

Fit to Print? Part 1.

By Susan Fox

Should you publish reproductions of your work? Why do prints? If so, should you find a publisher? Go it alone? What are the options? How does this fit with your overall marketing plan (you do have a marketing plan, don't you?)

The conventional wisdom has been to never do prints until you can't keep up with the sales of your originals. But many artists have clearly chosen to do prints anyway. What gives? Thinking about it, I realized the "never do prints..." advice came from long established artists. Until recently, if an artist wanted to self-publish, they would go to a printer and have to order the entire edition up front, at least 250 prints, more if possible, to get the unit cost down. But if no one was buying your originals, what chance did you have of selling out an edition 250 or more? Not good, as it turned out. The artist had a lot of money tied up in prints that they now had to market, absorb the loss of any which were damaged and, if they only sold a few, the unit cost shot through the roof. This is a recipe for economic insanity and the conventional wisdom was spot on.

Ah, but in the 21st century, the recipe has changed due to the wonders of digital technology. It is now possible to reasonably buy prints a few at a time or, depending on your ability, inclination and budget, do it yourself. Prints give the artist an additional revenue stream and "products" at a variety of price points. Someone who can't buy a \$3,000 painting might very well plop down \$300 for a nicely framed print.

So why not just find a publisher? This may be the best way for you. But, be aware that the artist sometimes is required to give up all rights to the image. In return, you get (probably) some money up front and royalty payments on sales, if any. However, they do all the production, marketing and promotion. Do buy the latest copy of Artist's Market, which lists many art publishing companies. Do your homework and don't send puppies to a company that only publishes landscapes. They **really** hate that.

If you want to consider self-publishing, there are two options- work with a printer or do it yourself. I will be assuming that you want to get the absolute best quality possible for the money you have to spend. You will need to develop your eye and judgment for the proofing process.

Option 1: You will have to educate yourself about the different ways of getting ink on paper (offset, laser, giclee, etc), then decide whether you want inexpensive unlimited editions or higher-end limited editions. The old computer acronym GIGO (garbage in, garbage out) applies here. Your prints will only be as good as the image you start with. You need to either hire a professional or get decent equipment for digitizing your work. The first choice is to have a digital file created directly from your art, either by scanning or capture with a high-end digital camera. The rule of thumb has always been that the fewer steps between the original and the reproduction, the better the quality of the output. That is still true. Next is 4"x5" transparencies. 35mm slides are too small for anything but small prints. Least desirable is photographs. You will need to pick the paper, decide on the edition size, size of the print, how many you will order to start, packaging, accompanying information (including a certificate of authenticity if it's a limited edition), frames and where and for how much you will sell the darn things. This route is the one I have chosen for my limited edition prints.

Option 2: All the above applies, except you are now the printer too. The advantage is that you have Total Control. The disadvantage is that you have Total Control and will now have to do it all yourself. Only you know whether this would be an unacceptable drain on your studio time and whether the equipment investment and learning curve is worth it. I've decided to go this route for smaller unlimited edition prints. My new HP printer is sitting in the box, waiting. Stay tuned.