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Doing Art's Work

Jen Bekman's growing empire of projects seeks to convert a new generation of collectors to her cause

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Jen Bekman in her 32nd Street office / Photo by Mike Fernandez

We've all been there: You walk into a gleaming white-box gallery where an elegant gallerina sits behind a designer table. She doesn't seem to notice your entrance, doesn't even deign to look up from her glowing computer screen as you walk through the hallowed rooms to see the art on the walls. If you ask her for a list of the works, she's curt, dismissive. And you try to whisk by the expensive creations as efficiently and unobtrusively as possible. You arrive back on the sidewalk feeling beat up, befuddled and a little... guilty. That's the problem with the art collecting experience, according to Jen Bekman. And it's exactly the opposite of what she aims for with her various art-world projects. Bekman has quickly become an undeniable force in the art world, horrifying some of the cultural gatekeepers, while simultaneously creating a cult of admirers and spawning imitators—all around her mission to bring art to everyone.

“Almost everyone I know who has been to galleries much has had at least one bad experience,” Bekman explains on a recent Friday afternoon from her loft-like office space on the fringes of Koreatown. “Either made to feel bad, or being offended by being treated badly. Either you have to be really secure or able to put up with a lot of bullshit. And most people aren’t like that. And then on the other end, you can go to Ikea. And so a lot of people have given up on it.”

In 2003, at the age of 33, Bekman cashed out her 401(k) and started a small storefront gallery with about \$15,000 in an out-of-the-way space on Spring Street near the Bowery. Her mission: to create an opportunity to see work in an environment that was credible and professional—as well as welcoming and warm. “I went in blind. But I was extremely determined. They should have never given me a lease,” Bekman says, with a chirpy chuckle. Two years later, she launched a photography competition called Hey, Hot Shot! that has since proven a launch pad for many photographers into the fine art market. Then, in 2007, she created 20x200.com, a website with an emailed newsletter that promotes limited edition archival prints starting at \$20. She was looking for a way to lower the “risk” associated with art buying. “I thought the price of lunch was low enough to feel the commitment without the risk,” Bekman explains.

She now employs a full-time staff of 25, contracts a number of printmakers around the country and various vendors and shippers to meet demand—since its start, 20x200 has shipped over 115,000 prints around the world—for distinctive art by actual artists. A cheery blond who has an impish twinkle in her eye and a milky-white complexion, Bekman seems like your sassy friend who also happens to have really great taste. Born and raised in New York City (she graduated from Stuyvesant High School, followed by a stint at Hunter College), she speaks in a bouncy way that makes her feel like a product of a relaxed West Coast upbringing: She’s not shy about saying something’s “awesome” or cute. Fittingly, she found her way to the Bay Area and worked at a series of web jobs during the dotcom boom. “I was never a dotcom millionaire,” she says. “I don’t have a gajillion dollars.” But she did have a thing for mid-century furniture and did invest in Heywood-Wakefield pieces that are still in her East Village apartment.

The office on East 32nd Street is shared with a graphic design firm and has that quiet, low-lit atmosphere in which creative types seem to thrive. Editions from 20x200 are hung on the white walls, and young men and women sit along a long table staring intently at Macs, doing art’s work.

While many of those she employs have MFAs and create art in their spare time, Bekman never worked at a gallery prior to opening her eponymous space. “It wasn’t even an aspiration,” she admits. But she had a friend who was an artist, and she saw how difficult it was for her to make work and present it professionally. She became aware of a huge gap, of a group of potential consumers who couldn’t access quality work. Then one day, she opened a Pottery Barn catalog and was horrified. “There was a \$200 framed picture of pigeons in Venice or something,” she explains. “And it made me furious.”

Without any art network or clients, Bekman started with emerging artists in her bricks-and-

mortar gallery, with the first exhibit consisting of photographers Dana Miller, Mara Bodis Wollner and Tema Stauffer. She chose Nolita, rather than Chelsea, because, as she explains, "I wanted people to feel like they could buy a pair of shoes and then they can still go look at art, and they don't need a town car to take them over to 10th Avenue." But she still felt frustrated that she wasn't reaching a wide-enough audience.

"I always talk about the fervor of the newly converted," Bekman says. "Living with art in my home is, like, this amazing thing, this fortifying thing. It makes my life better, and I'm sort of, like, everyone's life should be better like that. It is a very cool thing to have in your life. But if I wanted everyone to collect art, I'm not going to do it from a storefront."

With *Hey, Hot Shot!*, Bekman started employing the scale of the Internet and building an audience. At the same time, it allowed her to engage in a community of curators and publishers by creating a panel to select works from the submissions, lending them legitimacy.

But the big break came with *20x200*. A mix of the quixotic, quirky and cute: Browse the site, and you'll encounter everything from witty text-oriented prints to moody photographs of baby animals to colorful graphic designs that look like album cover artwork. While much of it seems accessible and upbeat—the sort of stuff you could show your fuddy-duddy dad, while also appealing to your angsty teenage daughter—there are pieces that aren't as easily digestible.

Bekman doesn't shy away from being populist in her approach. "I'm not super cool, and I'm OK with that. And I'm not like a huge nerd," she says. "And I'm not bland by any stretch of the imagination. I always sort of prided myself as being mainstream enough to understand what most people will like. It's also very important to me to engage people." If it's baseball season, there may be a piece that would appeal to fans (Don Hamerman's photographs of found baseballs) or computer geeks (Mark Richards' photographs of antiquated computer systems). They even offer gift-wrapping during holiday time, and have gotten into education regarding framing, an area that is also full of anxiety.

From the start, Bekman's motto for the business has been "Live With Art, It's Good For You," which she knows can cause eye rolling among the culturati. "I feel like I have to defend it because it's such a pat, almost cheesy statement. But I really believe that people's lives are better because they have art around them," she says. "I find it infuriating that art—which is such a joyful, emotional thing—is so fraught, that a lot of people have negative feelings around it. And some of it a mistrust of artists and the mistrust is: Are you trying to fool me?"

Jeffrey Teuton, the associate director of Jen Bekman Gallery, explains how the work of a photographer like Colleen Plumb, which the gallery recently exhibited, can have really beautiful photos (a dreamy, sleeping lion) but also striking images like the one of her husband lying down with their dog after it was euthanized. "We work on getting people in the door, having them look at something they wouldn't normally look at and perhaps work they weren't very familiar with."

The gallery had some very big success with photographer Nina Berman. Her work was

selected as part of Hey, Hot Shot! and then the photo journalist's "Purple Hearts" series was exhibited at the gallery. Holland Cotter of the New York Times reviewed the show, and later Berman's "Marine Wedding" series was included in the 2010 Whitney Biennial. "Jen was the first person to take Nina out of the photojournalist category and elevate her to the fine art context," Teuton explains.

Bekman says she expected an outsize level of narcissism and ambition from artists when she started, but discovered it wasn't usually the case. "The fact is that most artists can't not make art. And most artists are making art at incredible personal expense, just trying to keep a practice alive because they have something to say and they want people to hear it." So 20x200 was also a way to create support for artists and their practice. It provides a regular income and has financed new, expensive projects for some artists, and allowed some to simply pay the rent. "It's good for artists, and it's good for the world," Bekman reiterates. Now each artist exhibited in the gallery also selects a piece to have made into an edition of prints. And it is a two-way street: Bekman relates the story of one collector who so fell in love with a piece after she bought the \$20 print that she then bought the \$8,000 original. And the people collecting prints range from the neophyte to the savvy curator.

Michelle Muldrow's "Altar in Orange" on view at Jen Bekman Gallery beginning April 29. Painter Michelle Muldrow, 42, will have her first solo New York City show April 29 at Bekman's gallery, with a series of "landscape paintings" of the interiors of big-box retail stores. A mid-career artist who is represented in Los Angeles and in Ohio, where she has relocated, Muldrow explains that she first heard of Bekman through a museum curator friend in Cleveland.

"She had these beautiful prints on the wall; this great collection, and it wasn't cheesy," she explains. "And she said something like, 'I belong to the print-of-the-month club on 20x200.' And she says she refers a lot of people to it when they are just looking to collect and they don't know how to begin."

She says it has been sort of an adjustment, thinking about the archival prints of her work, since she was told all along, "'You don't reproduce your work in any way...'" These limited-edition prints kind of turns around the myth of what you're supposed to do as a fine artist." But she's excited knowing that some of her friends, who may not always be able to afford her works, will be able to own one.

The curation of 20x200 has branched out from simply featuring emerging artists to include editions by Lawrence Weiner and Roger Ballen. In December of last year, an edition of Paula Scher's celebrated "The World" painting was offered in various sizes and panels (the full, 30-by-40-inch edition of 10, offered at \$2,000 each, has sold out), with a third of the proceeds benefiting the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum.

It's the conversational tone and friendly approach that seems to have worked. On her Personism blog, Bekman often includes poetry and favored artworks—for example, she recently paired a Todd Hido photograph of a suburban lawn with a Raymond Carver poem ("Phone Booth")—and in the newsletters she writes that feature art from the 20x200 editions, she doesn't appear anxious or worried about her use of exclamation points.

When she received the news that 20x200 artist Jorge Colombo's work, created using an iPhone application, would be featured on the cover of *The New Yorker* in May 2009, she wrote it was "Officially awesome!"

Of course, with popularity and success come ruffled feathers, jealousy and even outrage. Part of it can be explained by the intimidation that Bekman's projects are siphoning off funds from collectors that would otherwise be spent in a traditional gallery environment. Brian Clamp, the director of ClampArt, feels it definitely has had an impact. The program of his 11-year-old Chelsea gallery features many emerging artists, including photographers, and if a collector is trying to build a comprehensive collection and can include a cheaper print of an artist, it may mean they won't spend it on a more expensive edition. Five of the artists he represents have participated in 20x200 with varying degrees of success. "There's certainly a discussion beforehand," Clamp says. And he admits it does allow access to works for a demographic that may not always be able to afford works by admired artists, including his own gallery assistants.

Although he does see it as being more valuable than buying "some poster" that is easily discarded, he's still wary of the fact that some collectors may forego the traditional gallery for one of the prints. "If they can get a \$20 print by an artist they want to collect instead of a \$2,000 one, then sometimes they will go for the \$20 print."

Elana Rubinfeld, the director of Fred Torres Gallery in Chelsea, says she doesn't feel threatened by 20x200 or other online art-selling ventures and feels it's a completely different experience. But she does go to the site to see work by new artists. She even bought a piece by William Powhida, his "Why You Should Buy Art," which she gave as a gift to an art advisor friend. "I don't think of it as art; I bought this little piece about the art world. And she has it hanging in her house," she explains. "It was the message: I gave it as a gesture. It was a thank-you. It wasn't something you take seriously; it can't replace the art-buying experience, so I don't see it as a threat. No one's thinking it's buying a real piece of work."

But that doesn't mean that Rubinfeld doesn't see the power of reaching a larger audience in this sort of medium. In fact, Rubinfeld partnered with Exhibition A, another online venture that launched in December that offers printed canvas editions of established artists' works, to offer an edition of a work by George Rahme.

"He's an artist we had one exhibition with in 2009. And it was a successful exhibition," she says. "His name is kind of out there, but this allows us to introduce his work to a larger audience. The [edition] is not precious, but it can be found by people, it can be respectable. And young collectors who want to acquire a piece can do it and not feel like they're going to be homeless."

According to Rubinfeld, Rahme was excited and on-board from the start. The artist is from Detroit and, although his work is priced modestly—in line with an emerging artist's work, and he's fairly successful—many people who admire his work, including friends, are not able to own it.

It was this reason, much like Bekman's initial impulse for starting her gallery, that Exhibition A co-founder Laura Martin, 27, came up with her concept, a tweak on the 20x200 formula. She had been working in fashion, as Cynthia Rowley's business director, and fell in love with the work of artist René Ricard.

"I was 26, living in Downtown Manhattan in an apartment with high rent and a whole lot of blank walls. I wanted to collect art by these artists that I came to love, but I couldn't yet afford their original works." She knew other people who felt the same way, so she presented the idea to Rowley and her husband Bill Powers, co-owner of Half Gallery, who thought it could work and gave their support and financing.

Although Martin says the focus is on more established artists—they have presented works by Terence Koh, Hanna Liden and introduced David LaChapelle this week—and the site has been likened to a "Gilt Group for art," referring to the semi-exclusive fashion-oriented discount Web business, the impulse is an echo of Bekman's creed. When Martin explains, "We want to introduce artists to a wider audience, and there are many people who are attracted to works but at this point in their lives could never dream of owning an original work... I sometimes say it's a gateway drug," she sounds like a Bekman convert. Martin goes on to explain, "It's another way to support working artists; it's an additional stream of revenue for them. From my perspective that's a good thing. We are a business. We do make money. A lot of that goes to the artists."

According to Martin, in the first month the site had over 13,000 members sign up, and since its Dec. 8 launch, it now has approximately 40,000 members. And her dream came true: She did work with Ricard, creating a limited-edition piece of one of his paintings, and it now hangs on her wall.

While Bekman says that a lot of dealers she knows have come around to what she is doing, and there are more and more sites imitating her concept, there remains a certain condescension and befuddlement at her achievements.

"Everyone is concerned with their pie; they want to hold on to their piece," Bekman explains. "I've been sort of saying for years: I'm trying to make the pie bigger; I'm not trying to take any away from you. I'm trying to get more people coming through the door of your gallery. I'm trying to map a path for people from, starting with us, feeling much more confident and comfortable walking in and engaging because it's an important thing to do." But her evangelical zeal doesn't seem to have abated. "I don't think we are so much about selling prints as we are about extending the experience of being an art collector to a bigger audience," Bekman explains. "And while doing it, we're very committed to ensuring that experience is authentic, whether someone is spending \$20 or \$2,000."