



Lisa Murch
Botanical Squatters, 2006
mixed media
6 x 6 x 12 inches
Installation in Glyndor Gallery,
Wave Hill
Courtesy of the artist



Charles Goldman
Public Fountain, 2006
mixed media
Courtesy of the artist



Charles Goldman
Public Fountain, 2006
mixed media
Courtesy of the artist

This is an interview with Jennifer McGregor about Public Art on July 9, 2007.

JACKIE: In my book, I'll be giving tips for artists who are thinking about getting into Public Art projects. One of the venues I talk about is the Percent for Art Program across the country. Are they viable options for artists? Does it take a certain type of artist to be in a Percent for Art Program?

JENNIFER: I think it does take a certain type of artist to do permanent public art and go through the competitive process. There are personal characteristics about being well organized and being able to present work clearly and well. You're going to have to be dealing with a lot of rejection. You have to be prepared.

I was talking to one artist who was the finalist for a project I was working on. She said she'd been a finalist something like 120 times. She's done about twenty really strong commissions. So her average is pretty good, but that's lots of times of going up, coming up with an idea, and having it not accepted.

I think that a lot of public art is problem solving. More and more, a lot of Percent for Art commissions are asking for artists to look a space, view the situation, and come up with an idea. So rather than just saying, "We're looking for a sculpture in front of this building," it's, "We have an airport. We want to move people from one place to another. We want an artist to think about this." So there's a problem solving element to conceptualizing your idea that I think is very interesting to a lot of artists. And then once you get the commission, there's

also a huge problem solving aspect to figuring out how to do it. How are you going to take this idea from a proposal to a completed, finished project?

JACKIE: Is it acting more like a designer rather than an artist?

JENNIFER: I think that there are definitely some commissioning programs that are really looking more for design. There are some public art programs that are getting more involved in design and others that put a premium on artists and architects working together or artists and people in other disciplines working together. It's good to be someone who is somewhat collaborative that's not just working in the studio all by themselves that can work in a team with fabricators and interact with the public at various points along the process. When I think about people that have been really successful with public art, they tend to be people who enjoy that aspect of it.

JACKIE: What are the more successful public art projects out there? Some of my favorites are works in the New York City subways that I enjoy every time I ride the train. I look for Martin and Munoz's little blackbird sculptures perched on the I-beams at the Canal Street, (<http://www.martin-munoz.com/>) or Life Underground, the series of sculptures by Tom Otterness's at the 14th street subway. (www.tomotterness.net/exhibitions_subway.html) You know it's a little hokey, but it works. It makes me smile. Then there are all the amazing tile mosaics everywhere.

JENNIFER: I love the Ming Fay's project at the Delancey Street Station. There's a lot of really great art in the subways. <http://mingfay.com/publicart/delancey.html>

JACKIE: Maybe you could give me some insight as to how the panel process works in Public Art.

JENNIFER: It's slightly different than a panel process for a grant or something like that because you've got mixed disciplines. [On the panel] you usually have a couple of art people, but you'll have people representing the building and the different factors of the project. So the people that are looking at the work are not living and breathing art all day long and aren't used to looking at hundreds of images the way a curator might be.

Having all these conversations with people who are coming from different disciplines evaluating the art is actually an aspect of the process I find very interesting. Work that's very conceptual and hard to understand in a few images is probably not the easiest type of work to submit for a public art commission, whereas in another curatorial situation that would work.

It's important that artists really look at what the project is when they put their submission together. If there's anything in your repertoire, even if it's something that you did ten years ago, that somehow has some kind of connection to this project, it might be appropriate to submit it here. Public art isn't necessarily so interested in the things you did last year. I've just seen so many times where one image will just trigger some kind of connection.

Sometimes there's just one image that's like "Oh my god. There's something about this and we can see how this would work." So trying to get a sense of the variety and the breadth of your work is important in a public art submission.

JACKIE: Really? Even if you only have a limited number of images that you can submit?

JENNIFER: Yeah, I think you want to think carefully about how you submit them. I always tell people to figure out how they are going to be projected and looked at, because that might influence what image you decide to submit.

JACKIE: So you put the images together like an exhibition of your work. What other information do they look at in a panel process or do they just look at images?

JENNIFER: Well they usually start out with images. Sometimes, they've asked you to write a letter of intent or an idea about what you want to do. I've found, the more detailed you are, the harder it is for people to absorb all that detail in the panel process.

JACKIE: So give them a broad sketch.

JENNIFER: For instance, let's say it's a mosaic or something for the subway, if you've done something in tile, submit it. If you've done an idea for a subway that you didn't get, something in Los Angeles that didn't get picked, there's no reason why you shouldn't submit that for the tile project in New York. Reworking the proposals you may have done that didn't get through is perfectly acceptable and sometimes more desirable than just submitting your paintings.

JACKIE: Do you have to write in descriptions of the work?

JENNIFER: Yeah. I think a lot of submissions now require some description. They not only want the title and its dimensions but also who commissioned it and a little description of what it is. What type of building is it in? So again, keep the descriptions concise, but they're coming at it from public art, so they want to know what was the scope, what type of building was this in?

JACKIE: And who you worked with?

JENNIFER: Yes. If you've collaborated with somebody, you should say so.

JACKIE: Like with the school kids—

JENNIFER: Even with like, "Jackie Battenfield and I collaborated on this together." You'll see that sometimes people don't say that if they didn't have such a good collaboration, but you do want to be thorough about the information you provide. Resumes are important, but that's probably something that they look at last. And that's probably something more in the final go rounds. I think more and more people also want references.

JACKIE: Who would be a good reference for a public art project?

JENNIFER: I would say people who know your work but also know you as a working artist.

JACKIE: References like she came in on time, she came in on budget. Are you asked to write references for artists?

JENNIFER: I am. Most public art agencies will just call me, so I don't always have to write one.

JACKIE: So, it's actually quite a small world after a while.

JENNIFER: It is, but you know there are over 350 programs around the country and there is a really strong network called the Americans for the Art, Public Art Network, (http://www.americansforthearts.org/networks/public_art_network/default.asp) which is a really good resource for artists in terms of finding out about commissions and finding out about programs. They have a really good directory that even artists can get.

I always encourage artists who are starting out to think [about public art], you're not going to apply to things all over the country, because you're an emerging artist. Why is somebody in Alaska going to pick you? But places where you have personal connections are good to start with: where you live, where you're from or went to school.

JACKIE: If you wanted to get started in public art, you would start work applying to projects within your region.

JENNIFER: Yes, for example, if you're in New York something like New Jersey, a days travel time.

JACKIE: How about if you're in California?

JENNIFER: You probably would be looking at Northern California or Southern California. But for instance if you are in Kansas, maybe your region is a little bigger, because the density of artists isn't as big.

JACKIE: So you start applying locally to get yourself started. Can an artist get feedback about their proposals? Some information about what you did right and what you did wrong.

JENNIFER: If you're submitting to a competition where 400 people enter, they're not going to remember what your images were like, so it's probably hard to get feedback from them.

I've noticed that one of the things that public art programs are trying to do is mentor artists more, and help them get involved in public art programs. They're leading information

sessions for artists who are interested in applying. I know some of the programs in Texas have tried to do some sessions with artists about what to include in a public art budget.

JACKIE: Sessions on how to respond to a Request for Proposals (RFP)?

JENNIFER: How to fill out an RFP, know what's expected of the artist when they get a commission, and understand what's involved, so that they won't be intimidated when applying. I would think that might happen more outside of big cities like New York. New York has so many artists applying. Smaller cities want to really make sure that their local artists are competitive with the big public art artists from around the country, so I've noticed that programs are also trying to have some smaller projects that are just for local artists, so they give artists a chance to get feedback.

JACKIE: There are all sorts of art in public places not all of it permanent work. Let's talk about temporary art projects.

JENNIFER: I think you have to be really wary about what is expected of the artist in these projects. How much money they are giving to the artists? There are a lot of sculpture parks and temporary sculpture opportunities out there. If they give you any money, is it enough money to transport your work? So you're going to be in a sculpture park in Tennessee. Well how are you going to get your work to Tennessee and is that really what you want to be doing? So you have to be strategic in applying for these things. But again if there is some sculpture park, or some temporary opportunities in your region, that's a good place to start. Having your work photographed outside. You can show that you had a piece that lasted all summer long and didn't fall down.

Starting off with a temporary opportunity is a really good idea. But the fact is, the way that public art is funded, most permanent public art programs can't use their money for temporary programs. So all in all, there's a lot more money for the permanent than there is for the temporary programs. But you can really experiment more and also get started with the temporary programs.

JACKIE: Actually I've been very impressed with the Arizona Public Art Program. Do you know much about that?

JENNIFER: Yeah, Arizona is one of the states that has led the way. Phoenix in particular had one of the first master plans. The whole state has been turning to incredible growth over the last twenty years, so they are building a lot of new structures, infrastructure and buildings. So there's a ton of opportunity. That's one place where they commission people from all over.

JACKIE: When you drive through Arizona, almost every highway overpass has some art on it.

JENNIFER: Scottsdale has a program. Tucson has a program. The growth there has been so great. The eastern cities, like Baltimore aren't building a lot of new highways; New York is basically just repairing the infrastructure that we have, so we don't have the kind of design team or infrastructure team opportunities. They've done some amazing flood gates and water dam type of projects out in Arizona but in older eastern cities, it's just a different type of construction.

JACKIE: In the book I have a whole chapter on budgets, not just for public art projects, but for grants, a studio budget. I want artists to be aware of what it costs to make their art. What are some of the mistakes that you've seen artists make on the budgets?

JENNIFER: It's essential to conceive a project that is within the budget. Many artists, not just the ones starting out, but artists throughout their career get enticed by the opportunity. You see that the budget is \$100,000 and it's like, "Oh my god, I got the hundred thousand dollar commission." But really you have to realize that the budget is going to pay for every single aspect of the art. I have to say this over and over to people. "We are paying you \$100,000 for this project. If your insurance cost \$5,000, that's 5,000 out of your budget." "Oh the insurance costs too much! Why do I need this insurance?" "Well it's required and we count on the fact that \$5,000 will go towards insurance." You have to rent a studio, because you can't use your studio, it's not big enough. Well that's another \$5,000. All of these aspects of your project are going to be paid for out of the \$100,000. So it's much more than just your materials and your time.

Time is also the other thing artists need to consider. They think "well I'm not going to get a fee on this project, because I want to do it so badly." And I think that that's a huge mistake that people make. Your fee should be somewhere between 15 and 25% of the budget. Before you have to do a budget for a proposal, you should certainly find out what the program administrators consider admissible fees for the budget.

JACKIE: So you are in line with what they expect.

JENNIFER: Right. Have an understanding. What the client is expecting to be included in the budget is very helpful information to get from the start and most places will tell you that. You also need to anticipate contingencies. If this is going to be part of your project, the estimates you're giving from your fabricators should reflect that. Don't get today's prices. Have them give you bids on the estimated price three years from now.

Another really helpful thing is to establish a separate bank account for your public art project, so you're not tempted to use it for something else. You're not using the \$60,000 for the down payment on your condo and thinking you'll come up with the money later. If someone were to get a big commission, it would behoove them to sit down with an accountant or a business advisor to help them figure out how to structure their project.

JACKIE: Do you have any general insights or tips for artists who are working on an art commission? It doesn't have to be a large public art commission, but maybe something for an upcoming exhibition or a commission from a collector.

JENNIFER: I think it's pretty much very similar, for instance if you're doing a commission for a private house, you're working in their home, so it might be a little more informal. But you should have a contract, a letter of agreement, or some kind of an understanding that says, "You know, this is what I'm doing." And discuss and write down the answers to questions like "Am I bringing my own ladder or am I using your ladder?" just to talk through the logistics of it. "Am I going to be working only on the weekends?" If you are just starting out, it may be a commission from a friend. It's just as important to spell everything out ahead of time.

If you're doing something for a corporation, you might be working with an art consultant or somebody who is negotiating on your behalf. Again, you should have a contract. There should be some stipulation that says, "We're going to pay this much money. We're going to pay it to you in installments. We expect you to do this. We're providing the lights or whatever it is." But most things should be spelled out in kind of a written agreement.

JACKIE: What if the collector or corporation doesn't like what you've done?

JENNIFER: Well, I think that your contract should address that and there should be a step where you show them a proposal. With any of these situations, you show them a proposal and they agree to it. Your proposal may be something that you replicate exactly as is, or it may be, "I'm going to do a sixteen foot long painting that is going to be similar to these other paintings that I've done, but I don't know what it's going to look like because it's part of my process." Make sure you invite them over to your studio to come and see it in progress or you send them jpegs. Keep them involved and saying, "Yes, we like this," so that the day you deliver it, there's not going to be any su . But your agreement should address that they are going to pay you for the work they have asked you to do.

JACKIE: So, let's switch a little bit to Wave Hill, which is your current position. When you commission work with Wave Hill, do you go through the same process with the artist?

JENNIFER: We do. When we're commissioning things at Wave Hill and this will probably be similar to other exhibition spaces, we're asking artists to create thing to exhibit in our space but the artist owns it, so we're not buying it from the artist. We're basically just paying them a facilitation fee. You know it's kind of what our honorarium is. For example, our honorarium for the sunroom projects is \$1500 to artists. Every sunroom project artist gets that. If they want to make something out of Kleenexes and Elmer's glue and—

JACKIE: Blow their nose and put it on a wall—

JENNIFER: —that's what we accepted; we agreed to it, there was really no material cost, and it will be thrown away afterwards. If they want to do something and get the materials

from Materials for the Arts and then it's up to them to go and pick up the materials. If they want to create some really elaborate video, we're still only giving them \$1500. If their editing costs were \$5,000, well that was their choice. They have to absorb it. It was their choice to do that bigger scale project.

JACKIE: Do you hesitate to give somebody a project when you know what they're planning to do can't possibly be done for \$1500?

JENNIFER: Yeah, well, there are certain cases where artists have proposed their idea and they've gotten faculty grants that have helped get work with a higher budget.

JACKIE: So you need to feel comfortable that they are going to be able to fund it.

JENNIFER: Or that it's so important to them that they're willing to fund it themselves. I have to say that we've never had a situation where people said, "Oh, I'm sorry, I ran out of money, I can't finish it."

JACKIE: I also want to talk some more about your work as curator because there's probably little tips you can give me in terms of that. What's your favorite part of the job?

JENNIFER: I love studio visits.

JACKIE: Why?

JENNIFER: Because you really have a sense of understanding the artist's process and how they work. It's very different talking to them about the work in their studio than elsewhere.

JACKIE: What do you like to see in a studio visit?

JENNIFER: Well there are a few things I don't like to see. I don't need to see images of all their works since high school. Certainly, people have done really effective slide shows in their studio when they are showing me documentation of installations. And when we are doing that, I also like to be able to see if they have some materials from those projects or something that's tactile. If it's audio, just something that will give me a better understanding of the project. Otherwise, I could just be looking at images in my office.

If I'm in their studio, I want to get a sense of what other things are they working on right now. You know besides the thing that we're there to talk about. There are always little things like what other little doodads do they have on the wall. How do they use their space? It's always curious. Like, there was a time this summer where I did thirteen studios in one week. I was all over the city, and these were all sort of fairly emerging artists, so I wasn't going to super deluxe studios, but it was such a great vista of thirteen different ways that people are working.

JACKIE: How do you find the artists you show?

JENNIFER: Well we do calls to artists and we find some artists that way.

JACKIE: What's a call to artists?

JENNIFER: Like you send out an RFP for artists to apply for a particular opportunity.

We usually post it on the NYFA Source website (nyfa.org). We send it to the Borough Arts Councils in New York. Like many art centers we focus on our region. With opportunities like our sunroom space, we select exclusively from the artists who apply to the call.

We also have general opportunities once a year when artists send us their images for general review for upcoming exhibitions. This helps us to streamline our review of artists work and focus on work for the specific exhibitions that we're planning. The upcoming exhibitions create a filter or a focus for my search.

JACKIE: How do you know if a curator's receptive? Dumb luck?

JENNIFER: Some luck. I would say, you were asking about how I find out about artists. A lot of it is through other artists. And I think you'll hear this over and over again.

JACKIE: So you're working on a subject, you find one person who may be the reason why you even got interested in that subject, and they start leading you to others.

JENNIFER: And certainly other curators recommend artists as well, but I think that artists tend to be looking at more work than a lot of curators are.

JACKIE: Do you search on the internet? Do you go to any registries?

JENNIFER: I sometimes go to registries. I use the Artist's Space registry and The Drawing Center Registry. I tend to be looking at things pretty specifically, so the registries are often too general, but there are certainly a number of artists that I've shown that I've found through registries.

I have these bizarre filing systems of cards from exhibitions that I've gone to. I now have too many different systems.

JACKIE: I mean one of the things that artists are considering is whether they should just email announcements or have a physical card. Who should they send the physical card to? And being a former curator myself, I happen to have a similar system to you. I say physical cards really still haven't supplanted the email.

JENNIFER: There may be different preferences, but I get so much email, and I think everyone in the world gets so much email, that I do save email in this kind of "shows to see"

section. But once the shows have passed, I can't keep saving all that email. If I have a card that was interesting to me, I'm more likely to save it.

JACKIE: Does the card have to have an image?

JENNIFER: Definitely, it needs a good image.

JACKIE: What does that mean?

JENNIFER: I mean sometimes there's a provocative image that makes you wonder if it's designed in such a way. What is this particular artist about? There are so many cheap printers around, so go to the good ones. There are cards that are either not well printed or they're really just a bad image.

JACKIE: What's a bad image? I want to know.

JENNIFER: Or maybe it's a bad painting. The color should be correct and accurate. It's important to spend time thinking about the best image or detail to use.

JACKIE: Do you go to the art fairs?

JENNIFER: I just do the ones in New York because I don't have a budget to travel. And I do find really interesting people through the art fairs. They're so overwhelming, but again with the art fairs it's usually like I've set my mind when I am there to think about X,Y, and Z shows that I'm working on. Because otherwise, it's too much. But I go to galleries. I really don't have time to do a lot of studio visits that aren't specifically related to things like artists I'm already interested in or that I am already working with.

JACKIE: I think sometimes artists don't realize how much time a studio visit takes in order to do it decently.

JENNIFER: Yeah. Even if I'm only there for 45 minutes, it took me 45 minutes to get there and 45 minutes to get home and I'm starting in the Bronx to begin with. I mean, I know that there are some people that can go to ten studios in a day, but I can't.

JACKIE: You've been around for a long time. You have worn many hats in the world. What are some of the mistakes that you've found that artists have made?

JENNIFER: We were visiting artists who we were considering for an upcoming show. One of the things we usually say to artists who show us their work is that if they don't have a studio right now or their work is all video and there's nothing for us, that they should come to Wave Hill to show us their work. So we always give people that option.

One time, someone [we were interested in showing] invited us to her studio. We get to this artists studio and she had nothing to show us. She just had a model of an empty gallery that she was supposed to have a show in, in about a month, for another space.

JACKIE: Did she get in the show?

JENNIFER: No! I didn't say this, but I thought, "You should have just cancelled the studio visit, worked on your show, called us up and said, 'You know what, I'm having a show next month. Why don't we meet at the gallery instead?'" It was kind of an act of desperation.

Another thing is, if we're going to have a studio visit with you about a show at Wave Hill, you better have come to Wave Hill before we get to you studio. I mean, it's one thing if I am going to visit your studio in Boston, I won't expect that. But if I'm coming to Brooklyn, or the Lower East Side, you better have come to Wave Hill because usually we've scheduled the studio visit a few weeks in advance and unless it was like snowstorms...

JACKIE: Yeah because that kind of sets up right away a sense of not respecting what you're—

JENNIFER: —what I'm doing. Recently, I did this studio visit with someone who hadn't ever set foot at Wave Hill. She went after our studio visit and emailed how great it was, so I know that she's been there, which helped a little bit. It's not like we just started the program yesterday. Again, if you're going to apply to a place and you haven't had the opportunity to go there and really think about it—

JACKIE: It means that it's a much richer dialogue with any organizers or decision makers.

JENNIFER: And you can ask me better questions if you know the space.

JACKIE: If someone you cared for was beginning a career as a visual artist, what three pieces of advice would you give them?

JENNIFER: This is probably true of anybody, but you should try to balance your need and desire to make art with the other things that you are doing in your life, so you're getting pleasure from all the things. It's not something that is going to be in sync for your whole life, and it's going to shift as you go through life. It's been interesting for me to watch how, for some people, art making is 90% of their time and then it goes down to 10% and then it goes back up again.

I have to say, take time to experiment. And I think that the art world right now doesn't put any premium on experimenting. I think that a lot of work really suffers.

And find a core group of friends and colleagues that you can continue a dialogue with. It may not be for your whole life, and they don't have to be other artists, but people you can share your work with. If you have to write something, you can share that with them. Because

I think that there is something very isolating about being an artist. You can do it all by yourself. But when I think about the people that I see that are happy with what they're doing, they are people that have good networks with other people.

JACKIE: And that's how you get people who suggest you for projects. Thanks for your time Jennifer.