

## Applying to a Gallery? KNOW THIS FIRST! Conversation with John Sproul

Hello and welcome to Down To Art. I'm your host Kristy Gordon, and today I'm super excited to be talking to John Sproul about how to connect with galleries. John is a Utah based artist, and he has had over 20 solo exhibitions and participated in over 120 group exhibitions internationally, including at the J Paul Getty Museum. And he also owned and directed Knox Contemporary Art Gallery and is the director of the art group.

So welcome John. It's so good to have you. Thank you. Thank you for having me. It's good to be here. Yeah, yeah, yeah. And we, we met just a few weeks ago at the Vermont Studio Center, and while we were there, you mentioned that, I mean, I've noticed you, you've shown in so many galleries,

so you're all like, obviously really good at connecting with galleries, but also you actually owned a gallery before, so immediately I was like, whoa, we need to like, talk about all your, you know, theories about how to connect with galleries. Sure, yeah. Yeah. So I think like, when, when I, when when I was talking to you about it,

I was, we had another artist friend with us too, and I think he brought up probably like one of the best points, and I almost wanna start there, which is like how hard, like how to connect with how to make that contact with the gallery and let them know that you're an artist. You say you've been visiting their art shows, you know,

and you kind of wanna like, make that communication and kind of somehow let them know that you're an artist and kind of bridge into the next stage. Yeah. What theories do you have around that whole interaction? Well, I, I, I mean this is, we're talking about mid process where you've already been supporting the gallery and going to the shows and whatever,

and I, I, I think it, the, the attitude to have, at least from my mind, is to come to it with what can you do to support the gallery? And then, and then as you have that attitude, you approach them with your, your work at a certain point and having respect for the galleries time, you know, not coming to the opening and trying to show 'em your work is a good idea not to do that.

Totally. Making appointment, you know, galleries are really busy. They're trying to, you know, they're hustling and trying to make a living. And so if you just show up during a regular day, they, they may give you the time,

but they're gonna be a little slightly annoyed that you're taking away from their time. So making an appointment to come and see them, maybe suggesting a studio visit, you know, zoom studio visits are pretty common now since the pandemic came in. And so just reach out and see if they're interested in a studio visit. Maybe that's a good way to start.

These are like so cool and so proactive. Like, I almost never do this kind of thing actually. So actually, actually, but you, you mentioned a good point, we've sort of started in the middle. So really what you would say first, and this is such a good point, is that it is so important to like, attend their openings,

support the gallery. Like what, what would you say as far as like getting the groundwork laid in that sort of way? Yeah, and just talking to the galleries and the artists and supporting their artists as much you wanna support the gallery and, you know, make sure, make sure you kind you like them, that you kind of get along because you don't wanna be in a,

a business relationship with someone you don't like, no matter how much you like the work they represent. Yeah, That's, that's true. Important I think. But I think we often operate in a level of scarcity, but that's, that's not reality. There's, there's a, there's, you know, there's hundreds if not

thousands of galleries around. And so find a place that fits for you both in personality and in in the work.

That's so true. Yeah. Yeah. I'm so lucky. I have all good, really good connections with galleries and I love to say that because like, it can be so wonderful when, when you have that, and I know it's like sometimes people don't have that. And yeah. So I think that's a really good point. Yeah. And so I have all sorts of theories myself about how, so I'll sort of tell my, the way that I sort of deal with this, and then tell me any additions that you would make to it. But, so I like to go into the gallery during business hours, not with a portfolio in hand ever, and never ever to make a conversation at that moment about like, oh, this is my art. But no. So I go into the gallery, I look at all the art on the walls and then, you know, maybe I remember the name of one of the artists, it's a group show or whatever, and sort of note some technique or whatever that they're using. And then I do try to force myself to talk to the person at the desk,

which sometimes is the actual gallery owner. And sometimes it's, you know, someone working for the gallery. But I just try to be like a normal person and be like, oh, I really love what you're showing in the gallery. You know, I love what this artist is doing with textures or whatever. And I just try and strike up a conversation.

And then if I feel bold, which I try to force myself to do, I might even say like, oh, I'm like, you know, I really love the work that you guys show. I was just wondering like what, what you prefer as far as artist submissions go. Do you like to get like a hard packet, you know, a hard copy of a portfolio sent to you or see digital images instead.

And, and that way I'm kind of posing a question to them because I used to do it where I would go in and be like, oh, I'm an artist, and you just see them freeze. They're like, oh no. But instead to just give them a question, you know, and then they have to say, oh, I prefer an emailed version, or, or whatever. And it just kind of like segues into that. So that's kind of like how I do it. And then I might send them a card afterwards like, oh, it was such a pleasure to meet you and talk to you at your gallery. I'm excited to send you some images soon. That kind of thing. But I, I don't know, I'm just like making this stuff up as I go. Like, what would you tweak about that or add to it? Well, I think that's a good idea. You're, you're not being super confrontational or aggressive, but you're also being clear about what, you know, you'd like to send them a portfolio and you're not bringing it in at that moment and,

and putting pressure on them. And I think that's, that's a good way to go. And then the follow-up's nice too, cuz they're super busy and, and you know, when we're stressed out, our memory doesn't work as well as it does normally. So I, I think that's all really good. I've noticed myself when I go into galleries, the ones where they're more amicable, this has happened where it just naturally evolves into that. Cuz you go in and you're really looking at the work and they notice that and then they start talking to you or you talk to them about it. Yeah. And, and so it, yeah, it kind of comes into that sort of point where you're just, you're just beginning this conversation and,

and I like the point that you take it to very quickly and like, you know, you guys are even asking if you, they do accept submissions cuz so many galleries don't anymore. I often don't ask them that. I just ask because I almost want to creep in through the cracks. Yeah. They may not officially be taking artists, but sometimes they will.

Exactly. Yeah, Yeah, Yeah. Just, you know, I think that's great, you know, being kind and Totally. And yeah, I, I think it, you're doing a good, a good job there. Thanks. Well, and I really

liked your point about like how important it's to go to openings cuz I sometimes feel like I just like blend in.

But as you know, since you used to own a gallery, like tell us about what it's like when you own a gallery as far as all the faces at your openings and how Yeah. Likely it is for you to eventually maybe try and piece it together and kind of figure out who's who. Like do you, how does that work? I, I'll tell you that a number of AR artists that I showed, at least a few that happened because they kept coming to the openings. And so it makes me want to like, oh, they're very supportive. I wanted to see how I can support them. Totally. I've seen that happen too. When I was going to openings, I saw another artist that was often going to the openings at a gallery that I showed with.

And then exactly like you say, he eventually like, took on this artist then it was because he'd been going to all the openings. Yeah, yeah. So it it, and there's a level of professionalism in that and just Yeah. Decency and generosity. Yeah. And Often, often openings can be seen kind of superficial cause that's the worst time to look at the art.

Oh yeah. But, but it, it, it is a really good time to go and socialize and connect with the, with the gallerist and the artist. And even if you don't get a chance to connect with the gallerist, the artist might be a, a better way to start. Cuz the galleries will notice that. Yeah. If you're talking, you know, and Avis crowd or whatever, that's why it's important to go often. Yeah. So you'll have more opportunities to engage. Yeah. So, but yeah, I, I would, over time I would just notice people and they'd introduce themselves to me or I'd in, you know, I would ask them who they were if they'd been coming a while.

So Yeah. And a lot of good not just, you know, partnerships and gallery artists relationships, but also good friendships come out of that. Totally. Yeah. That's totally true. Yeah. Yeah. And I think like as far as like FAPAs to watch out for as artists, like I would definitely never do anything in the realm of like, like I,

I, for me, I almost don't make any attempt to talk to the gallerist myself, like at an opening. But if they were to talk to me, obviously I would, but I almost feel, and tell me if I'm wrong, cuz again, I'm just like making this stuff as I go along. But I almost feel like that shows a certain level of professionalism.

Like I understand that they've got like a job to do, you know, that night. Yeah. That's, and it's not talk to me. Yeah. And yeah, you really gotta judge the moment. True galleries, at least the ones I know of, most of their sales go out on outside. So like there's a typical gallery stroll where I live, you know, every third Friday they have the openings, that's where the public comes in. Yep. But the galleries actually often make most of their sales not on that day. Oh. So yeah. That's interesting. That's more of a, a public interface. Oh. I'm not sure how it is in New York, but, but here is more of a public interface.

Like the gallery I work with here, they have a private opening and then they have the, the public opening and the, and their cells are mostly from a private Oh, that's a really interesting point that I never like thought of. Yeah, yeah. So in some ways they maybe aren't totally like frantically trying to sell art or anything, but you don't wanna go up to them with a portfolio.

But, but that's interesting too, like what you mentioned about how Yeah, sometimes even when you're visiting a gallery, the gallerist will eventually sort of talk to you and sort of strike up the conversation. I realized for me, cuz sometimes it's just about receiving when things happen, like with art opportunities for me, there was a gallery that I was going into all the time and then one day I was shocked the girl who worked there like came up to me and started talking to me and I just almost froze actually.

And I didn't tell her that I was an artist or anything like that. And like, I, so I think it's actually sometimes just good to be aware of like the possibilities and so that we can be more like receptive to the moments that might occur. Yeah. If it was to happen again, I would like, you know, I think I was almost hiding that I was an artist.

I think I was almost like, oh my God, she's gonna figure out that I'm an artist. And I'm like, yeah, I think that, I think they often know anyway. Oh yeah. And True One, one thing we is, I need to figure out how it works best for you as an individual. Yeah. That being said, you know, if you're a shy person, nothing's gonna happen because, because you're shy and you're not gonna do anything, but you have to push yourself. But how it works for you in that, in that pushing and challenging way and there are many different ways to do it. That's really true. And like, I'm, I'm not, I don't know if I would even say that I'm a shy person normally, but when I used to go into galleries I used to just be so freaked out, like, oh my gosh, it's a gallery. Like they're, you know, it's like hard to even talk to them and that's why I would try to just strike up a conversation, like, just kind of force myself too. Like, it's just words out of the mouth and just talking about art.

And a lot of the time as artists when we just strike up a conversation, you know, oh, I like the textures that so-and-so's doing in that painting. Like, it's so easy to do and we have a lot of knowledge about art so we, you know, sound good and the conversation flows and it just makes Yeah. It more natural to talk to like,

you know, these people that we like really want to connect with. Yeah. And it makes it easier when the, when the work in the gallery you're excited about it cuz you, you do wanna talk about It. Oh yeah. And, and they see that. So That's, that's totally true. Yeah. And then I know cuz yeah, you've been in like so many shows,

so many like solo exhibitions and tons of two-person shows and group shows and stuff. And so I was wondering like what some of your strategies or, you know, just with all your knowledge, like what you find are some of the best ways to kind of get your art out there and start to make these connections. Like I know you mentioned brochures actually when we were talking Before.

Yeah. So, so in regards, I'll, I'll, I'll touch on the brochures and then we'll go back to the, the first part. Yeah. So my thinking is galleries are inundated by artists Right. All the time. And so if you send them an email with your images, the chances, the possibilities of them seeing it are pretty slim.

Or if you send 'em a cd, it's also the same. Yeah. And this is a recommendation I have heard from other people. So sending 'em a brochure where as long as they pick up their mail, they'll actually see your images is a, is a good way to get it in front of their face to see the work. Yeah. Yep.

Because we're, we're hoping that the work sells itself. You know, that's where we're Yep. Where we're hoping it focuses. So that's why I was thinking about brochures, you know, slightly larger. It's more of an investment than a CD and you know, emails no investment at all financially, but that's true. But also, but that investment shows in that you're serious about what you're doing and wanting to invest in your,

in your career. That's really true. So that's where my premise for a brochure comes from. But as far as showing a lot, like wherever an artist is located, you just build a, a good group of friends and get involved in the community, help support the community. I've been involved for over 15 years as an advocate in the community. So Yeah,

That's so you're connected to all the right people because of just building these friendships, I mean, and come to it with generosity and how you can help and support people not with the intent of how they're gonna support you, but eventually that does happen. You know, it just Yeah. Back to you. And so that's, that's why it's made it, you know, I'm, I'm able to have the shows I'm able to have where I live is because of all the people I know, You know? Yeah, yeah. And I'm a it's true. Yeah. And I'm a person, I have social anxiety, but, and I was super shy as a kid, but you, you just gotta push, push against it and push beyond it to, to build these, these relationships. And one thing about being in the art world, it's such, I mean as you and I experienced in Vermont, it's such a rich world to be in so many amazing people. Yeah. Yeah. It's so rewarding and fulfilling. So, So true. And yeah, I get like social anxiety too and I just like to be kind of like, like I spend a lot of time alone in the studio and stuff, so it's not always like the easiest to be social. And I get kind of drained too. I feel like I only have so much energy, but when I was in Vermont, like yeah, I just really loved, I mean the thing about a lot of artists is, well a lot of us are like that.

Yeah. So it was like such a relief to have like so many people around that I could just genuinely be myself with and you know, they would understand if I come and go cuz I'm like, oh, now my energy's dropping, I'm gonna Yeah. Go and then, you know, and I saw other people even were isolated than me and it was great.

Yeah. But it was all okay. And, and I Think In any community you live in, you can build that type of, you know, pack of people. I find your pack, that type of thing. And varying degrees. But you have to, you have to meet people and get to know them before you really know how it's gonna work.

Yeah, that's true. That's like, that's the, just getting out there part. But yeah, I'm so glad that I have like a community of people that is really supportive too. Like I love that so much. Just the yeah. Like actually totally supportive. I think that there can be this perception that like a lot of artists could be competitive or whatever and I'm sure that like exists, but I don't really have that, I just have a lot of like Yeah. Just genuinely supportive, building together kind of people. And it sounds like you do too. And I I love that. Yeah. Yeah. It's, it's very fortunate and it's, it really is what you reflect, you know, it's, it's what you're trying to That's true.

Give and that's the kind of people that gravitate towards you is so if you're in it for yourself and you're just trying to make money or get these shows and whatever people know, you know, it, It for sure. And even if you get that success, there's, there's a sacrifice you make in relationships by doing that. So. Yeah, that's true.

Yeah. You can almost feel the energy right away when somebody's really just like in it for themselves. Yeah. Kind of repelling. Yes. But going back to the brochures too. Yes. Alright, go ahead. Let's take a really close look at exactly how you format these things. So what size paper are you printing these brochures on? Everything. Cause I remember you had lots of good ideas about this.

I, I'm thinking like, you know, eight by six are bigger. You don't want 'em too big. And so would it be like ledger paper folded into three or legal folded three ways? Do you know what I mean? Like Yeah, let me, yeah, I, I think a little bigger bigger than legal. Okay. Yeah. So probably the ledger.

Yeah. And then trifold. And so you want to have your most, your strongest piece of work on the front, Right? Yes. And the way I have mine is I, I have what I think is my strongest piece and it

opens up and then the next page is an essay that I've had written about my work. Yeah, I wanna talk about that.

That's so, yeah. Cool. So how did you find, cuz was it a, was it a, an art critic or something like that? Who had previously written about your, How did he write This person? Yeah, The last brochure I did, I had an art critic write it and he was, he's an amazing writer and very kind to do it for me.

I met him through, he lives in Florida, but he was visiting where I live in Salt Lake and I met him because he was doing a tour with a friend of mine and she brought him to the gallery and so we met that way and I found out he liked you gotta make sure they like your work. Yeah. He liked my work. Yeah.

And he was willing to write that for me. And I, it, you know, it's, it's not free but it's worth it to have a professional cuz you're professional, visually have a professional, write your work for you, write the essay for you. And how long is it Like, yeah, I would say like 400 words, maybe five.

So does it take up sort of the full Yeah. One, the next one, like the, of the three sort of Sections. Yeah. So yes, that vertical section and then you, yeah. So you, you have the first flap and then the second one and you open that up so it's full. And then I have one really large image that covers half the size,

you know, like maybe my second best piece. Yep. And then several smaller pieces on the side as an example. Oh nice. And then a cover letter in there that's catered to the specific gallery. And I don't even, I just, my whole intent is just to share my work with them, just to put it in front of them and that's the Yeah.

Where it starts. If they're, if they just love the work, they're gonna, they're gonna contact you and try and arrange something. Totally, totally. No pressure, no. Like just, here's my work. I love what you're doing. I love these artists that you've are showing maybe even thank for showing those artists cuz maybe they're like for me sometimes artists are more challenging.

Yeah. Sell and, and they're still representing them. I think that's really cool. So just, you know, everyone loves to hear that they're doing a good job, right? Yeah. Yeah. So, and just that, so the cover letter like that and then, you know, link to your website and your Instagram or whatever, just very simple.

If they wanna know what your CV is and go to your website, you don't have to really include that. Just make sure your website's really up to date and it's done well. Yeah. And, and that's how I go and the back, the back I leave for the address and everything. And one thing that I, in sending 'em out, initially I sent 'em out without an envelope so they got really banged up.

So my recommendation is send them in a clear envelope. So I thought that was brilliant. Yeah. So A clear envelope. So sorry I kind of interrupted you. So that Yeah, they can see the image they're forced to see. Yeah. So they're forced to, they see the image still, but it's protected so, you know, like it's not torn in half by the post office or whatever images Smeared.

That's smart. And where do you get these clear envelopes? I haven't gotten yet, but I, I think you can get 'em, you may have to special 'em order 'em online. Yeah, yeah, yeah. But, but I've, well I've seen them because if you think about like wedding invitations, they often have 'em. Oh yeah. So it's just a matter of finding them.

And would the cover letter be a separate piece of paper? Yeah. So they, so so that the brochure is stop inside. Yeah. The brochure is universal. You can send it to everyone but Totally. You don't wanna send the same cover letter to Everyone. No. It needs to be tweaked a little bit. Yeah. Do you tweak them like,

I like what you're doing with your gallery such as this like more specific detail, some little tidbit about what they're doing. Yeah. And or you know, love this last show or one good thing to do to try to do if you can, is to visit, you know, you know, try travel as much as you can to visit if you're trying to get something outside of your area.

Yeah. So you've actually been to that gallery if possible. Or something I like to do is you go to the fairs in LA or Miami or New York and a lot of galleries are there from all over the world. And so you're like, oh I saw your work at, you know, freeze last year and I'd loved it and blah blah. So they kinda,

as many ways you can connect with them as possible Would be Helpful. Yeah, that's, that's really smart. I did like your idea too about having the wording be sort of around, I just kind of wanna introduce you to my work or whatever. Yeah. Not necessarily like I'm totally specifically dying to be in your gallery. That's just sharing it and hoping for the best.

Yeah, no that's, I think that does just keep it more of an open conversation. It doesn't put so much pressure on them. Yeah. Yeah. And one other thing in regards to like showing, you know, I talked about having friends or whatever, but also just applying a lot, You know. Oh, true. And, and not being worried about rejection.

Yeah. Oh totally. Like when I, when I was really, really adamant about my career years ago I collected, and this is before people would send you art copy rejection letters. So I just kept them all. And so I was like, I'm gonna have the biggest pile of rejection letters ever. So I'd send them like to the the MoMA and all this stuff.

So I'd get these rejection letters from these prestigious places. Oh. Into a positive. Ah, I love that. For me, I would make a list of all the places that I sent the thing to and I would have a little check box beside it and I would check it as soon as it got sent. And that would be the big success,

you know, and then I would check off when it got rejected to or whatever. But that was totally fine. It was just a check mark. Yeah. It meant I heard back from them. That's actually a good thing. Yeah. It's, yeah. Yeah. Cuz often they don't respond do they? Yeah. It's about just trying to turn everything into a positive to give you that energy to keep going and doing what you need to do.

Totally. Actually. And Ron on the, my last podcast, Ron Lambert who you old so No, he said that he would submit to so many things that by the time he got the rejection he would forget that he never submitted. Yeah, Yeah. He's, yeah, that's a great idea. Yeah, that's brilliant. I totally do that too.

Actually I had forgotten that I'd submitted to the Vermont Studio Center, so I likely opened their email and I was like, wait, what's this? I've got accepted. Yeah, yeah, yeah. It's just keep going. Don't let anything pull you down cuz there's enough. Yeah. There's too much negative energy without you generating yourself. Yeah, no, that's true.

I'm just trying to think. So I know I sometimes like send cards with my images too when I've first gone into the gallery and kind of made any kind of communication with them even before I ever send like a portfolio, you know, I would sort of immediately after talking to them in the gallery, send them a card, which would have an image on my work and just say like, what a pleasure it was to meet them at the gallery. And I know one of my galleries I did end up getting to show with them and it was because of the card. I know it was, and he said like, nobody, almost nobody ever sends cards, you know, people, we should all be doing it all the time. But it,

it's not actually that common. So it still stands out. Did you get many cards sent to you when you owned the gallery? Well, the artists here aren't very proactive, so I, I got occasional thank you cards like what you're talking about. But I think, I think that's a great idea. I mean you're just adding another possible connection to the relationship And Yeah.

You know it and I, you know, you know, after I've had a good lunch or conversation with a friend, that's what I do. I text him or whatever. So I kind of, it's not abnormal to do that. I think that's a great idea. Yeah, I think I picked that from you. I need to start doing it again.

It was actually really great. I was really proactive like when I was starting out or something and yeah, that one really worked well. Yeah, I think it just like warms the waters for your portfolio. Is that even the same? I don't know if it is probably not, but yeah, yeah. Maybe it is for, and then your portfolio comes in and they're like,

oh, I remember this person and I have a good feeling about them. You know? Yeah. That's, you know, a nice thing to do. And I Didn't you say that once you sent someone flowers? I did actually. I did, I sent someone flowers after, it was actually case, I'm trying to remember now. It was, I actually had sent him images of my work with the intention just as you had said that I really just wanted to introduce him to my work and I kind of wanted to get some feedback too. And yeah, I think he had a little bit of a consultation with me and he was actually, I was just starting out and his gallery was like extremely good. So it was sort of out of my league. And so after the consultation he, I, I sent him flowers and he later told me that like, nobody has ever done that for him.

And you know, he just really like appreciate it and actually I've been really excited a couple times later in my career. I never did show with him. I think his gallery changed hands and things change and stuff, but he is an art collector himself too, and he's like bought a painting of mine since, and I don't, you know, we've kept a relationship like,

so Yeah. Yeah. It establishes that. Yeah. And I, I think as human beings we tend, we tend to, if we like, if we know the per the artist and we like them, we tend to like their work more. Yeah. So it's very helpful to be a, a nice person and thoughtful. Like That's true. The things that you've done.

Yeah, that's, that's true. I mean, I've met, I've, I've seen artists work where I was sort of like, oh, that's all right. But then I meet the artists and get to know them and then I, I like their work more. Yep. And, and in some case, in one case at least I end up showing their work later.

Totally. So, yeah, no, I think like this, the whole, the big takeaway that I'm kind of getting is just about like, trying to have all of your interactions have more of a flavor of like, obviously being nice and supportive and not trying to take but more, you know, give and, and like just collaborate, you know,

or more, I don't know, just being sort of in it together or whatever, but not having this, like, I need something from you kind of flavor. And same with when you're connecting to other artists, just I think that's like, it's like sort of so important to always have that in mind, like when we're connecting with, with people and galleries and Yeah.

Glad you like mentioned that Because if, if you're gonna, if the galleries ends up working with you, you're, I mean, you have a partnership and it's like a friendship. You don't want to, you know, manipulate the friendship. Totally. Not go anywhere. So. Yeah, totally. And actually like I, yeah, I feel like that's another place where as artists and as good gallery owners too, you get the opportunity to kind of set the relationship up right away in such a way that it's clear that like you're in it together, you're kind of, you know, collaborating on things, it's friendly, you know, it's, you know, you both have the same goals in mind and Yeah. And also just keeping



emails short and things like that I've noticed can be very important when you're dealing with galleries cuz they're very busy so you don't wanna be writing a link the emails or anything like that.

Yeah, Yeah. Hmm. Well this has been such a good conversation. I'm like so excited to try out some of these things and I just think there's like so much good information on this. So thank you so much for joining me, John. It's my pleasure. Thank you. Aw, yeah. And where can people find out more about your work?

So it's [www.johnsprawl.com](http://www.johnsprawl.com). J O H n S P R O U I. Excellent. I'll definitely include a link to your website in the description of this podcast. And yeah, it's just so good to talk to you again. And thank you so much, John. Thank you. Talk to you soon. Bye. I hope you've enjoyed this episode of Down To Art and if you're interested in any of my classes or seeing my paintings, you can check out my work at [Kristy Gordon dot com](http://KristyGordon.com) or look at the online classes I have at [Kristy Gordon courses.com](http://KristyGordon.com/courses). If you've never taken any of my classes, I would suggest you start with the self-portrait class. So thank you for joining us today.