

"Art washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life."

- Pablo Picasso

## **So You Want to Be an Artist?**

By Michael Masterson

I got a nice letter from LB, a 78-year-old man from Pacific Palisades, CA who spent most of his career working in film and video production, with many excellent credits. In more recent years, he took up digital still photography and has gotten positive comments about his work from "many high-level critics."

LB's goal is to "get in front of the public" and sell some of his prints - and he is looking for advice on how to market them. He says that one of his "chief selling points" is that he's willing to restrict the number of prints to no more than 50 of each. He says he will sign and number each photograph so that in the near future (considering his age and the fact that he doesn't expect to be doing this much longer) "these pictures will have value as a collectible."

As he says, "Stranger things have happened."

LB's interest in making a twilight career with art is a common one. So what I'm about to say is not directed specifically at LB (because his letter shows that he understands some of this) but to anyone who, like him, is thinking about making art (painting, drawing, sculpture, mixed media) work as a retirement profession.

Artwork is the kind of product that is valued subjectively. A limited-edition print from someone nobody's ever heard of is worth very little. Almost nothing, in fact.

Think of it this way. You are a retailer of prints in a busy city or tourist town. (There are very few retail locations where prints can be profitably sold.) A photographer walks into your office and offers to sell his prints to you. He tells you he has been a professional photographer for 40 years and is willing to limit the editions of his photos to 50 each. He is 78, etc. And you like his photos. They have good eye appeal. How much do you offer to pay him?

The answer: probably nothing at all. Because yesterday, four people came by with reasonably good photos that they were happy to give away in exchange for a very small commission just so they could make a name for themselves. One of them, a wealthy woman for whom photography is a hobby, told you she would pay you to carry her photos. Her objective is to be able to say at cocktail parties that her photos can be seen in your shop.

You see the problem.

When it comes to retirement fantasies, Americans have two: Unimaginative but hardworking executives and entrepreneurs want to wile away their later years on the golf course. Less well-heeled and more creative sorts want to enjoy a second income by creating and selling art objects that display their experience and sensitivity.

Having recently taken up golf, I think I understand both instincts. I have twice retired, and twice tried to make a living as an artist. But I've given up on this aspiration now and have a different plan. Making money, if I want to, as a businessman... and making art, when I want to, simply because it gives me pleasure.

But that's my plan. Let's talk about LB's situation.

The problem he's facing is a problem of supply and demand. Because his dream is so common, he is competing against tens of thousands of capable and/or talented people who are doing the same thing. Not just inexperienced amateurs but people who, like LB, have years of experience.

I have no doubt that LB's photography is better than most because it is technically sophisticated and reflects his great experience looking at life through a lens. Unfortunately, the number of people who can appreciate it are few. The "high-level critics" he mentioned are among them. But LB won't make much money selling his photos to them. To accomplish that goal, he will have to sell to the public. And the typical art buyer is a boorish Philistine who buys pretty or cool things to hang on the wall - a person who makes purchases mostly when he is on vacation. He doesn't know anything about signed limited editions and doesn't care about them.

The bottom line: LB's photography, however good it is, has little or no commercial value.

Commercial value for commodity art is created almost entirely by the art broker. Because he creates that value, and can recreate it over and over again, he feels - somewhat justifiably - that he should get the lion's share of the profits.

LB says he's willing to offer a "reasonable commission" to anyone who can sell his art. I'm guessing he means something in the neighborhood of 20 percent. But it is the broker of commodity art, not the artist, who deserves the 80 percent.

Could LB live with that? Could you? That's the question.

When I was in the business of selling art, I'd drive an even harder bargain. I'd insist on 80 percent in the beginning - but I'd also insist on a 20-year contract. That's because once the artist's work became well known, its commercial value would no longer be entirely dependent on me. Once his name got around, there would be a secondary market for his work - i.e., he'd be able to sell it to other commercial brokers or through auctions - and I would feel cheated if I didn't get my 80 percent of those transactions.

I realize I sound like a greedy sonofabitch. Nevertheless, I'm telling you what is fair with this kind of transaction. If you are thinking about becoming an artist and having other people sell your art, you must be willing to pay what they, not you, think is a reasonable commission.

If LB agrees with me and decides, "Okay, I'll take 20 percent and be happy," he still would have a big problem. His expectations would be reasonable, but he'd have a hard time finding someone to sell his prints because there is such an imbalance in the market between supply and demand.

For every photo that is commercially sold, there must be at least ten thousand sitting around waiting to be bought. I don't think I'm exaggerating.

So what can LB do?

He has a choice. He can visit every retail vendor of photography and try to make a 20 percent deal - a very expensive and very unlikely path - or he can become his own broker and market his photos locally and/or through the Internet.

Locally, he can sell them at flea markets and traveling art shows. He won't make a lot of money doing that at first, but he'll make some - and he'll develop a mailing list of customers who should be happy to buy from him on an ongoing basis. If he keeps at it for four or five years and garners a few thousand first-time buyers, he could easily be making \$50,000 a year by intelligently marketing to them.

I've always been amazed at how ignorant flea-market and art-show vendors are about business. They go to so much trouble and invest so much money into getting their products to the market - and then when they do get customers, they sell them one time and then forget about them.

Selling someone at a flea market or art show is a considerable accomplishment. It takes personal interaction and a pretty high level of interest on the customer's part. Turning that kind of a buyer into a productive, long-term customer would be relatively easy. (You can find out exactly how to do it by buying a copy of my new book *Ready, Fire, Aim* when John Wiley publishes it in January and reading what I say about back-end marketing.)

Besides direct selling, LB could get into direct-response marketing by setting up an Internet business to sell his art. Again, this is a subject that is way too big to talk about in detail here - but these are the highlights:

- He should set up a website, but he should keep it simple and not spend too much time and money on it.
- He should invest the majority of his marketing time in going out to other websites and e-mail lists and promoting his name and his artwork.
- He should promote his name first by teaching people about photography - how to appreciate it, what separates good photos from bad, etc. There are plenty of places where he can plant his advice for free. He should encourage people to respond to his articles, and then add their names to his mailing list.
- He should create two e-mail services - one that teaches people how to appreciate photo art, using his own photos as illustrations, and another that goes directly to people who have purchased or expressed interest in his work. In this second service, he would talk about his art, the projects he is working on, and his next limited editions.

LB might not want to do this kind of work. He might see it as boring or arduous or too commercial. Lots of artists I know feel that way. They place great value on the work they do (creating the art) and little value on the work brokers do (creating commercial value for it).

In truth, the broker is as much an artist as is the producer of the artwork. His art is just as much about transformation and magic and imagination. The only real difference between the two is the end object. The artist's aim is to create a material object that has little or no commercial value until it becomes a brand. The broker's aim is to take something that has little or no commercial value and transform it into something that does.

Today, in the age of scientific direct marketing and the Internet, you have the unprecedented opportunity to become twice the artist you are. First by producing your art... and then by selling it.

Michael Masterson, author and businessman, has developed a loyal following through his writings in "Early to Rise," an e-newsletter that mentors more than 400,000 success-oriented individuals to achieve their life goals. What do you want to do this year? Become wealthier? Get healthier? Read more books, travel the world, and become wiser? Sign up for ETR at <http://www.earlytorise.com>, and we'll show you how to do all of that and more . . . in just five minutes a day.