

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

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HUFFPOST ARTS & CULTURE

Studio Visit Advice From Painter Michael Berryhill

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For artists, it's a truism that having studio visits is one of the most important things you can do to connect with others in the field and advance your career. But having collectors, dealers, curators, and even other artists to your studio can be a wild ride if it's a first time visit. Sometimes it might feel like you and your lifestyle are being judged right along with the work. How much work should I display? Am I "bohemian" enough? Am I talking too much? Do they have ulterior (i.e., booty call) motives?

Though most studio visits are completely normal (and that should be your expectation), on a few occasions, I've found myself tongue-tied, amused and even flabbergasted. Once, a collector brazenly told me I should purchase an expensive sound system to entertain visitors, and that I should offer them drugs "to make them feel at home." Back in the day in my Tribeca studio, a prominent collector made a beeline past me to a pile of drawings on a table and, without a word, began rifling through them as though he were on a treasure hunt. As an MFA student at Yale, a faculty member advised me during a studio visit that I should "paint with my dick" (quite the anatomical challenge for a young female artist). A friend of mine, when she was an MFA student at Columbia, was told by a visiting artist that her painting style would improve if she were sodomized. Some studio visitors, particularly those who feel emboldened by professional or financial status, can be shockingly inappropriate.

But despite the possibility of disaster, it's a treat for artists when you have an engaging conversation with your visitor where you both share equally, and at the end of the visit, you've gained some new inspiration. So, what can you do as an artist to facilitate a good visit? During a recent visit with painter Michael Berryhill in his studio in Red Hook, Brooklyn, we had a conversation about how to have a successful studio visit.



"Domestic Statistic" 2012. Courtesy Michael Berryhill and KANSAS, New York

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1. Make your visitor comfortable. Start by offering clean seating and a bottle of water. I've taken one frazzled visitor to a bodega and bought her oatmeal and a banana when her blood sugar was crashing. Michael Berryhill had two comfortable chairs facing a small room full of work, giving me time to relax as I adjusted gradually to the world of his creative process. Casually gazing at his doodles and notes in the beginning was a nice prelude to tackling his larger works.

2. Ask questions. It's a lot to expect every visitor to love your work, so be prepared connect with them on other levels. What do they have in their collection? Have they been doing a lot of studio visits? Have a variety of questions ready. Berryhill advises, "Just start talking about how they got there. How'd they find you? Did they see this or that show? You find the thing you agree on pretty quickly, like shows you like. Books are a really good conversation starter -- if people don't like the works you can talk about books, so it's good to have some books in the studio."

3. Curate yourself. Pare your oeuvre down to a manageable amount. This is your opportunity to curate yourself -- you don't need to show everything you've ever made to a visitor. If you have work facing a wall or in your storage space, it's OK to politely decline to show it. But a studio visit is also an opportunity to get an opinion on something you're not sure about. Picasso reputedly asked everyone, even his mailman, what they saw when they looked at his work.

4. Be vulnerable - and tell it like it is. Says Berryhill, "Be honest. A lot of conversations can be about the dumb origin of some idea you have. It's a good conversation starter. It's a 'This American Life' version of your own studio. Telling that story you don't think is that interesting can end up being pretty important."

5. Kick'em out if they misbehave. You don't need bad memories of studio visit nightmares lingering in your studio. It's also OK to set a time limit in advance, like "I'll be around from three to four."

6. Keep it in perspective. Says Berryhill, "Just try to think that you make interesting stuff and someone's in your house to talk about that interesting stuff, so it's all good. [Studio visits] should be part of being an artist that you're going to look forward to, so try to enjoy it."

Conducting a great studio visit takes practice. As artists, we're used to working visually, and it can be hard to put words to our pictures and sculptures. But it's also an important way to help people connect with our work, and with art in general. Studio visits can be a good form of practice, where we hone our skills in talking about the artistic process.