

*I first noticed Julie Baker Gallery years ago with her ads in Art in America. I loved the design and I've been keeping track of the gallery ever since. When I was looking for a gallery to interview that wasn't in a major metropolitan area, hers was the first one that came to mind. This is an interview with Julie Baker on September 7, 2007.*

J: Julie to start, tell me a little bit about yourself. You run a gallery in an unlikely place in Northern California. How did you get started there and why in that city?

JB: I grew up in New York City. My parents owned an ad agency. And back in the day before there were computers, people needed advertising agencies to place their ads in Art in America, or Artforum, or ArtNews, make their invitations, and all that sort of stuff. So that was my parent's business. Dinner table conversations were about Arne Glimcher because he was a client and others like Betty Parsons. All the major galleries in New York were my parents' clients. In fact, my mother taught a class about marketing art galleries for art dealers at the New School many years ago.

So, at the age of fifteen, I started interning and working at galleries. My first gallery job was Aldis Browne Fine Art on Madison Avenue as the coat check girl. I interned at Christies when I was in high school, then at Jan Krugier Gallery, and then I left New York to go to school in California. I went to UC Santa Cruz and just loved the life and the pace of life there and was really torn because I wanted to stay in California. But I moved back to New York and worked again for Christies and the Jan Krugier Gallery.

J: So you got to see how an auction house functions.

JB: Yes. And then I took over my parent's business and ran it for six years.

J: At what age did you take over your parent's business?

JB: I was twenty-six. I had an older brother who had been in the business, but he didn't like it. I learned it by fire, just immersed in it, and it was tough. It was in the early 90's when the art market had soured, so we had to go out and diversify. It was an incredible experience.

For example, one of the first things I did was start the Soho Gallery Association back in the day when all the galleries were in Soho. It was just a loose organization, so we could buy cooperative advertising in the New York Times. My parent's business had been more situated on the Upper East Side and 57th Street and really hadn't gone downtown, so I got to know people like Charlie Cowles really well. I ran that business for six years.

Meanwhile, my husband is from Nevada City California. We would go out there for family trips and then we'd fly back to JFK and I would feel myself getting more and more depressed as I drove into New York City. I thought, "Well this isn't right."

We had our first son, then I was pregnant again at the age of thirty, and I found out it was another boy. There we were living in Brooklyn and, I thought, "Two boys, in Brooklyn? This is too much. I don't want to raise them here." Anyway, long story short, we moved to Nevada City nine years ago.

I had always wanted to open a gallery since those family dinner table conversations, even though you think having heard about the art world, I would know enough to know better. But I always wanted to do it. And then we were living in Nevada City. I was working for a web development business, doing sales and marketing. I've always been really good at sales and marketing. It's something that's in my blood, I think being a good sales person is sometimes just an inherent quality, but it was really soulless. It was about technology and was the first time I had worked outside of the art world.

When my dad died at the age of 90, it was one of those moments where you kind of stop, think about your life, and say to yourself, "Okay, well life does end and I am not doing what I want to do. This isn't why I moved to a place like this. What I really want to do is open an art gallery." At that point, I really felt ready. I felt ready because it combined all these experiences that I had had in sales, marketing and web stuff, working at Christies, and working with lots of galleries over the years.

I looked at [my rural California?] community, and although it's small, it has a real love for the arts. There was a foundation for art and culture and a lot of theatre and literary arts. There were a lot of visual artists, but there was no venue for them. So I quit my lucrative web job. I called my mother and I said, "Am I insane, but I want to open a gallery, what do you think?" I called all the people I know in the art world and most of them said, "Yes. You're crazy." But, you do it because you love it. You don't open a gallery of emerging artists to make a lot of money. You do it because it's a passion.

J: There's a great quote for my book.

JB: So we did it. The first opening we had, over four hundred people showed up. I'd planned it for six months. I had a dance performance in the parking lot. The first show was called "Baker's Dozen" and included thirteen painters, many of them from New York: Jason Middlebrook, Tracy Miller, Susan Homer. It was a great show. And it was all paintings because I love painting.

J: What are the challenges to keeping a gallery open in a rural place?

JB: From watching galleries in New York, I understood that galleries have a core-group of collectors that they work with. Every gallery needs that. They have their nice list that they can call on all the time. So, I knew that was one thing that I had to develop: my core group of collectors.

J: Did you have a business plan?

JB: I'm more of a gut kind of person. And it's such an unpredictable business, the art world. You have no idea what they're going to respond to and when. So, no, I didn't have a business plan, but I knew from my sales and marketing background that it takes three to five years to open any retail business. And let's be blunt, an art gallery is a retail business. We can pretend it's something else and that art is not a product, but it is.

So, I knew I had three to five years and enough capital to make that work.

J: Was your initial plan was to develop that base of collectors locally?

JB: No. My initial plan was that I knew I could not depend upon the local audience to support my business.

J: Do you think the fact that you have background as a web designer made you realize immediately that marketing had great potential outside of Grass Valley?

JB: I could not have opened a gallery where I am without the web and without art fairs. Those were the two components I immediately knew I had to use. And I had to do really good marketing. So, I spent a lot of money in the beginning. Everything I printed was letter press. I did beautiful invitations. I took out ads in the national ad publications, and I put together a really good mailing list from all the people I knew.

J: I noticed your gallery immediately because you took out a nice ad in the Art in America Annual Guide.

JB: Exactly. It was an inexpensive way to just put a little [information?] out there. It was an ad this size [gestures] for \$675. They're not expensive. I mean, in the grand scheme of things. A full page these days in ArtNews magazine is \$8,000.

I knew that I had to really proclaim that I existed and that it had to look really good and that people had to pick it up and go, "Wow. This is really beautiful and well done. Grass Valley?" You have to make that link for people. I knew that the majority of the people who were going to receive information would never actually come to my gallery. They were going to go to a virtual gallery.

The other thing that I knew was that there are many components to the art world. There are collectors I have to attract and there are also the community dealers whose respect I have to gain in order to get into art fairs. I started with the community dealers that I knew close by in San Francisco. I had to prove myself so much more because nobody knew my address and it was certainly not an art destination. So, I had to say, "I know what I'm talking about." I threw out "I'm from New York," many, many times, "Oh, I'm actually from New York. No, I'm not from Grass Valley and I know these people and I know those people." You know that sort of thing. I did a lot of networking to prove myself. I also knew immediately, I had to get into an art fair because that was how the art business was going. This was six years ago and of course today—

J: It is the business.

JB: It is the business. Absolutely. We opened the gallery in November of 2001, and I think I was in my first art fair, January 2002 in San Francisco. And that was because I had done so much networking.

And you know, I did make many mistakes. I went into fairs that were not the right fit for me. There's so much politicking that you have to figure out as well in the art world. You know? Who's watching you? And a lot of it is other dealers. They're rating you and determining which level you fit you in.

J: So, you see your clients as collectors and other dealers?

JB: And, I consider artists my clients.

J: The artists you represent are your clients?

JB: They're my clients. I have to take care of them. I can't do it without them. I don't make art. So, I wear two different hats. I have a hat that is managing artists and the other that is managing the collectors. My job is to bridge the two. And then, especially when you're not in a zip code that is New York, there are other dealers. You have an extra layer of proving yourself.

J: Would you agree that almost all galleries starting out have to impress other dealers too because that's how they start making more connections for their artists.

JB: Yeah. That's right. That was the other reason why I did those art fairs, because it was an incredible way to network. The fairs allowed me to really feel like I was a part of a community. It's so isolated in Nevada City, Grass Valley. I suddenly felt like I was a part of something. That was really important for me psychologically.

Getting back to the challenges, I knew from the beginning that I could get some collectors locally. There's a lot of money where I am. It's quiet and it's not ostentatious, but there's money there. I knew that there were some people who were going to appreciate what I did and I had to get to those people. I knew that there are people who drive up on their way to Tahoe and they've got money. So I had to look at the region. One of the first things I did was join the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento, at the \$1,000 level. It is the closest museum to my gallery. No other art dealer had done that.

J: So, you got invited to all the special events.

JB: I met all the big collectors. I became friends with the director of the Museum. The Museum has bought things from me and my artists have shown there. I've sold art to the major collectors involved there. It made me very well known, for only \$1,000 a year. So that's one of the things you do. Think creatively when you are in a smaller community. But it was shocking to me that there were lots of galleries in Sacramento and nobody had done that.

In the beginning, I did a lot of education. I did a lot of art talks. I also thought that it was important not to just represent local artists. Clearly it was also that the quality that I wanted wasn't there. There are some local artists that I show, but I knew that across the board, it couldn't just be local artists. I also thought it was very important for the local artists to see art from elsewhere New York, Chicago, Los Angeles.

I did a lot of education and outbound marketing in the beginning. I would start to go to these fairs, and people would say, "I've seen you. I know you. I've seen your marketing. It's so good. It's so consistent." And I would hear this over and over and over again. "I went to your website. Wow, I

really like the work you show. It's amazing to see that in such a small town."

Then I started to do really well at art fairs and of course that was great validation. Being so isolated, you don't know, you make these selections, but you know and you hope that what you're doing is right—I'm as insecure as anybody is. After all, this is my personal opinion that I'm putting out there.

J: What percentage of your business is art fairs now?

JB: It changes because I moved the gallery location several times, but there was a point where 80% of my business was outside of the area and that was mostly generated by art fairs. I just sold something to someone on my computer this morning who I met two years ago at Art Chicago. He bought something from me. He just moved to Switzerland, he's been looking at my website, and he said, "I'll call you today with my credit card number." I get weekly inquiries certainly from email, "How much is this? How much is that?" I've sold things through my computer. It's amazing.

It's a visual business. You can send jpegs. You can send things on approval. I have clients now all over the country. Once you've got a client base like that and you are good at marketing, you keep them abreast of what you're doing and occasionally send them [something] specifically. I personalize everything too, write handwritten notes to people, "You know, I'll be coming to town. I was thinking about you. Hope to see you." That sort of thing. I've now got collectors all over the country and meet new people all the time and have to try to stay one step ahead doing things like that.

J: How did you come to develop the Flow Art Fair?

JB: Well what happened is that Matt Garson and I met at an art fair years ago and we shared something in common. He was trying to do it from a remote location as well in Cleveland.

He would see me at these fairs, really liked my program, we got to know each other, really liked each other, and he said, "We should do stuff together." And it just sort of blossomed like that. We co produced an art fair last year. It was the first year "Flow" and it was in Miami because that's where everything is right now. We had this great group of eighteen dealers.

J: You have all the dealers I love.

JB: Yeah. They are great people that have fantastic programs, but aren't necessarily going to get into Basel. Probably most of them don't even apply or aren't, let's say, "hip enough" to do Scope

J: They have a certain look.

JB: A certain look. Integrity.

J: Do you do much in secondary market sales?

JB: I occasionally do some secondary market sales.

J: But you do that mainly as a convenience for a collector or if somebody's approached you. You don't look for them.

JB: If it comes my way. I don't look for it. And it's been great. There was one year selling a Charles Marion Russell painting for half a million dollars that made my year.

J: How is the art business different from other businesses? Or maybe it's not?

JB: I think of it as Hollywood. Like any industry, there are peaks and valleys of course. So, that's like any business. I mean, I think the thing that makes the difference is the personality of an artist that you're dealing with that I think is potentially different than other industries. Managing and working with artists can sometimes be a lot of work for me.

J: A challenge?

JB: It can be a challenge. It depends on the personality.

J: In what way is it a challenge?

JB: Every artist has to believe that they are the best; otherwise they don't go back to the studio. Because, you know there's so much competition. They really have to believe in themselves. That's a huge ego. If you're managing more than one artist, you're dealing with competing egos who really want your time and believe that everything else that you're showing isn't as good as what they have—you know that sort of thing. So, you have to manage that properly and their expectations and then as they become successful, you also have to manage those expectations. What's going to happen next? I always say, "Being a really successful artist is like trying to be in the NBA. A very small percentage of people are actually wildly successful at it. I mean hopefully it can be self-sustaining.

J: Are any of your artists self-sustaining?

JB: Yeah. There are some. And there's often the moments of panic.

J: Is it based just on your efforts or is it because they have other gallerists or other dealers?

JB: They have other gallerists and I work on that. One of my jobs is to get people in other galleries.

J: And then you get a percentage of that?

JB: The first year, I do usually.

J: And then you cut them loose?

JB: And then I cut them loose.

J: Well that makes it more interesting for the other gallerists.

JB: It makes it more of a motivation for the other gallerists. It also essentially doesn't make sense to be the middle man.

J: Right. That's a lot of paperwork.

JB: And it's just, it's better for them to develop a relationship with that artist because that way they understand better who they are representing.

J: That's very grown up of you.

JB: Well, you know it's something I learned from people I respect.

J: And do you think that that keeps your artists happier with you as their career is going up, that they're less likely to leave you.

JB: I think so. An artist who works for me part time told me an interesting thing. I was frustrated with an artist, because often what happens for me and I don't know, I think it's across the board, I work really hard for an artist, success starts to come and they sort of forget that I helped them get there and they say, "Well I don't really need you anymore. I'll just go out and do it on my own." And that's really frustrating because it's a relationship. It's like someone is breaking up with you. "Wait a second. I put a lot of energy into this." So, I'm talking about that and how I had this one artist who really wanted to not just be represented by me and be able to go out and promote. It's tricky. There's lots of layers to that. A dealer who saw this artist's work at art fair through me, through my efforts, went directly to that artist and cut me out, which then I say to the artist, "I don't know if that's someone you want to work with because that's not how it should operate in the art world." So the artist that worked for me said, "Artists are people who are always fighting against being a part of the establishment. That's how they are. That's why they're artists." When they start to feel owned, it makes them very uncomfortable. That's when they say, I've chosen to be in this world because I don't want to be owned. I don't want to have a boss. You're making me feel like I have a boss, so that's when they say, "I don't want you to just own me. I'm out of here." So, that was an interesting thing for me to learn, because I'm not an artist.

J: So, do you have contracts with your artists?

JB: I don't.

J: You have consignment agreements?

JB: I have consignment agreements, but I don't have contracts. I don't think it works. I learned this in business before I had the gallery when I had my ad agency: if a client doesn't appreciate what I do and there's no trust between us, it doesn't work. I'm just fighting and I don't want to do that. There are plenty of [other] people I could work.

J: What's your favorite part of the gallery?

JB: Calling the artist and saying, "I've sold a piece." It is absolutely, my favorite part.

J: And what's your least favorite part?

JB: Rejecting people.

J: Rejecting people how?

JB: When people come in and think that they are a great fit for the gallery and I have to explain to them that they're not. That's a tough thing to do.

J: How do you know they aren't a good fit?

JB: You know, I always tell people this. It's subjective. This is just my opinion. That's all it is. So, I just say look it's not right for me, how do I know? It's kind of gut thing again, I can't explain it. I think it's the same with collecting. I mean why do you like something? It's sort of a gut feeling. And part of it is the market. Yeah, sure, I have to think about it from a business perspective. Is this sellable? But the times I've made mistakes have been the times when I've been motivated only by that. Is it sellable?

When I'm motivated by the idea, "Oh, I think this will do well because this is what the market wants," it doesn't work.

I have two programs. I do have an on the road program and an at home program. That's another thing about having this kind of gallery. When I first started, I was only exactly what I thought the outside world wanted. But I have more landscape based artists in the Nevada City Gallery now.

J: So, you have things that you know appeal to the local market as well.

JB: That I would never show at an art fair. They're probably not even on my website. And that's a tough thing to explain to an artist, because they're so excited to be showing with me and I have to say, "Well, we'll try it out here first."

J: What kind of services do you provide for your artists?

JB: Well we manage all their paperwork sort of stuff. We update bios, but we certainly don't write their artist statements. We do all the marketing and trying to place them. I give a lot of advice, obviously that's my job. I'll look for other dealers that I think would be a good fit for them. I suggest to them to be applying for grants or applying for group shows or applying for juried things, "Try and get into the New American Paintings..." I'm looking for opportunities for them, for a core-group. I can't do it for every artist I show. It's like, I'm an agent. I manage their careers.



J: Do you give them the names and addresses of collectors?

JB: I do.

J: You're not worried? A lot of galleries don't like to share that information.

JB: I ask them [the artist] not to contact them directly mainly because I think it's a privacy issue and I think it's inappropriate. I haven't asked the client if that's okay. But, they should absolutely know. It's their business.

J: Do you do the images of their work?

JB: I don't do the images. They have to. I can't afford to do it. And also I think each artist should learn how to photograph their work properly. Whether they are doing it themselves or they're hiring someone, they need to learn how to do it well. That's very important. Because it's such a visual business clearly and the wrong color in a jpeg or any of that kind of stuff can really change the whole thing.

J: So how should artists approach a gallery?

JB: They have to do their homework. That's really important. It's so strange to me when an artist comes in and says, "Oh I want you to look at my work," and you look at it and you think, "This has nothing to do to with what I've shown. Have you ever looked at my website?" So, do your homework, find the gallery that's the right fit. I would say develop a relationship if you can. They're selling themselves to try and get someone who wants to represent them. Sales are based on relationships. So, go to the opening. Hang out at the gallery that you like the most. Get to know the people that are part of it, so that when you finally do get into that conversation, they already like you, and respect you.

J: Well how about if you live in Nevada City, but you're not the right fit for Julie Baker's program so you're looking and thinking of seeing where your work might fit in some other place, but you really can't show up to the openings?

JB: Well, then I think you have to write a great cover letter.

J: What in a cover letter made a difference?

JB: Well, I think one thing, they'll say something specifically about [the gallery]. I've sold many different types of things in my life and when I would go into a sales meeting, I would do my homework, so it sounded like I knew everything about their company. I didn't know everything about their company, there's no way I could have, but I had enough tidbits, that that person thought, "Wow, she knows what she's talking about. I want to work with her." Same concept. You know. Write me a letter that says, "I really like this person's art or I saw you here and I really appreciated (blank \_\_\_\_). You have to not only talk about yourself. You have to talk about them.

Essentially explain to me why you are a good fit for me. Bottom line, is the work.

J: How many images do you need to see to make a decision?

JB: You can tell within four or five. And prices. I actually like to know what your prices are because that's going to make a difference for me too whether or not it's realistic or unrealistic.

J: So you can put in a price range.

JB: You certainly can put in a price range.

J: Such as my paintings are under \$10,000.

JB: Yeah. And if you don't know because you are so new, that's okay, because my job is to help you with that too.

J: When you look at images, do you like to have any information with them?

JB: A description. A good artist statement is a good thing to have to explain and describe the work.

J: What is in a good artist statement from your point of view?

JB: Well it has to be well written and not every artist can do that. But it has to tell me what you are thinking, tell me your concept. What is the idea behind it? And if they're just great abstract paintings say that. You know, that's fine. Or tell me who your influences are. I mean you don't have to explain the work because it should speak for itself on some levels but you need to be able to explain where you are coming from.

J: What kind of tips do you have for artists concerning the artist dealer relationship?

JB: I think it's good to be honest, be clear as much as you can—

J: Clear about what?

JB: Clear about what you want. You know. Do you want sole representation? Do you want to just be one of their artists? Do you want career advice? What do you want from that dealer? Do you want them to help you with pricing? Do you want them to take you to an art fair? Do you want them to introduce you to galleries that they know? What are your goals? Be clear because we are working on this together. So the artists I think I work the best with are the ones who are clear with me what their goals are—

J: And they know what they want.

JB: Yes, They know what they want.

J: I have a whole chapter on writing goals. What do you want? Artists are never asked that question. They don't even know that they should ask themselves that question. I have found that the artists that are successfully navigating careers have goals.

JB: And the ones that are successfully navigating tend to be the ones to work hard. You have to produce. You've got to be in that studio and you've got to make art. That's your number one job. But you also have to work at the business of art as well. You have to do your homework. You need to be reading the magazines. You need to be up on what's going on in the business side of things. And if you feel like your dealer isn't doing what you want them to do, you need to be clear about that. You need to go in and say, by now, "I thought this and this and this would have happened." Lots of times, dealers have no idea that that's what the artist is thinking.

J: Or the artist doesn't say that because they really don't want to hear the truth.

JB: The truth exactly. I mean I had an artist who recently said to me, "Oh someone else is also going to represent me. Sole-representation but you and I can still work together."

J: What does that mean?

JB: And I said, "Well, why?" And she said, "She's going to really develop my career." Okay, "I've gotten you a review, gotten you into great collections, and taken you to three different art fairs—okay so what more is this person doing for you?" She said, "Actually I don't know." And I said, "Well maybe you should ask them, what does that mean to really represent you." And I said, "Because in my mind it means that if they're saying what they can do is they know tons of curators, then they should be calling those curators and asking, 'what have you got coming up in three years that this artist would fit in?'" You know, and there are a lot of dealers that have great relationships with tons of curators. Partly because of where I am located, don't have as many relationships with curators that are out there. That's something I'd like to develop more.

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

JB: Make the best work you can and be realistic.

J: Realistic about what?

JB: Realistic about what you are getting yourself into. It's a really tough business.

J: And why is it a tough business?

JB: Here's how I describe it. There is only a certain percentage of people who buy contemporary art. Then there is a smaller percentage of people who are going to buy the kind of work that I like. So, you get down to a pretty small percentage of people. Not everybody buys art.

J: It's not a vast market.

JB: It's not a vast market. We're all competing for the same groups of people. Thank god there are people who are voracious collectors who have thousands of works of art. And there are millions of artists too. So, let's be realistic about what you're doing.

But that's not the only advice I would give. In the beginning of a career, focus on making work. Just make. Be in the studio. Go out there and look at work. Immerse yourself in the art world, especially at the beginning of a career. That's what you should be doing. You should just eat, breathe, and sleep in that world.

Then try and find someone who you really trust and develop a good relationship with that person. Stick with them. If you find a good dealer, like any of those people that we had in our fair last year, stay with them, listen to them, and work closely with them.

J: Have you ever let an artist go?

JB: You mean no longer showed them? Yeah.

J: How does that feel? How does that work?

JB: Sometimes it's a natural thing that just happens. You stop selling the work. You stop loving what they're doing. You know, some of them, I've had to call and say, "I don't feel like it's a fit anymore. I'm sorry, I'm taking you off the website." That's really the last straw.

J: That's painful.

JB: That's the painful call. Most of the time, that's pretty well understood. I think they see it coming. It's hard sometimes to have to [make that decision?]. In the beginning when I first opened, it was really hard for me to say "no" to people. I'm not going to just run to your studio without seeing something first. I need to see something first and decide if it's a good fit. Now six years later. It's easier for me to say "no". It's easier for me to be honest with people.

J: I think artists seldom realize how often dealers get rejected.

JB: Yeah. Absolutely. Yeah. I mean there's a small group that's that the top layer and then there's a lot of us out there who are all vying for spots at the art fairs that are incredibly competitive, trying to get the best artists, and all of that sort of stuff. Trying to get written up and trying to have this writer like us, and have this curator notice us and that collector notice you. Absolutely. And we're human too.

J: Do you have any goals for the gallery right now? I mean you had some really specific goals when you started out and it seems to have met those goals.

JB: Yeah we have. Now it is to help the core group of artists that I work with.

J: And that's how many?

JB: Really on an active basis, probably about six to eight. To help get them to that next level, go from emerging to museum shows, since I am not in New York, it's really difficult.

J: Well there are museums all over the country.

JB: There are museums all over the country and I've made great strides with The Crocker for example. Now The Center for Contemporary Art in Santa Fe is going to be showing an artist of mine. Orange County has been talking to me, San Francisco, and that area. But it'd be nice to eventually say, I got my artist into a show at the Whitney.

J: Thank you for sharing so much information with me.

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*Julie Gerngross Baker is the Co-owner of Garson Baker Fine Art, a contemporary art gallery in Chelsea, NY that opened in 2008 (<http://www.garsonfineart.com/>). Since 2001, she is also the owner of Julie Baker Fine Art, a contemporary art gallery in Nevada City, CA. She is the Co-founder of flow, an invitational art fair (2006 – present). She is the former President of Gerngross & Company, (1992-1998), an Arts Marketing firm in New York City, established by her father Hans Gerngross in 1946. In 1992, she was the Assistant Producer and Marketing Manager for the Soho Arts Festival founded by Simon Watson. She founded the Soho Gallery Association with Charles Cowles board member, an active organization from 1992-1994.*

*Julie was born and raised in Manhattan but now lives in Nevada City, CA a gold rush era town located in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, with her husband Richard and three sons Miles, Theo, and Trey.*