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HOW TO GIVE AN ARTIST TALK

Let Your Nerves Go And Focus On Your Story

BY GIGI ROSENBERG

The first step to giving a better artist talk is the simplest one. Starting today, observe other presenters, not just artists, and make notes about what you admire. Tonight, if you watch a Netflix comedy special, for example, notice how the stand-up comic tells a story. The next time you're at a school fundraiser, observe how the speaker welcomes you at the beginning.

Make a list of all the qualities you'd like to embody in your artist talks. For example, if the fundraiser speaker made you feel welcomed the moment you walked in the room, make a note of how she did that. Maybe she had great eye contact and she looked around the room and took her time acknowledging the audience.

When a comedian tells a joke, it's usually in the form of a story. If he's funny, notice what he includes in these stories: There's usually a scene, dialogue, characters, all essential elements of stories. Notice how specific he is so you can see the story unfold in your mind's eye.

PICK A TOPIC AND A DEADLINE

Your next step is to book a place and a date for your talk. The fastest way to learn how to give an artist talk is to give one. That deadline will give you focus. But where to talk? Some ideas include:

- Most professional conferences have small sessions besides the keynote speaker. Apply to be one of those speakers.
- At your next solo or group gallery show, volunteer to give a talk on a weekend afternoon while the show is still up.
- Call your professor friend and offer to give a talk to their class.
- The next time you have a curator do a studio visit, consider that one-on-one visit a form of an artist talk.

But what do I talk about? You might be asking. If you've studied with me or read my book *The Artist's Guide to Grant Writing*, you already know that answer: It depends on your audience. What's the one thing you want your audience to walk away with? Design your talk for captivating them and giving them a memorable

1 *Water Spout*, 2016, by Bonnie J. Smith. Textile, piecing, stuffing technique, appliqué and acrylic paints, 36" x 34". Copyright © 2016 Bonnie J. Smith. Used by permission of the artist. 2 *Audible Reflections*, 2018, by Robert Leedy. Watercolor on Fabriano Artístico 140 lb. Cold press paper, 22" x 30". Copyright © 2018 Robert Leedy. Used by permission of the artist.





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experience and one key message. Some ideas for what to discuss or do during your talk include:

- Your process, step by step, including a live demonstration
- The historical context of your work
- What other artists are doing in your field
- Your unique materials
- What you're seeking to understand with your work
- The story of how one work or series came to be from first spark of an idea to finished work.

For this issue, I interviewed five experienced artists who all enjoy giving artist talks. They didn't always enjoy the process, but now they do. Read on to learn from artists who are out in the world giving talks about what made all the difference.

DON'T BE NERVOUS ABOUT NERVES

Judith Modrak

I went from a reluctant, nervous speaker (at best) to fully embracing, not only the opportunity, but the entire experience and the audience as well. Hour-long artist talks swim by in seemingly minutes followed by dynamic question and answer sessions. It really is a case of reprogramming one's response to what can be a cause for stress into an occasion to reveal one's body of work and sources of inspiration in more depth. My tips include:

- *It's fine to be nervous, most people will be a little nervous. Work with the nerves, not against them. • Focus on your work and what you love about it and want to say about it.*
- *Exercise the day of a big talk or take a walk to collect your thoughts.*
- *Be prepared: preparation reduces anxiety.*

- *It's OK to pause and ask for something, for example a glass of water or that the lights be turned down a notch or that the projector's color be tweaked. All these things make you feel calmer and put you in control of the situation.*

TELL YOUR STORY TO COLLECTORS

Jaqueline Allison

There's nothing more affirming, gratifying or terrifying than speaking to a group of potential collectors about my art. Connecting them through words to the visual aspects of my abstract paintings opens a line of communication and understanding that would not be there through the image alone.

Collectors resonate with, and respond to, an artist's work not only because of the visual impact, but also because of the backstory and influences behind the work. An artist talk gives viewers a glimpse of the artist as a human being

[3] *Our Memories at Naumburg Bandshell, Central Park*, 2018, by Judith Modrak. Fiberglass resin cast and acrylic stones, 54" x 22" x 24". Copyright © Judith Modrak, photo by Sylvie Rosokoff, used by permission of the artist. [4] *Our Memories at Thomas Paine Park*, 2018, by Judith Modrak. Fiberglass resin cast and acrylic stones, 46" x 54" x 26". Copyright © Judith Modrak, photo by Sylvie Rosokoff, used by permission of the artist.

with similar hopes and dreams and creates a natural framework for questions and give and take conversation.

Take the time to write down your “artist story,” including your artistic history, influences and inspiration. In doing this, the information will be readily available to you when speaking with others about your work and gives a jumping off point to discuss a specific piece of art or series. By sharing this personal history, it allows viewers to relate to you on a more personal level and helps them understand why you create your art.

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

Bonnie J. Smith

While recently in the United Kingdom with my “Swimming Upstream” series, I made sure to have everyone sign my contact book, and then I actually sat down at my computer when I got home and sent a

thank you email to every single person. I was so appreciative of the many kind and lovely people that I wanted them to know how much I appreciated meeting them.

I advise artists to talk about what they would like to hear if they were sitting in the audience. Keep the facts and dates in order while telling your story. Make it light; don’t burden others with information that should be left for your therapist; unless it might be that kind of speaking engagement.

Be prepared, and I mean practice that speech out loud at least twenty times and then edit, edit and then edit some more to keep within the time parameters. Have the speech flow, not jump back and forth in history. I practice my speeches on the elliptical machine when I’m alone.

Lastly, use a microphone if available and use it properly, meaning keep the microphone close to your mouth. That is something you can also practice by just

using whatever is close at hand and about the same weight as a microphone.

Have a good time with your talk. Remember that the audience won’t know if you forget something. I always wear my reading glasses as that only lets me see the first couple of rows into the audience and I forget about the size of the group I’m speaking to.

THREAD THE SPECIFIC WITH THE BIG IDEA

Donna Lyons

Pre-planning keeps me focused and guards against my temptation for too much elaboration where I may lose my audience. I do a demonstration of my watercolor painting process while I’m speaking. In addition to the demonstration and simultaneously with my talk, a slideshow of my work is run on a large screen that is placed to one side. This is handled discretely and quietly by a tech-savvy friend, so I don’t have to think about it.

This format works very well for me, and as a result, I find the audience is more engaged, asking questions and making comments, which in turn, helps me to relax and enjoy the event. Their questions also help me to more clearly express myself. It’s almost like giving a verbal and visual “artist statement.”

Remember that people come to your talk because they’re interested in and like your artwork, and now they want to hear the story behind the art. Every painting I do has a “thread” of a greater idea than the subject matter running through it that connects all of them. During my talk, I reveal this “greater idea” and how it’s expressed in my paintings.

If your purpose as an artist is very clear to you and you’re able to communicate that effectively and in an interesting fashion, then you do not have to worry about “memorizing a speech.” My audience leaves the event eager to see my next exhibit because now they have a sense of who I am as a person and an artist, and they also know something deeper about my paintings.



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“ People want a story behind a painting. It adds to their perceived value of the work. ~ Robert Leedy

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

Robert Leedy

Your first priority is to understand who your audience is. They're either artists or non-artists. Often, it's a mix of both.

Artists enjoy a discussion of your process, yet my experience tells me that they also really want you to be honest. They don't care about being impressed. In fact, this is usually a big turn off. They want to relate to you in a direct, honest way: they want to hear of your failures, your short comings, doubts, second thoughts and your missed opportunities. They want to be assured that you are as human as they are. They want to hear that you've shared many of the battles

and letdowns they have.

Non-artists are looking for how an artist thinks and reacts to the world around them. They want insights into what makes you tick. While artists are looking for similarities, non-artists are looking for what makes you different from them. They want to better understand you and hope to briefly — during your talk — live in your world. I find this helps in selling art as well.

People want a story behind a painting. It adds to their perceived value of the work. I recently began writing mini-stories on the back of my watercolors before framing them. I write the day and date



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[6] *Merengue*, 2018, by Jacqueline Doyle Allison. Acrylic on gallery wrap canvas, 24" x 24". Copyright © 2018 Jacqueline Doyle Allison. Used by permission of the artist.

[7] *Arabesque*, 2018, by Jacqueline Doyle Allison. Acrylic on gallery wrap canvas, 36" x 36". Copyright © 2018 Jacqueline Doyle Allison. Used by permission of the artist.

[8] *No Secrets*, 2015, by Donna Lyons. Transparent watercolor on paper, 7" x 10". Copyright © 2015 Donna Lyons. Used by permission of the artist.

down and include who I was with, what the weather was and why I was interested in the subject. I write about any strange or funny things that happened while I painted. I'll write about my feelings on the finished painting. The customer may discover the little story, or they might not ever see it at all. It's there and, hopefully, will add to the enjoyment of the work.

Learn to wrap your ideas and thoughts into interesting stories that weave your successes, failures, desires, dreams along with your process and creative thought. Look for unique and possibly quirky angles for telling those stories. Hold attention with surprises and a little humor.

TAKE NOTES FOR NEXT TIME

The day after your talk, sit down and set a timer for 30 minutes. In that time, write down everything you learned from giving the talk. What went well? Where did the audience



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seem most engaged? What would you do differently next time? What did you forget to bring?

Send thank-you notes to your host and reach out to everyone you met via social media, a newsletter or a quick “nice to meet you” note. You’re planting seeds for future opportunities.

You’ll be tempted to skip this step. But don’t. Waiting on thank-you notes means they likely won’t happen. Also, you’ll never be as clear as you are right after the talk about how you succeeded and what you can work on for next time. Remember: every talk you give is just a rehearsal for the next one. **PA**

Gigi Rosenberg is an author, artist coach and editor of Professional Artist. She wrote *The Artist’s Guide to Grant Writing* (Watson-Guptill) and coaches artists to help them find funding, blast through creative blocks and launch vibrant marketing plans. To download “5 Steps to Your Elevator Speech,” visit gigirosenberg.com.

THE ARTISTS

Jacqueline Doyle Allison is an abstract painter born in Las Cruces, New Mexico. Her paintings have been shown at juried solo and group exhibitions in the southeast. She’s the recipient of national and international awards, including finalist in the UNESCO Bioethics Art Competition, “Express the Gift of Healing: Body, Mind and Spirit.” Her works are in corporate and private collections throughout the United States. She currently lives in the mountains of north Georgia. For details, visit jacquelineallison.com.

Robert Leedy is a watercolorist who says his storytelling was passed on through his architect father and extensive travel. Leedy lived throughout the Caribbean, Europe and South America with his wife, Vicky, before returning to his native Florida in 2010. He teaches classes, workshops and lectures frequently. His work is shown at Aviles Gallery in St. Augustine, Southlight Gallery in Jacksonville and online at robertleedywatercolors.com.

Donna Lyons prefers to paint on location in watercolor and completes her paintings in one sitting outdoors in the inspiring beauty of the Kawuneeche Valley in Rocky Mountain National Park, near Grand Lake, Colorado, where she maintains a home and studio. A retired elementary art and kindergarten teacher,

Lyons now teaches watercolor classes for the Rocky Mountain Conservancy Field Institute. She’s the author of *My Kawuneeche: An Artist’s Journal* in Rocky Mountain National Park. See more of her work at donnalyonswatercolor.com.

Judith Modrak is a New York-based sculptor who has exhibited extensively in the United States in museums and galleries, including LACE, Trenton Art Museum, Point Park University, Woodstock Museum and Hartnett Gallery. Our Memories, a public artwork, has been installed on Governors Island, NY and in Central Park, and is currently on view in Thomas Paine Park through 2019. Modrak’s work has been featured in the Tribeca Trib, Scientific American, Seaside Times, The Pittsburgh-Tribune, among others. For more, visit judithmodrak.com.

Bonnie J. Smith, fiber artist, is known for telling stories about what “she sees and knows.” Smith sees justice and injustice in the world, the terrain of California and she knows family and all that it encompasses. Smith exhibits her textile artworks locally and internationally. Recently, her textiles have traveled to China, London, New York, Japan and France. In 2017, her 14-piece textile “Swimming Upstream” series was hosted in the United Kingdom. For more, visit bonniejofiberarts.com.

9 Resting Yolas II, 2014, by Robert Leedy. Watercolor on Arches 300 lb. cold press paper, 11.5" x 27". Copyright © 2014 Robert Leedy. Used by permission of the artist.

10 Alviso, 2016, by Bonnie J. Smith. Textile, photography, piecing and reverse appliqué, 36" x 36". Copyright © 2016 Bonnie J. Smith. Used by permission of the artist.