

Studio Tour in NY State Brings Bucks, Not Just Bodies

by Ligaya Figueras

Many artists and arts organizations host studio tours. These happenings – whether they are held in large metropolises or small towns – can attract a lot of visitors, yet record attendance doesn't necessarily translate into sales. One organization, however, has found a way to make its studio tour a driver for fine art sales instead of just a scenic drive to the country.

Sculptor Serena Kovalosky founded Open Studios of Washington County, New York, in 2004 with the vision of creating a studio tour specifically for professional visual artists in this economically challenged rural area of upstate New York while also increasing tourism in the area. From the outset, Kovalosky aimed to attract *buying* visitors rather than people who “wander around and say, ‘Isn't that nice.’”

“Our marketing plan, PR and operations have always been geared toward the sales of artwork, so our artists do quite well, and visitors come ready to buy,” stated Kovalosky.

The first Open Studios of Washington County was held in 2007. At the following biennial event, held in July of 2009, sales were up 25 percent. “We didn't think we were going to make anything,” admitted Kovalosky, citing the hit that most artists experienced during the height of the economic crisis. “Everyone made 25 percent more in sales. That's fabulous!”

As organizers gears up for the next open studio, slated for July 16-17, 2011, Kovalosky discussed with **Art Calendar** the strategies that her art organization and participating artists have used to make the tour a sales sensation.

Give visitors a professional experience.

Given that Washington County is one of the poorest counties in New York, Open Studios targets buyers from outside the region by promoting the event as “a higher quality experience.” Thus, Open Studios uses a juried selection process and accepts only 12 artists per biennial event. All of the artists are professionals, not hobbyists, with equal numbers working in 2-D and 3-D mediums, offering a good mix to visitors.

“That was quite the challenge because most people were used to seeing open studios where every artist in the county would have an open studio,” explained Kovalosky.

The organization also suggests ways for artists to make the tour professional and pleasant for visitors, including spiffing up the studio, transforming a section of it into a gallery, and affixing labels with the title of the work and the price next to each piece of art. As far as price points, they recommend that artists include pieces in the \$200 to \$250 range to get first-time tour-goers in the door, with the hope that the buyer will return in future years to purchase a more expensive item.

Also, because Open Studios attracts hundreds of visitors,



Sculptor Gyula Varosy participated in the first Open Studios in 2007, when he only had a small studio space. Varosy, motivated by the potential of the event, spent the next two years building this stunning gallery and unveiled it to the public at the 2009 tour.

event organizers advise artists not to create artwork or provide demonstrations during the event so that they can instead concentrate on meeting visitors. For the same reason, they recommend that artists enlist friends or family to handle sales transactions or hire help for the event. The artists should have a state tax ID and the capabilities to accept major credit cards to make purchasing as easy as possible for prospective buyers.

Get qualified people in the room.

A key marketing piece for the tour is a full-color brochure that includes a profile of each artist as well as directions to each studio. That collateral item is sent to individuals on each artist's mailing list as well as the growing mailing list that Open Studios has cultivated. In 2009, the brochure was sent to approximately 8,000 people. Attendance numbers that year reached between 400 and 500 individuals.

“These are buyers. They know this is an event where you can get great artwork. When you get 400 to 500 qualified people in a room, that's more than you get when at a museum or gallery opening,” Kovalosky said.

The majority of sales hover in the \$200 to \$2,000 range, but Kovalosky added that artists generally sell one to three larger, more expensive pieces because “each artist has buyers who make a special trip to come to Open Studios and might buy that \$10,000 painting.”

Timing is everything.

From the outset, the studio tour was planned as a biennial event so it could be presented as a feature attraction and keep the interest of visitors and the media. In addition, the extra time provides artists a chance to create a solid body of work specifically for the event rather than just hanging inventory they want to get rid of.

The Saturday-Sunday tour is held in July because people are in summertime travel mode. "Half the point is riding to the country," said Kovalosky, explaining that this area of northeastern New York, characterized by rolling hills, has garnered the nickname "Little Tuscany." Organizers also take time to check the event calendar within a 100-mile radius of the county so as not to select a date that conflicts with festivals and other headline functions.

Challenges: Money and Manpower

Though the tour has thus far been deemed a success, it faces its share of challenges, particularly with funding and manpower. Open Studios used to receive funding for its promotional efforts from *I Love New York*, the state's tourism arm. However, funding for that 50/50 matching grant has since dried up and Washington County cannot fund anything unless it is in the form of an advertisement. How will the group raise the \$8,000 needed to pay for a quality brochure, signage and publicity efforts for its 2011 event? Most of the costs will be covered by the \$450 fee each artist pays to participate. (The organization does not take commission on sales.) Open Studios is also seeking financial support through ads on its site, www.OpenStudiosWashingtonCounty.com, as well as corporate sponsorships. However, in this small community, this can be difficult. "These businesses do support the arts but they are getting hit up by everyone who has been hit by a loss of arts funding," commented Kovalosky.

The event is currently an all-volunteer affair, which poses another set of problems. Although artists participate in meetings and help when and where they can, Kovalosky has since looked for help from outside the art world. For 2011, her cadre of volunteers includes retirees who had worked in retail.

Two marketing strategies that the organization will employ for 2011 include using social media and forming partnerships with area businesses. Using social media means that Open Studios doesn't have to spend a dime to spread the word online. As far as forming business partnerships, they want to bring value-added benefits for visitors through the availability of food and overnight accommodations. Thus, they plan to work with caterers to create quick sandwiches for a crowd-on-the-go, especially important since most restaurants in the area do not open for lunch on Sundays. Likewise, they are soliciting area hotels and B&Bs to purchase web ads so visitors know where they can stay, which will bring also more tourism dollars to the community. "It's important because if we are doing tourism, then yes, we have to work with area businesses," explained Kovalosky. AC



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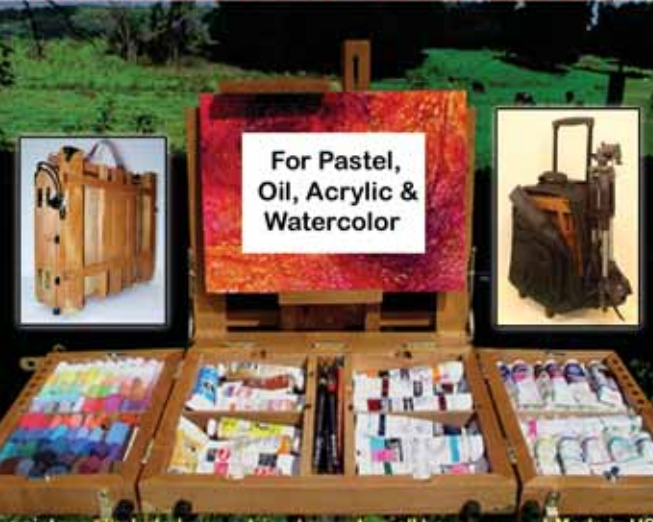


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