amount of loyalty,” she maintains, “and that’s part of why the gallery has been successful. My relationships with my artists are incredibly important to me. I think artists know that, and value that”.

For Dallas native Holly Johnson, whose Holly Johnson Gallery has been in existence since 2005, art has always been a way of life. Coming from a creative family, she remembers poring over art books as a child. “And that’s where it began – in the looking,” she says. After high school she attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, studying painting and drawing. Soon she was interning at a local gallery, and an epiphany wasn’t long in arriving. “Within six months I had one of those ‘ah-hah!’ moments. ‘I think I’ve found my calling,’” she recollects. “It wasn’t my intention to be in the gallery business, but I just took to it, and it took to me”. After graduation, she stayed in Chicago as the director of a gallery specializing in contemporary and modern prints, painting and sculpture from 20th century masters including Calder, Lichtenstein, Motherwell, and Picasso.

But after stints in Dallas and Houston in the ‘90s, she returned to Dallas for good in 1999, when she was hired as gallery director by Pillsbury and Peters Fine Art. She spent the next five years there, before she and her husband, artist and Renaissance man Jim Martin, established Holly Johnson Gallery. When they found their space on Dragon Street, it was a blank slate, perfect for their purposes; the couple started sketching floor plans on napkins, configuring around existing plumbing in the slab foundation. Today the gallery has a wide-open feel that’s quietly elegant, with a Zen-like simplicity and great light. “We had a pretty good idea of the artists we were going to be showing,” Johnson says. “A lot of the artists I’d shown at Pillsbury Peters were people I’d introduced to that gallery... so a number of them came with me with I opened here”.

Holly views the gallery business as a liaison, a triangular equation that brings together dealer, artist, and patron. Most of the artists she shows are involved with two-dimensional work, and because her own background is in painting and drawing, she says she’s especially attracted to artists who’ve mastered their craft and are “the best at what they do”. She currently represents 25 artists, including Dornith Doherty, William Betts, Gael Stack, Tommy Fitzpatrick, Mike Osborne and John Adelman. “What’s exciting about working with artist is that you hear what they have to say, you go to their studios and see what they’re doing,” she says. “You have a relationship that’s always in motion and always in flux”. About a third of her diverse collection of artists have ties to Texas, and the balance are based in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, or California.

Now having worked in the gallery world over 25 years, Johnson’s seen “high-highs and low-lows” in the business, but has kept her perspective on the big picture. “All my experience have helped to prepare me,” she philosophizes. “This isn’t a cakewalk. You have to be realistic about your projections, what you can and can’t do, and you have to be careful. I’ve always been very hands-on... even after 25 years I’m still updating resumes, writing press releases, and Jim and I install all our own shows; I do all the lighting myself. And I love installing shows, it’s like my favorite thing, even though it’s difficult and taxing and it wears you out. And I like the relationships I have with my artists very much; they’re some of my best friends”.

Although she’s only been a gallery owner for a little over a year, Cris Worley of Cris Worley Fine Arts brings a decade of gallery directing experience and two art degrees to the table. Located just outside of the Design District on Monitor Street, Worley’s intimate space and roster of 15 artists reflect her intuitive,

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deliberate mission for the space – she’s still adding artists, but without an urgent timeline. Some of her artists have been with her for 10 years, dating back to her days with Karen Mitchell Frank Gallery and Pan American Art Projects. “I’m interested in the long haul, and that has something to do with the fact that I consider myself a bit of an art historian,” she surmises. “I think being a witness to an artist’s journey is a beautiful thing... I’ve really enjoyed watching the process for a lot of these artists. But by the same token you have to look for new artists you can add to the family, who’ll bring something to the group... the group makes up the gallery”.

Right now that group includes Isabelle du Toit, Harry Geffert, Rusty Scruby, Adela Andea, Ruben Nieto, and 10 others; the majority of them are based in Texas, but Worley points out that many have international backgrounds. Light sculptor Adela Andea is from communist Romania, sculptor William Cannings was born and raised in England, Ruben Nieto hails from Mexico, and painters Isabelle du Toit and Murielle White are both French, so there’s a uniquely international flavor to Worley’s program. Most of the work she shows is 2-D, but Cris is open to the evolution of her gallery, and she’s interested in all kinds of media including “the more ephemeral ones” like sound art and video. She explains that she’s attracted to an eclectic range of artwork. Ultimately, she says, “The gallery is an extension of the owner’s interests and tastes; it’s got to be a mirror in some way. At the end of the day, I have to connect with the work”.

After Pan American Art Projects closed its doors in December 2009, Worley stayed active as a consultant to curators and collectors, initially starting Cris Worley Fine Arts as an art advisory firm. She soon knew something was missing. “I realized pretty quickly that I’ve gotta have a space,” she recalls. “I’m a people person, and that’s what this job is all about – connecting with people. And it’s about the artists. They’re working diligently in their studios, and they need a home. I wanted to have that home for them, and I realized that this was the time to do it”. Worley continues to juggle those two roles, promoting her artists while at the same time helping collectors achieve their goals. “For me, it’s such an exhilarating experience to bring the artist and collector together,” she add. “They may never meet each other, but to bring them together on this level field where they share this experience is an actual tangible manifestation”.

With the gallery just over a year old, Worley optimistic and excited about the thriving art community in the city she calls home. “One really remarkable thing in Dallas is that all of us gallerists do play well in the sandbox together,” she assesses. “We all have a genuine goal of promoting visual art and fine art in Dallas, and outside the city as well – and that’s a really great thing”.

- Steve Carter