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Organizing Chaos: Making a living as a mixed media artist

by Lori Baratta

For those of you already making a living as an artist, or who are in the process of it, we're sometimes told that this is a career which can be daunting. But, if you happen to be involved in several various fields simultaneously, working in assorted media, things can start to get a bit crazy. I was never quite certain how chaotic things sometimes were here until I started writing this article. An art business can run more smoothly with a little bit of foresight.

I'll give you a brief background, so that you get the basic idea. I license designs and do custom work, both illustrating and painting various subject matters from country to fantasy genres. These designs are then used on various products according to each company's specific needs. In addition, I also offer commissioned portrait work for private and public clients.

Some artists choose to zero in and hone their craft in one particular area, using one specific medium. I wish this idea would have appealed to me a lot more when I first started, but because of my impatience and minimal attention span, along with a great interest in a vast amount of things, I chose to experiment as much as possible in all areas. This is not something I would necessarily recommend, just something I do. Creating art is the easy part, the fun part… it's the business side that can become a bit crazy. Organizing that chaos became a mantra.

Almost from the very beginning, I invested in high quality archival stitched print sleeves, to not only protect the finished pieces, but also to store the larger single sheets of paper and/or board supply. Although it was initially a bit pricey to order the sleeves, it worked out in the long run, as this method keeps the paper clean and free from possible tears. This saves money and even time in replacing both used and new paper and supports.

The second thing I decided to do when I moved into my current studio was to set everything up as organized as possible. I keep colored pencils and paints in easy view. Allocated work stations help immensely, saving precious time when there's a need for specific materials for each new piece that has to be worked on, and even more so if I'm required to work on several different projects at a time.

Stoneware Crocks
Watercolor on Strathmore 400 Series Bristol sheet, 4-ply vellum surface.

Although this method may seem to take the spontaneity out of a piece by being too planned out, it has actually helped. There is very little time wasted looking for each individual brush or tube of paint. Instead, that time can then be used to design or paint. Being efficient definitely helps, especially when there is an imposing deadline. Making time is a big factor.

Because I offer a variety of services and live in a very rural area with limited art material suppliers, I try to keep the supplies that I need most on hand, including lots of

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Winter Solstice
Watercolor and Colored Pencil on Strathmore 400 Series Bristol sheet, 2-ply vellum surface.

Strathmore® paper. I stock an assortment of surfaces and sizes in both pads and sheets, as I am never quite sure what jobs will be in store for me from one week to the next. I also like my clients to know that I am using good quality materials that offer longevity and produce dependable results.

I also look for media surfaces that can be used for more than one purpose. The Strathmore Gemini 140 lb Cold Press surface is excellent for washes of color, in addition to accepting crisp lines of ink which is useful for decorative designing. I also found out by experimenting some years ago that Strathmore's 400 and 500 Series Bristol sheets with a vellum surface (sometimes also referred to as Kid Bristol) can really take a beating and accept heavy, even washes without ever having to stretch the paper, like traditional watercolor paper.

Not having to stretch the paper not only saves a bit of time, but also saves the aggravation of having to soak and then either staple or tape the paper down before I can take a paintbrush to it. I like to know that the surface I am working on, can withstand some abuse, without fear of tears or buckling. The open time is excellent, especially if there is a need to cover a large area and the paint can then be more easily lifted while the paper is still fairly wet.

I personally use Strathmore Bristol for watercolor, acrylics, ink and even colored pencil, which makes it extremely versatile. This saves the expense and storage space of having to keep a large assortment papers on hand. Although this particular paper is manufactured mainly for dry media, I found it

Sydney
Colored Pencil on Strathmore 300 Series Bristol, smooth surface.

to work beautifully for combining pen and ink and watercolor illustrations. I know other artists who have used Strathmore's Bristol for the same purpose with success.

I would highly recommend testing each sheet first because the Bristol is not designed specifically for watercolor painting. Also, keep in mind that irregular washes can occur when laying down color. There are many variables which could also affect the outcome including the amount of saturation, the type of medium, etc. I will reiterate, these sheets are not manufactured for this particular purpose, but I have had great results with them. Experimenting and trying different approaches in techniques and with materials, is after all, what art is all about!

My husband made custom pencil holders for each set of my colored pencils (e.g.; watercolor, wax, oil based, etc.). I have holders individually set up by pencil type and have arranged the pencils by colors. I have spent several rainy afternoons making swatches for each of the colored pencils, along with their corresponding names and stock numbers. So now I have a custom set of swatches and can easily find the exact shade

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Harvest Home
Watercolor on Strathmore 500 Series Bristol sheet, 4-ply vellum surface.

Northern Lights
Pastel on Strathmore 500 Series Bristol sheet, 4-ply vellum surface.

I need without wasting a lot of time. On several occasions I have used the swatches for an additional purpose: to help clients identify a very specific color for a design when they were unable to accurately describe it. The client ends up with exactly what they want and there is no end confusion as a result.

Like most artists, I keep an ever growing supply of reference photos on hand in file folders and on my computer hard drive and storage disks. I tend to take more and more digital pictures, especially since having moved to the beautiful countryside. Organizing the photos in some manner such as alphabetically, by subject matter, or whatever you prefer, is also a good practice.

Husky
Pastel on Strathmore 400 Series Bristol sheet, 2-ply, vellum surface.

Empty coffee cans house my assorted brushes. Each can is marked so I can easily see what I need. This is especially useful when I have several cans in different areas of the room for work on simultaneous projects. I have a nicely covered bookcase which keeps my reference books clean and at the ready. I also have a set of pastel drawers on wheels that I can easily move about the room. Luckily my one large window is facing north so lighting is not much of a problem, but I do have several lights available on the rare days that my lighting is not sufficient.

If you have clients who visit in person, it always helps to keep an area set up in either your home or studio where you can discuss your business. If space is limited, at the very least, attempt to conduct business in a place that is free of distractions. Although it's a normal way of life for most people, a phone ringing, dog barking, or children screaming in the background may devalue your standing as a professional.

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If you will be conducting most business via email, always make sure to include all of your pertinent contact information in each and every correspondence. It helps solidify your business and serves as a simple reminder for the client, making it easier for clients to touch base with you… and send out a payment to you! It sounds trite but you would be surprised how many people leave this information out of correspondence. Several times when I needed to call someone who had initially contacted me, I found myself having to try and locate their number when it would have been much easier if they would have included it somewhere in the form of their letter. A simple signature at the bottom of each email, or at the top of a letter written on stationery, including your name, address, phone number, email and website URL (if you have one) can make a world of difference. It's also another simple way of keeping your services at the forefront of potential clients' minds.

All in all, running a business such as this, and organizing the chaos therein, is not exactly what I had in mind when I first started painting and drawing. It does take some personal time away from just being able to paint for the heck of it, but for me, when I'm able to get down to the actual painting or drawing for a project, it's both stimulating and exciting. I never know what job is around the corner for me to do, thus forcing me to keep stretching the boundaries and pushing me into unknown territories, and after all isn't that what art is all about?

Best Friends
Graphite on Strathmore 300 Series Bristol sheet, smooth surface.

ABOUT THE ARTIST
Lori Baratta

Lori Baratta is a decorative and fine art painter and illustrator with over 270 published designs. Her appreciation for art started as a child when her mother would take her to different galleries, but it was not until she became an adult that she started to paint and draw, at first just for fun and then later as her livelihood. Lori originally started painting with acrylics on wood, but moved on to watercolor, oils, pen and ink, pencil, pastel and gouache. She later began experimenting with mixed media, combining methods and materials to explore her many ideas. Lori's paintings and illustrations reflect various subject matter which includes family, friends, animals, holidays, spirituality, landscapes and wildlife. She also paints life size realistic still lifes using some of the antique items found in her home such as baskets, quilts, pewter, stoneware, fresh flowers and vegetables which she picks from her gardens. Her fantasy and mystical designs are inspired by her love and respect for nature and a quick walk around the rural area in which she lives sparks ideas no matter the season.

Her art has graced the covers of magazines, catalogs, book covers and is licensed to companies who offer her designs on a diverse array of products, including cross stitch patterns, ceramic tiles, t-shirts and note cards. The products and giftware bearing her images are available in specialty stores nation wide as well as through her own company. Lori also runs a program though her business, donating a portion of proceeds from commissions to help benefit homeless and injured animals awaiting adoptions, in no kill animal shelters. She has also written several published, instructional "How To Paint" projects for art & craft magazines. Her commercial work has been favorably reviewed in national trade publications, with some attention being focused on the symbolism of her spiritual mythical designs. Her commissioned portraits reside in private, public and government collections.
Lori currently works and resides in rural upstate New York with her husband and assorted animals. Her historic home is on a scenic mountain surrounded by several acres of land, complete with gardens, a large pond and woods.

You can see more of Lori's work at www.fineartandportraits.com and she can be contacted at loribaratta@midtel.net or 518.287.1660.

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Featured Product

Artist Trading Cards

The biggest movement in art is very small.

Our bestselling fine art papers are now available in official Artist Trading Card size so artists can create, swap and collect art from around the world. Strathmore® makes it easy.

Precision-cut for a clean surface, these convenient cards are available for a range of media – drawing, watercolor, acrylic, oils and mixed media collage.

Join the Movement!

www.strathmoreartist.com/atc

Lakefront by Sherie Sloane.
Watercolor on Strathmore 400 Series Watercolor.

Self Portrait by Susan Schaffer. Acrylics on Strathmore Acrylic Linen Canvas.

What are artist trading cards?

Artist trading cards (ATCs) are miniature pieces of art traded around the world. Artists create, trade and collect art at organized "swap" events, either in person or online. It is a great way to meet other artists, share creations, and build unique collections. The only official rule is the trading card size which must be 2.5" x 3.5".

How did the movement start?

In 1997, M. Vanci Stirnemann, a Swiss artist, created 1,200 cards by hand as part of an exhibit. On the exhibit's last day, he invited others to create their own cards and trade with him during the closing reception. The movement has skyrocketed and many other artists now organize major "swap" events. Today, there are ATC swaps online and in almost every major city around the world!

Create. Swap. Collect.

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Questions From Our Artists

Since we launched our new Artist Trading Cards (see featured product on page 5 in this issue), we received questions from artists who are interested in joining the "movement." We thought our eNewsletter was a good way to share answers with other artists.

I'm an artist trading card "newbie." I know that the only "official" rule is the size of the card, but are there any other guidelines?

As you mentioned, the only official rule for Artist Trading Cards (ATCs) is the size. But, there are a number of generally accepted conventions.

ATCs are always traded and never sold. ATC purists believe this is the essence of the phenomenon. Trading is about meeting other artists and sharing art without money being exchanged. Artist trading cards are about connecting with other artists, not with art collectors or commercial art galleries.

As the popularity of artist trading cards has grown, so has the interest of collectors. As a result, some artists choose to sell cards. Cards that are sold are not called ATCs, they are called Art Card Editions and Originals (ACEOs).

Art should be original, limited edition or series. In the spirit of trading, art should be original, one-of-a-kind or in very small limited editions. Sets of ATCs that are based on a theme are called a series.

Most artists include information on the back of their ATCs. In general, the following information is included on the back of the card: name, contact information (email or address), title of piece, and number if it is part of an edition or series.

Card should not be too thick. It should be relatively flat so that it can be mailed or stored in a trading card sleeve. This is a requirement for many but not all trading groups.

I would like to join a face-to-face ATC trading group. I've seen the terms "trading session" and "swap." Is there a difference?

Trading sessions generally refer to a face-to-face, informal gathering that is loosely structured and social. Participants bring as many cards as they would like to trade. Conversations begin and participants pass cards back and forth until they strike a deal. Many groups gather regularly, for example, the first Saturday of every month.

Swaps usually refer to a more structured approach to trading that ensure all participants get to trade. At a face-to-face swap event, all participants bring in the same number of cards. The number is determined by the "swap host." Cards are placed face down on a table or placed in a bowl. Each person randomly picks a card one at a time. Some hosts choose to collect and distribute cards to participants.

Regardless of whether you attend a trading session or a more organized swap, you should find it to be a very supportive environment. In the spirit of how artist trading cards originated, most groups ensure that everyone feels welcome and that it is a relaxed, fun and social experience.

How does an online ATC swap work?

There are a number of different online swap formats. The formats and rules are up to the swap host or hostess.

Most online swaps involve the following:

- Participants mail in their cards to the swap host.
- The host randomly selects cards and mails them back to participants, ensuring that the artist does not receive their own card.
- You may be charged a small fee to cover postage.

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