

Moving Beyond the Gallery Walls ~ The Online Presence of Jen Bekman

by Eric Miles ~ photographs by Stefan Ruiz

Jen Bekman's eponymous gallery, which she opened in 2003, is located in a neighborhood on the edge of what was once New York's 'skid row'. Dubbed NoLita (North of Little Italy) by realtors in the 1990s, and now just a stone's throw from the recently re-opened New Museum of Contemporary Art (a sleek stainless steel edifice designed by Japanese architects Sejima + Nishizawa/SANAA), it is filled with upscale boutiques and intimate restaurants, but is not an area one typically heads to seeking out new photography in galleries. The space the gallery occupies is often described as 'pocket-sized', but it belies her outsize, seemingly uncontrollable, presence on the web. A first generation Internet pioneer going back to 1994, her work as a relentless promoter of emerging photographers and artists is inextricably wed to the online context. In addition to her gallery, she is the founder of a quarterly online competition Hey, Hot Shot! [www.heyhotshot.com], which has become a vital launch pad for photographers looking to expand their audiences. Equally concerned with new collectors, she is utterly firm in her conviction that buying art should be possible for most anyone. To that end, her most recent initiative, 20x200 [www.20x200.com], makes amazingly high quality ink-jet prints available for prices as low as \$20. Her blog, Personism [www.personism.com], serves as a sort of running commentary on it all. We spoke last fall in a café near her gallery.

Your resume is rich with the early history of the Internet – Director of Interactive programming for Disney; executive at Netscape, Chief Creative Officer for an AOL funded streaming video company, Vice President of User Development for Meetup, the list goes on. How did you come to be the proprietor of a gallery?

It was an impulsive decision to open the gallery. I was not involved in the art world at all. I had been incredibly ambitious in my Internet career (I started working in Internet related jobs in 1994, before the Web). I was interested in innovation and the ability to communicate with a lot of people online. In 1996 I started working for a company in San Francisco, Electric Minds, which was the first web-based online community. In 2000, I moved back to New York to be the Chief Creative Officer for a company that allowed users to upload videos onto the Web.

Sounds familiar.

I don't want to go into that conversation [laughs]. When I was working in executive jobs, before the Internet bubble burst, I was making decent money. I wasn't rich, but I could afford some nice things – furniture, a small collection of pottery. When I was unemployed for 18 months, I started taking inventory, asking myself what had real value for me. And I hadn't bought any art. I didn't know that I could. Until I opened the gallery, I didn't realize that significant pieces of artwork could be available for under a thousand dollars. As a professional person in New York City, this is not a huge sum of money. People buy handbags for \$1000 all the time!

Departing from the more typical model then – a gallery director or assistant director strikes out on their own with a roster of collectors and a new backer – how did you go about establishing yourself once you opened?

My web presence definitely distinguished me from the start. It wasn't an afterthought. It was, and remains, an essential component of the gallery's identity. I don't think there's another gallery out there that's used the web in the same way that I have. Saatchi has an amazing community site for artists, but it isn't curated [Saatchi Online: www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/yourgallery/].

And how did you get collectors to begin to trust you?

Part of my emphasis has been not only emerging artists, but also emerging collectors. I want someone to be able to come into the gallery and respond to work without feeling they need a Masters in Art History to do so. I achieve this in part by what I show and in part by the fact that I encourage interaction – I want people to feel free to ask questions and know that they won't be seen as being stupid for doing so.

Walk me through a cycle of Hey, Hot Shot! [HHS!]. It has become one of the premier events of its kind for emerging photographers. How would you differentiate it from other juried competitions?

It is a juried competition, but there are several things that differentiate it: It's connected directly to a New York City gallery and offers an



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opportunity not just to show there but also to be represented. The panel is top notch and reviews all the work, not just a pre-screened selection. Also, it is not only the winners who have the opportunity for exposure: In the weeks leading up to the competition deadline, contenders are featured on the HHS! Blog daily. Even being mentioned on the blog can, and does, have an effect on someone's career. It has also become an incredible resource for emerging photography.

Four times a year, ten winners are chosen who are then included in a group show at the gallery. At the end of the year, four photographers are chosen to be represented by the gallery and participate in a full-scale group show. I may change the format to twice a year instead of four times, though, with shows of five artists instead of ten. My hope is that fewer artists and fewer exhibitions will make it that much more prestigious to be included.

Who is your ideal panelist for Hey Hot Shot?

I want a diverse group of people. I have had Lesley Martin, Publisher of Aperture Books; Jörg Colberg, of the photography blog Conscientious; Caterina Fake, Co-Founder of Flickr; Stephen Frailey, the chair of the photo department at the School of Visual Arts Photography; Michael Bierut, one of the principals at Pentagram design; Julia Leach, the former creative director of kate spade [a designer of women's accessories], who also happens to be a very savvy collector with an interest in emerging artists. I try to change it up. I always have photographers who teach on the panel; I learn a lot from them. Plus I always have past HHS! winners as well. The opportunity to review work with this amazingly engaged bunch of people is constantly energizing.

When you are looking at such an enormous volume of work every few months, how does it affect the way you see current stylistic trends? We were both at Review Santa Fe last spring [an juried portfolio review event organized annually by Sante Fe Center for Photography], so I'm sure you noticed the ubiquitous presence of 'sullen adolescents', to take just one example.

I do get really saturated. I look at more work than just about anyone I know. At times I feel like I've seen it all before. Whenever you look at artists' statements, as well, and people are listing their influences, it always seems as if they are the same: William Eggleston and Stephen Shore, et cetera. The current preoccupation with the vernacular, in a contemporary context is something that I can find to be at turns maddening or incredibly boring.

Can you elaborate on that a bit? How do you see that as a potentially negative tendency?

Well, everyone wants to be Alec Soth [laughs]. Surprise, only Alec is Alec! When you see so much work, it becomes clear that so many people are imitating, even if that imitation isn't intentional. When dealing

with vernacular material in particular, what makes a given photo special is such a subtle thing. Think of Eggleston's tricycle photo [the cover image of *William Eggleston's Guide*, the 1976 MoMA exhibition catalogue]. What makes it so great? It is so difficult to put your finger on! This is dangerous territory: to go out and shoot, say, empty swimming pools or gas stations. The optimist in me believes that this might be just young artists going through their paces. Perhaps it's a rite of passage: you graduate from art school, return to your hometown and photograph empty parking lots and then move on to something else.

Have you tried showing work that departs from the vernacular then? Is there a counter-tendency you see coming down the road?

I did a show of Nina Berman's portraits of Iraqi war veterans last summer. Stylistically, she comes from a photojournalism background. It was very interesting for both Nina and I to re-contextualize the work as a fine art project. I'm very interested to see how her work develops now – the experience may well change how she approaches a project. All of this is to say that a body of work exploring a well-informed idea will ultimately hold up.

The thing that I don't have the answer to is, 'what is next'? Though I wavered on doing it, one of the reasons I decided to do Beth Dow's show [who had a show of platinum palladium prints in November of 2007] is because they reference a classical photographic tradition. Ultimately she is shooting in the present, but in a way that's different than the prevailing trends. And that is something I'd been looking for: someone using alternative processes – old-fashioned technique – but with a contemporary eye. I find it vexing sometimes that to be contemporary, one has to reject the past.

What are some of your notable Hey Hot Shot! success stories?

Nina Berman, definitely. I was, first of all, amazed and incredibly pleased that she had entered to begin with. She had won the World Press Photo 1st prize for Portraits earlier in the year; she's a seasoned photographer with an impressive resume. After she participated in the spring group show, there was a hastily planned solo show of the *Purple Hearts* series that was meant to be quite brief. That exhibition received a prominently placed rave review from *The New York Times* that literally touched off an amazing array of worldwide coverage. The show was front-page news in prominent newspapers across Europe, in Korea, and Japan. We did TV and radio interviews; we placed work in museum collections. Nina herself said that it was putting the work in a fine art context that did it. She has been showing work from this series, mostly in a non-profit context, for a while. It had received some positive attention, but nothing like what we experienced at the gallery this summer.

Brad Moore, who exhibited in the same season that Nina did, had a solo show open in Chelsea in September. The gallery owner found



him via Hey, Hot Shot! James Deavin, who showed in the first year of the competition, had one of the photos he showed picked up by *Harper's Magazine*. His career has been on the rise ever since: he just finished a big commission for the Tate in London. I've sold a great deal of his work, through the gallery and at art fairs.

20x200 is your most recent venture. Editions of two hundred ink jet prints – photographs but also other graphic work – are sold for the incredibly low price of \$20. Two smaller editions in larger sizes in editions of twenty and two are sold for \$200 and \$2000 respectively. What is the logic behind the project?

In the art world an edition of 200 is big; in the mass market, however, to limit something to 200 – to be able to pay \$20 for something that only 199 other people are going to own--is incredibly special. And because the web site drives an enormous amount of traffic, I can sell-out an edition of 200. 20x200 was just an idea last January. I knew what I wanted it to look like; I enlisted a bunch of great people; I told the design firm, Little Jacket: I want a logo that is as good as the FedEx logo! That was my standard, and I feel like they met it. 20x200 came to fruition based on my track record. The people who worked with me really believed in the ethos behind it, and knew that I was serious about making it happen.

What allows you to sell work for such a low price?

The entire project is based on a concept I am fascinated with – that technology has created the means for high-quality mass production. Simple business rules of volume make it possible to minimize costs. Again, I set a preposterously high standard here – I need the prints to be high quality, and I need them produced quickly for a very low price. I couldn't compromise – as a gallerist, it's important to me that the work is well done.

It took some time, but I was able to find a printer, Eric Recktenwald, who gets it and wants to see the idea work. Eric's a fine art printer who makes exhibition quality prints. The margins are almost impossibly slim for the editions of 200 – for all of us, not just the printer. But they improve at the larger sizes, which are selling very well since they are still amazingly affordable.

The prints are all worth more than they cost – it's ridiculous that you can get a print of this quality for so little, but it's supposed to be like that. Everyone involved in the project believes that more people will buy art once they discover the pleasure of collecting.

How do you convince an artist that selling their work for as little as \$20 will benefit them?

I've worked very hard to make 20x200 make sense. The way I explain it to an artist is that we're dealing with a single image, which is not unlike doing a post-card mailing, only better, because you are getting paid for it. They are receiving publicity by being featured on the site and getting work into the hands of more than two hundred people who will be talking about it, perhaps buying \$200 or \$2000 prints. I am not interested in creating a stable of artists who are turning out \$20 prints! I am interested in nurturing artists whose work is on a path to selling for much more, or is already there. Taking part in 20x200 is a one-time thing. Again, the spirit of the project is that *everybody* should be able to buy art.

So as with Hey, Hot Shot! you are selling photographers on exposure, traffic, and the opportunity for publicity? Are you the sole curator?

Yes, it's exposure and it's also the prestige of being chosen to take part in the project. Anybody can sell \$20 prints. But I've had the gallery for five years now, established a reputation: as a gallerist, as a curator and as something of a renegade.

Would you say there is something of an anti-elitist stance implicit in this emphasis on approachability and accessibility? Where do you stand, for instance, in relation to established Chelsea galleries?

If you operate on the assumption that we are a consumer driven culture, buying art from an emerging artist is about the most authentic experience you can have within the realm of consumerism. You have this thing in your home that becomes attached to a certain part of your life, to your personal history. I don't believe that only very wealthy people should be allowed to have this experience. There are many people making art who want to sell it. And a lot of people making great art don't have galleries or any other means to find their markets. Why not connect the people who want it with the people who make it? It is so obvious.

Further, I don't think you have to be mediocre to reach a broad audience. Look at the way that some clothing designers have done lines for the mass-market – Isaac Mizrahi designing for Target. There is a lot more permeability now, in terms of class and taste. I don't want to merely be the affordable, acceptable art gallery. My program on the whole is rigorous; I take risks. I don't necessarily think the ideas that I have are particularly innovative; they are simply ones that others have given up on. As I said to Raul Gutierrez, the first person who signed up to help build 20x200, 'I want to change the art business!' He was skeptical, but that is what I want to do. I think it needs changing. +

Stefan Ruiz (San Francisco, USA, 1964) studied painting and sculpture at UC Santa Cruz and the Accademia di Belle Arti in Venice, Italy. He took up photography while in West Africa, documenting Islam's influence on traditional West African Art, for which he won a scholarship from the Color Purple Foundation in 1990. He worked at San Quentin State Prison from 1992-1999, teaching art to inmates, including prisoners on death row. Ruiz has worked editorially for magazines including Colors (of which he was Creative Director in 2003-04), The New York Times Magazine, Details, Wallpaper and Rolling Stone. His award winning advertising photography includes campaigns for Caterpillar, Camper, Diesel and Air France. His work has been exhibited internationally at the Havana Biennial (2003), Photo Espana, Madrid (2003) en Les Rencontres d'Arles (2005), among other venues. In 2006 Chris Boot published his first monograph, People. Stefan Ruiz lives in New York.

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