
PRODUCTIVITY IN THE STUDIO

*Keeping it together and getting it out
the studio door for professional artists*

Susan Hensel

Productivity in the Studio

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For information contact :

(Address, website)

<http://www.susanhenselprojects.com>

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PRODUCTIVITY IN THE STUDIO



I am known as a highly productive, multimedia artist who shows a lot. I am self-represented, showing mostly in academic settings and artist run spaces. In my 40+ year career I have exhibited in well over 200 exhibitions, with 35 solo shows, from coast to coast, with a brief foray into Mexico. I am also a former gallery director working over 12 years in Michigan and Minnesota.

First and foremost:

SHOW UP

MAKE A MARK

MAKE ANOTHER MARK

It is not a matter of waiting for inspiration. Inspiration will find you in the act of working. I often say every artist needs a "mug."

What do I mean by that? I mean that we all need something we can DO artistically when flow appears to be absent. For a potter, that would be a mug. For a poet, that would be a journal entry. For a painter that might be drawing. In working and playing with our materials routinely, new ideas will pop-up.

Let there be ORDER

We all have varying needs for order. Some of us need visual chaos to work (Think Francis Bacon!).





Some of us need ascetic, Zen-garden surroundings.

I need well labeled boxes and drawers of materials. I need tools quickly available at the point of use. I need a moderate amount of visual stimulation in the studio...but not too much mess. This allows me to approach the state of flow much more quickly than if I have to search all over for the right tool or material.

Learn your needed degree of order and organization. It will help you be productive.

Do you have a mission statement? I usually have one, re-evaluated ever couple of years. It helps me to look at my work to see if it "belongs." I find it useful when I feel lost or stuck in the studio. For me it is a way of providing order.

My current mission statement goes something like this:

I create objects and experiences from a variety of media on the themes of nostalgia, feminism and age. It is my mission to gently involve all sorts of people in these discussions with the goal of helping them regard on another with empathy.

PART 2



Quelling Anxiety/perfectionism

Perfectionism prevents productivity. We get anxious about whether the work will be good enough, before we even make the first mark. There are techniques that I use that help quell this. Even though I am very productive, I too face the blank page or the next step with my heart in my mouth. Here are my tricks:

1) artists pages- I think of this as the garbage dump. I use this technique especially when I am beginning a new, public project...when I will be called on to perform; meet lots of new people; when I feel like I am "leaping off a cliff" in the studio. I write 3 pages or 15 minutes, anything that comes to mind...ANYTHING! It helps me externalize and put to bed my worries

2) Exercise- I am no athlete, but walking everyday is essential to my energy and my ability to focus clearly in the studio. Walking meditation.

3) Remember - perfectionism is an idea, not a destination. It is, in fact, unattainable.

4) Materials are only materials- They are not precious in themselves. I use the mantra "It's only paper."

5) Rehearse expensive materials- When materials ARE expensive, there are ways to rehearse next steps. I use photography and Photoshop to rehearse drastic changes in projects that are advanced or use more expensive materials. I can slice and dice and recolor in Photoshop to my heart's content.

6) It's not rocket science, bridge construction or surgery- No one is likely to die from what we do

7) But what we do IS important! It is key to our humanity, health and happiness.

8) Be not afraid! And if you are...do your work anyways!

9) While outcomes matter, try to let go of deadlines and dreams of masterpieces and allow yourself to PLAY and EXPLORE with your materials.



PART 3

What all is part of the Process of Churning out work from your studio?

Showing up and making the art, obviously. But there is more.



Documentation is part of the process:

- 1) photograph everything, at every step of the process for large works
- 2) write about each piece
- 3) keep track of what materials went into each piece
- 4) Keep some sort of inventory (I use GYST software)
- 5) keep track of where it has been exhibited/ what collections it has gone into
- 6) keep your resume up to date



Writing is part of the process

- 1) writing proposals and grants...honest! It really is part of the process!
- 2) contacting galleries, collectors and shows is part of the process. No one is going to just discover you!
- 3) artists statement, bios
- 4) writing about the new or developing piece so you can understand it and talk about it
- 5) write your own press releases.



Exhibiting is part of the process

If art is about communication, then there needs to be an audience, someone to communicate with.

For me, an artwork is not done until it has been documented, written about, and shown, whether to a friend or a gallery.



Studio Administration is part of the process

I find administration odious. It is not my gift. I can do it. I can struggle through it, but it brings me no pleasure.

What do I consider to be administration?

finding shows

responding to email

keeping the database up to date

keeping the web page(s) up to date

updating the resume

writing and re-writing artists statements and bios

taking professional photographs of work

writing grants and proposals

managing the calendar
organizing the archive
Facebook, Instagram, Twitter

YUCK!

So how do I manage it?

I schedule one day a week devoted to management of these things.

When my cash flow is flush, I hire administrative help one day a week.

When cash flow is low, I can use unpaid student interns, barter for help, trade for help with other artists or, yuck, set aside time to do it myself. Even if I set aside only 1-2 hours a week, I can make progress on the all the administrative work. It's never caught up anyways!



How do I find shows?

I live in the midwest and get to New York usually every other year. So, NYC is not a good bet for me. Gallery representation is largely dependent on relationships developed over time. A couple of days every other year is not enough time to develop these relationships. So, I look elsewhere, while not eschewing opportunities that show up from time to time in NYC.

Knowing where your work fits is key. My work is largely non-commercial, somewhat narrative and often installation based with a touch of performance. I have learned that it belongs in educational institutions and artist run alternative spaces. It took time and trial and error to figure this out. I learned from rejections and from looking at the past exhibitions of organizations I might be interested in.

I find exhibitions through referrals, google searches and online services. Referrals come through other artists and through my visibility locally and through social media. Friends send me prospects! I post jpgs of new work and work-in-process obsessively. The online listing services that I use the most are Arts Opportunity Monthly and Call for Entry. When pursuing these, I search by "solo," "call for Proposals," and by media restrictions. I also do google searches for

calls for art. Just the other day I came up with 4-5 colleges looking for proposals.

I send out a lot of proposals. Most of the solo-show proposals do not require a fee. They take a lot of time to perfect, but what choice do we have? *No one is going to come looking for you if you do not invite them.* I have succeeded in securing large solo shows yearly. The market has changed over the years. You used to be able to rely on help with shipping or an honorarium to lecture and an airline ticket to come teach. I saw wonderful parts of the country on the academic dime. Now, there is very little money available and higher competition for exhibition slots. Shipping has gone sky high. So, I have limited shipped shows to one a year. Shows I can drive are easier.

What about group/juried shows? Sure, I do them. I can't resist having the art seen! I say yes to almost all local invitations to keep my name in conversation. I apply to group shows with jury fees when I like the theme, the juror, or the award money. I especially like to try out new work in these shows. If you are new to exhibiting, these shows are a good way to begin to learn who your audience is.

I also, from time to time, will develop and present a show in my studio space. My studio is on a main drag and I ran it as a commercial gallery for 9 years. It is still a known venue in town.



WHAT ABOUT REJECTION?

Rejection is just part of the job. Simply put, the more proposals or applications you put out, on balance, some will be picked up and rejections will matter less. When you have established the right venues/audience the balance of rejection to acceptance will shift. Will it ever be more yes than no? For most of us, probably not.

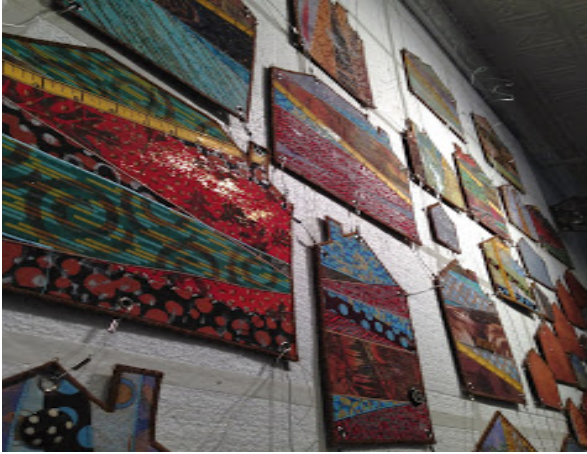
Competition is fierce and we just have to learn how to work with it and improve our skills and thicken our skins.

Let me give you some context: 20 years ago, when applications were paper, slides and self-addressed envelopes, my success rate grew to

about 50%. I took 10 years off to run a gallery. Now applications and proposals are almost all online, making it easier for artists to compete...more artists are participating now. My success rate runs about 10% now and I am happy with that.

I also look at rejections as opportunities to learn. Was it the wrong venue, wrong juror, wrong part of the country? If there was feedback, what did it indicate about my proposal? What did they not understand? How do I need to change my proposal documents in light of my new understanding?

PART 7



WHAT GOES INTO A PROPOSAL?

1. Figure out which bodies of work you have available. Think about your work thematically. Make folders of images based on themes, media, potential show title... I currently have a rotating series of 4-5 different, thematic bodies of work ready for proposal.
 2. Identify your audience. This is hard for me, but in general, I have learned that my work belongs in academic galleries and alternative artist run spaces. How did I learn this? Lots of rejections!
 3. Read the mission statements, research past shows of the potential venues. Does your work fit with their vision? If it does...
 4. Write the cover letter to the curator by name. Give a very brief history of your work, a paragraph about the show you propose, and why you think it is a fit. For instance: you can mention which academic departments and/or classes would benefit; how the community would benefit; offer lectures and/or workshops.
- If you are writing to a commercial gallery, cold, show that you know their vision, mention artists they show with whom you see compatibility. If you have been referred, mention (with permission) who referred you.

5. Proposal document: in this document you outline the parameters of the show. e.g. I propose an exhibition, titled EROS AND THANATOS, a large-scale mixed media installation comprised of... Simple and direct is fine.
6. Artists Statement- a general artists statement or a statement specific to the work being proposed.
7. Biography- a short, pithy history of your career
8. Professional resume for your art career. NO JOBS please. This document should emphasize exhibitions (solo shows especially, then group shows), collections, grants and fellowships. I do list publications, education and professional organizations...but toward the end of the document. The purpose of this resume is to demonstrate your trustworthiness as an artist. By demonstrating an exhibition history the curator can see that a) you continue to work hard b) other people have noticed c) you can be relied on to fulfill your obligations.
- 9) Images: the very best photos you can get of your work, arranged in the order you want them viewed. You are building a virtual exhibition before their eyes. A good show has a visual logic and pacing. It is rather like reading or performance: think about what you want your audience to learn and pace it in a way that allows them to take it in. Lightbox or Adobe Bridge are great programs for arranging sequences of images. Otherwise, you can arrange print outs on your work table.
- 10) image list: give them what they ask for. At the most basic: title-media-size-year completed. Often you can give a small description, which will allow you to contextualize the image within the whole proposal.
- 11) Press tear sheets: If it seems appropriate or if requested, you can include a selection of press written about your work.
- 12) Keep track of your proposals and applications. I have an Excel spreadsheet with columns for: due date; expected results date; title of show; venue with address; how I applied (online, their website, email, snail mail); date of exhibition; a list of images sent

PART 8



FINISHING WORK

I work on multiple projects at all times. My work is dramatically multi-media, ranging from drawing to full scale installation in all sorts of materials. It suits my personality! There is usually something to work on that suits my attention on any given day! But how do I manage the list of projects? among other things, with LISTS.

- 1) prioritize my lists by day and delivery date
- 2) when I leave the studio at night, I try to leave the work with an obvious next step: e.g. hang a fresh piece of paper and put a mark on it; lay out tools needed for the next step; webpage open to idea sources
- 3) I use a bookmarking program that allows me to save, off line, lists of sites germane to my research (DevonThink Pro)
- 4) I leave myself notes pinned or taped to artworks in process, especially if I need to be out of the studio for a few days, so I can more easily pick-up where I left off.
- 5) If it looks stupid, CUT IT UP and re-assemble. If the time and materials are precious, Photoshop the cutting up process to rehearse

it.

6) trick your eye: walk away from a problem piece, then turn and look: what is the first thing you see? Is that a good thing?

7) put problem pieces away for a while to "marinate." When you take them out again, you may know what to do next, including recycling;-)

8) turn it upside down and sideways! Repeat it! What if you made more of them? Your camera and Photoshop are great for testing this.

9) Photograph that problem piece: the camera flattens it out allowing you to see the composition differently.

10) ask people to look at it: how does it make them feel, what do they see first,. Ask artists and non-artists.

11) form a critique group

12) always ask "What if..." Theme and variation can lead to bodies of work ready for large exhibition.

13) I write a list for the next day before I go to bed

14) Create accountability-especially in the absence of an upcoming due date, how do you keep working? Create an accountability relationship with another artist: agree to gently hold each other accountable to finish works or make progress toward finishing work.

15) When my obligations are complex or unmovable (like when I have a grant to fulfill) I will create a timeline and stick to it.

PART 9



SELF CARE

How to leave the studio

This one is hard for me!

Try to leave the studio for 24 hours one day a week! Think of it as a Sabbath. Do something different. Not research, not cleaning of the studio. See friends, a movie, cook.... Trust me, you will come back fresher, clearer and better able to work.

Is getting into the studio is more of a problem than getting out of the studio?

1) make sure you have a dedicated space that can be messy, even if it is just the corner of your room. Having to put everything away each day is an impediment to productivity.

2) Schedule your studio time and stick to it. Even if you are tired after your day job, show up! Make a mark, make another mark. Answer an email. Write some ideas down...in your studio, in your set aside space and time.

From time to time I mentor artists who have received grants. We talk about fulfilling the requirements of the grant, creating timelines, keeping things in perspective.

One of the most important lessons for one artist I mentored was scheduling studio time. She worked full time outside the studio, as most artists do. Just placing her body in her workspace on a regular schedule made a huge difference over time. From simply "showing up" she developed a new, complete body of work in time for her exhibition.

When bound by a day job, it is also useful to think of your studio time in a seasonal way. A sculptor friend, who works 40-50 hours a week in her day job, shows up to labor on her artwork but also, off hand, mentioned one year, as we were all feverishly writing our grants, that is was "grant season." She accepts grant writing as part of the process and shows up for "grant season." I found that helpful for me as well. Rather than thinking of it as taking away from studio time, re-frame it as a seasonal part of the studio rhythm.

3) Make studio time **NON-NEGOTIABLE**. It is yours. It is precious. Do not squander it.

ADDENDUM

When I originally put this document together on my blog in 2018, there were a couple of things I had not yet begun working on. My work changed, as it often does, and began to require different sorts of venues.

In addition to more or less all of the above, I am now seeking commercial gallery representation! While nothing, as of this writing is written in stone, there have been a few nibbles of interest.

So, how am I approaching this task from the Great Plains of the United States, when the key art centers are thousands of miles away? With a certain level of *confidence* and a lot of research.

What makes me *confident*?

I suddenly figured out that galleries need artists!

Duh!

Where do I find galleries?

Art magazines

Google

Google maps

Other artists resumes

Ads and Reviews

Yelp

Artsy.net

Instagram

Facebook

You can get sort of lost down the rabbit hole doing this research...but
If Google presents you with the *particular* gallery you are looking for,
they usually will list, especially on the side bar, other galleries nearby.

Look at the artists whose careers you admire. See where they have
exhibited. Model their trajectory!

Focus on city centers that look good for your artwork.

What do I do with this information?

I have started developing separate databases of US galleries,
International Galleries and curators. In these databases I put as much
useful info as possible:

Gallery name

Address(es)

Owners

Director(s)

Phone/email

Website

Do they do art fairs?

Who they show that I am compatible with?

Do they accept submissions or not?

What do they require for submissions?

When did I contact them?

What kind of response did I receive?

What do I do with this database info?

I carefully contact the galleries I am interested in.

I DO NOT OVERWHELM THEM WITH INFO

I DO NOT SHOW UP UNANNOUNCED

I DO NOT PROPOSE A SOLO SHOW

I DO NOT REQUEST REPRESENTATION

In my research, many galleries that I am interested in have a “Do not submit” policy. They claim they do not look at portfolios. But some of these galleries look like galleries I should be in. And, remember, they need us! They need to keep their walls filled with fresh art.

I follow them on Instagram

Subscribe to their newsletters

Learn about their programs (i.e. what and who they show).

If I remain convinced that I belong in their program, I can write them a *brief* email introducing myself (a super mini bio), complimenting their program, attach 2 images and a link to my website. That’s it! Submitting is the easy part!

Thank you for reading! I hope this has been helpful for you.

Do you have questions or comments?

Feel free to email me at susanhensel@yahoo.com

See what I am doing daily on

https://www.instagram.com/susan_hensel_multimedia_artist/

<https://www.facebook.com/susan.hensel1>

<https://www.pinterest.com/hensel0187/>

<http://www.susanhenselprojects.com>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susan Hensel is a Minneapolis artist who received her BFA from University of Michigan in 1972 with a double major in painting and sculpture and a concentration in ceramics.

With a history, to date, of well over 200 exhibitions, 35 of them solo, twenty garnering awards, Hensel's desire to communicate ideas through art continues to be a powerful motivator.

Hensel's artwork is known and collected nationwide, represented in collecting libraries and museums as disparate as the Museum of Modern Art in New York and The Getty Research Institute with major holdings at Minnesota Center for Book Arts, University of Washington, Baylor University and University of Colorado at Boulder. Archives pertaining to her artists books will be available for study at the University of Washington Libraries in Seattle in 2017.

In recent years Hensel has been awarded multiple grants and residencies through the Jerome Foundation, Minnesota State Arts Board, and Ragdale Foundation.

Hensel's curatorial work began in 2000 in East Lansing, Michigan with the Art Apartment and deepened with ownership of the Susan Hensel Gallery. Hensel has curated over seventy exhibitions of emerging and mid-career artists from all over the United States and Canada.

www.susanhenselprojects.com

