



Art in the Big Apple

British artist **David Thompson** had the chance to work in a New York City gallery, and says the art scene in the American Chelsea is very different to that of the UK

YOUR FIRST YEAR living in New York is always your most exciting. This was what I was told upon arriving here, and I can sincerely say that in my first 12 months I have experienced more than I'd anticipated, and have made some very interesting observations along the way.

The first obvious feature that struck me when arriving in New York came the moment I approached the Chelsea gallery I had chosen to work with. The pre-war building consists almost entirely of around 30 art galleries spread over six floors, situated in a prime Manhattan location. To add additional perspective, the Chelsea district on the west side of Manhattan from 16th Street to 27th Street, between 10th and 11th Avenues, has more than 200 galleries showing work from both established and emerging artists.

These numbers indicate that art is embedded in the people that call New York "home". When art is so deeply rooted in the history of a city, it becomes easy to openly accept art as a part of society.

New York seems so hospitable to artists due to the extent to which art is accepted and incorporated into everyday life here – walking through any one of the many New York City neighbourhoods will reveal a number of sculptures, murals or public art installations. But who visits these galleries? And where does all the money come from?

As a curator in New York I have noticed that visitors to these galleries tended to be mainly tourists and members of the public, rather than buyers, closely followed by students. In my experience, the gallery serves as a showroom to existing clients and collectors, and sales are often made to collectors before an exhibition even opens.

It is impossible to say what is most popular in galleries here, as every style and era has been catered for. Prices can range fantastically from gallery to gallery. Works in some of the more renowned galleries can sell for upwards of \$250,000, while some independent spaces will start at \$1,000.

A comparison of non-profit art in England and America (which includes some galleries) must be based on the attitudes of the public towards art, but \$13 billion of American arts funding in 2007 came from individuals, foundations and corporations (the private sector) while the remaining seven per cent of arts funding came from the US government. In Britain, between 2008 and 2011, we'll invest more than £1.6 billion of public money from the government and the National Lottery to create these experiences for as many people as possible across the country. Although these are just statistics, these numbers do demonstrate the differences in how each

country looks at art.

Curating an exhibition here is very interesting. With such an abundance of extremely high-quality art on offer, it is difficult to decide how a new exhibition should be approached. The curator is primarily looking to develop an idea for the show and find talented artists with appropriate work for the commercial gallery, while also looking for an individual who is established. The gallery is in business and needs to exhibit someone who is sellable, so it ultimately becomes a search for the package deal.

Often, the decision comes down to impact. If the exhibition is to make a mark on the New York art scene, the art must speak volumes in originality and innovation.


When looking at potential artists there are certain criteria to keep in mind. The gallery directors will be looking for the artist with an exciting philosophy, pedigree and ideas to sell clients and collectors on their vision. Galleries in New York really know how to drive a sale – when exhibiting in Chelsea, for example, the artist has a salesman fighting his case. The downside, however, is the extremely high competition in this city and the difficulty of even getting seen by a curator or dealer.

Private views in New York are impressive. Working with an independent gallery I organise and host many functions that attract hundreds of guests each night. The streets often have a festival atmosphere.

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I would advise UK artists interested in exhibiting here to visit New York for a short period to experience the art

world first-hand and learn what it takes to prosper here.

I love living in New York, there is something about this city that keeps you coming back for more. It is impossible to pin point specifically why I feel this way, but I learn a great deal here every day. 



David Thompson has a degree in Creative Practice from Leeds Metropolitan University and has exhibited

extensively since graduating in 2007. He currently works as a curator at Serrano Contemporary Gallery in New York City. www.thompson-art.co.uk