

# BEHIND THE SCENE

PRIVATE ART DEALERS, WHO SELL WORK WITHOUT THE BENEFIT OF A BRICK-AND-MORTAR GALLERY, CAN BE GREAT ASSETS TO PHOTOGRAPHERS BOTH FINANCIALLY AND IN DEVELOPING THEIR CAREERS.

BY CONOR RISCH

Three years ago, Barbi Reed decided to shutter the Sun Valley, Idaho, area gallery she'd operated for more than three decades. Reed wasn't getting out of the art business, however. Instead she was changing her business model, from one based around a traditional brick-and-mortar gallery to one more akin to those run by private art dealers, who serve many of the same functions as gallerists with one big exception—they have neither the benefit, nor the expense, of a permanent exhibition space. Reed now operates a "virtual gallery," curating exhibitions for her Web site and publicizing them just as she would an exhibition at a brick-and-mortar gallery.

Charles Guice was a health industry executive who loved photography when he decided to start a business as a photography dealer in 2001. He contacted photographers he wanted to work with who had no representation, and wrote out a five-year plan. His goal at the end of that period was to open a gallery space. While Guice, who operates as "Charles Guice Contemporary," has built a successful business representing nine artists, he has also realized he doesn't necessarily need a physical space, though he may open one in the future.

June Bateman owned a gallery in Manhattan's SoHo neighborhood from 2001 to 2004, and before that curated "pop-up" shows. Bateman decided to close her gallery and become a private art dealer during the difficult, post-9/11 economic period in New York City. She

**Left: A photograph of a mother and daughter from Marisa Portolese's series "Antonia's Garden." Opposite page: A work from Erika Diettes's series "Rio Abajo" (Drifting Away). Private dealer Charles Guice represents both artists.**



© MARISA PORTOLESE



now operates as a dealer with a stable of artists, and also works as a consultant for art buyers and collectors, introducing them to work by artists she doesn't represent.

Nicole Katz had a gallery in Los Angeles, Eighth Veil, which she opened after stints working in galleries in New York City, but she closed the space recently to take over her family's printing and publishing business. Katz still represents several of the gallery artists privately, however.

How private dealers work with artists and the ways they structure their businesses varies greatly. "Each business is unique," Bateman notes. "There's no cookie-cutter aspect to the art world." (Both Reed and Guice still prefer to be known as "gallerists," and the term "private dealer" is loosely defined.) But regardless of a dealer's particular *modus operandi*, photographers who work with them exclusively or in tandem with their other gallery representation see several benefits.

*PDN* recently spoke with art dealers who operate outside of the traditional gallery system, and some of the photographers they represent to find out how private art dealers work for and with photographers.

## LOW OVERHEAD AND NO EXHIBITION COSTS

At the top of the list of benefits for art dealers who operate without a gallery space is the lower overhead costs. Renting or owning a gallery space and paying to create and publicize several exhibitions per year is expensive. When dealers operate without a gallery, they face less financial pressure. That can benefit the artists they represent financially as well.

Tom Chambers, a photographer who works with Reed, says there is "an opportunity for a better price break" for the artist on the sale of works. Galleries traditionally split sales with the artist 50-50, but "some of these [private dealers] are doing a 60-40 price break in favor of the artist," Chambers says.

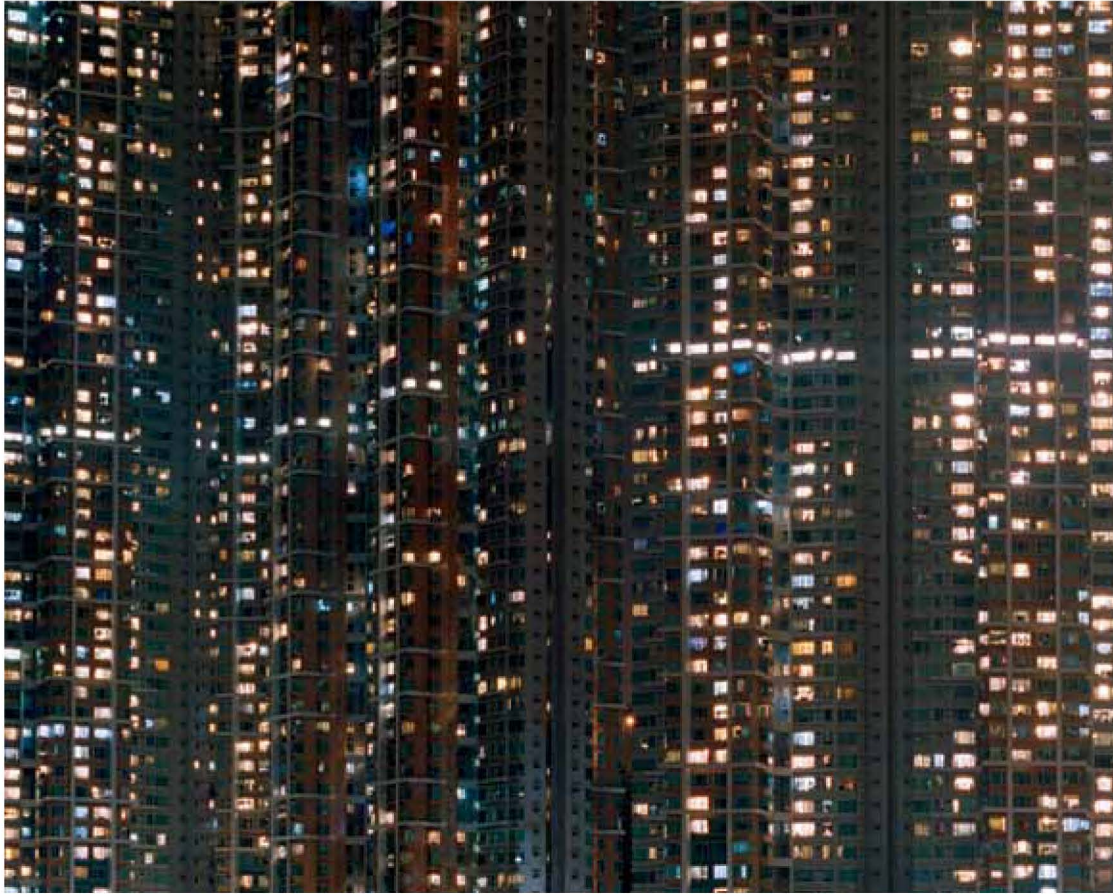
Photographers also face less financial risk because they "don't have to stock a gallery with a ton of prints," Chambers notes. "That's a big advantage because that's expensive for the artist."

Christoph Gielen, an artist represented by Katz and another private dealer in Europe, Beatrix Birken, says working with "agents" rather than galleries has advantages. "You do not have to deal with the level of commitment that you do with a





# BEHIND THE SCENE



BOTH PHOTOS © CHRISTOPH GIELEN

gallery,” he notes. Putting on shows is costly for the photographer, Gielen adds. “You have to weigh the pros and cons and see where you want to invest.”

Instead, Gielen concentrates on creating talks and symposia around his work, which has considered topics like land usage and, most recently, the super-max prison systems in the United States. Gielen has spoken at events like the BMW Guggenheim Lab and TED conference, and then relies on Katz and Birken to place his work with collectors in the U.S. and Europe.

Though Reed operates a “virtual gallery,” curating exhibitions for her Web site and doing everything she used to do for shows except hanging prints, she no longer holds an artist’s work for a year after his or her exhibition. Now, when she creates an online exhibition, she asks the artist to hold work for just six weeks. If she hasn’t sold it in that time, the artist can place it elsewhere. She also saves thousands in framing costs by not having physical exhibitions.

Guice says he still does many of the same things as brick-and-mortar galleries. “I do shows, I mount and finish work, which can add up to tens of thousands of dollars, and the average art fair is \$25,000, if not a little more,” Guice explains. “There’s travel, [and] everything [else] that goes along with a physical space with the exception of a lease. But it’s still less.”

## EXHIBITIONS AND THE LACK THEREOF

Art fairs are an effective way for dealers to show an artist’s work to collectors. “It’s important to do art fairs,” Bateman says. She recently showed Michael Massaia’s large platinum-palladium prints at AIPAD and says there was a constant stream of visitors to her booth.

Guice says he’s had “considerable success” participating in art fairs, and that they were an important part of his initial five-year plan. “The only way that I could establish myself is to do fairs,” Guice says. “That served, in effect, as advertising.”

Chambers notes, “the majority of my prints that are sold through physical galleries are sold through the galleries taking prints to art fairs.”

However, fairs are a considerable expense, requiring several thousand dollars to frame and ship the work on top of travel and booth rental fees, so “it’s important to be realistic about the number of fairs you want to do, and how much you want to spend,” Bateman says.

**Left: Photographs by Christoph Gielen, who is represented privately by Nicole Katz in the U.S. and Beatrix Birken in Europe.**





BOTH PHOTOS © TOM CHAMBERS

## “SOME ARTISTS GO TO LARGER, ESTABLISHED GALLERIES AND GET LOST,” SAYS CHARLES GUICE. “I LIKE TO THINK I CAN PAY MORE ATTENTION TO AN ARTIST.”

Dealers also show work to collectors by traveling to meet them or arranging private viewings. Katz has a viewing room in her printing shop to host collectors and show them prints, which gives her the ability to select work specifically for each collector. “I get to curate work based on what I feel their individual interests will be, and the conversation follows suit,” she says.

Guice takes advantage of the “ability to travel extensively, to meet with a curator or a collector in their home as opposed to them having to come to you.” Guice took three artists to an event organized by a museum in Birmingham, Alabama, for collectors and donors, which led to sales and funding for an artist’s next project. “This client said to me that he had invited gallerists to visit and I was the first one who had come ... and he is a major collector. I was able to establish relationships, real friendships, that I would never have been able to if I had not been able to travel and go on that visit.”

Before she closed her physical space, Reed sent work to collectors “on approval,” and she continues to do so now that she’s showing work online. (Because her gallery was in Ketchum, Idaho, adjacent to the Sun Valley resort, she has a lot of out-of-town clients anyway.) If a collector wants to buy a work now, she’ll send it to them and they can send it back, minus shipping costs, if they aren’t satisfied with the physical object.

**Above: Images by Tom Chambers, who is represented by Anne Reed Gallery.**

Web sites are also an important part of marketing the work of the artists dealers represent. Reed, who says she considers herself a gallerist because of the way she organizes exhibitions on her site, notes clients who couldn’t make it to see a show in her gallery space in previous years had virtually the same experience her clients have now: They receive an e-mail notifying them of a new show, and they can view it on the Anne Reed Gallery Web site.

While they may not curate online exhibitions, each of the dealers we interviewed for this article maintains a Web site where people can view the work of the artists they represent.

### **MORE ARTIST AND CLIENT FOCUS**

The work of a private dealer mimics the work of a gallery in many ways: They both make calls to collectors, network, and try to place an artist’s work in museum or corporate collections.

“Galleries are all private dealers in a sense,” says Reed. “Just one aspect of a gallery’s function is to work with clients and introduce them to work. As a private dealer it’s probably 90 percent of what you’re doing.”



# BEHIND THE SCENE

Chambers adds, “A lot of the day-to-day [work] for a gallerist is making phone calls ... Even if they have a physical gallery, the way they sell prints is to make a thousand phone calls a day.” Without a physical space and its distractions, there’s more time to sell work, Chambers notes.

Bateman says it takes just as much energy and hustle to be a private dealer as it does to be a gallery owner, but the energy is directed toward different things. When you have a gallery, mounting exhibitions, publicizing them, organizing talks and events, and doing the other attendant work is very time consuming. “[Now] I am really able to focus more on my clients and their needs,” Bateman says. “You always wish that you had more time when you are running a gallery.”

“Some artists go to larger, established galleries and get lost,” Guice notes. “There’s no attention paid to their career. I like to think I can pay more attention to an artist.”

## WORKING WITH BOTH GALLERIES AND DEALERS

While some galleries may ask to represent an artist exclusively, private dealers have found most galleries are open to working with them when they both represent the same artist.

Reed says that in the three years since she closed her physical gallery, she’s felt that other galleries are more willing to work with her



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**Above: A photo by Michael Massaia. Left: A photo by Harvey Stein. June Bateman represents both artists.**

because she functions more as a private dealer. (Reed does note, however, that it could also have something to do with the economy.) “We go to [galleries] and say, ‘We’ve got somebody interested and we know you handle that work, would you be interested in working with us?’”

Guice believes artists should have several galleries and representatives in the U.S. and abroad. “What that does as an artist is get you the right amount of exposure.” As Katz puts it, “It’s like that expression: There’s no such thing as bad publicity.” She adds, “I talk about [my artists] a lot ... and I just think that’s a good thing.”

Some of Reed’s artists decided to work with other brick-and-mortar galleries in the region when she closed her doors, and she “understands and supports them,” she says. A couple of the artists who left have since come back, though. “They really missed working with us,” Reed says.

A good business relationship with a private dealer “has to do with how you click and what your personal relationship is and how reliable that is,” says Gielen, who chose to continue working with Katz after she closed her gallery. “Once you’ve established a personal connection you stick with it and I think it pays off.” **pdn**