



Unsold

To hold on or let go? Several artists share their insights on how to deal with unsold artwork.

By Daniel Grant

The spaces underneath the beds and sofas in California artist Barbara Nechis' home are full of framed paintings—all of them her own. Indianapolis artist Charles Mundy says he has more than 100 of his own works hanging on (or leaning against) the walls of his house. There are 20 in his living room alone, in fact, which begs the question: Just what are artists supposed to do with all their unsold output?

In general, artists want to exhibit and sell their work; however, most pieces on exhibition are eventually returned, even as those artists are still producing more work. This can lead to an accumulation of unsold artworks for which, unfortunately, the prospects aren't limitless. They can be given away as gifts, lent out, thrown away or stored for posterity.

HOLDING ON

An artist's studio is probably the most obvious place to store unsold works. Most of Nechis' paintings, for example, are kept in a large, deep bin that's recessed into a cabinet in her studio. "I can fit more than a hundred matted watercolors in there," she says, "and the paintings are easily accessible. I also have a flat file for storing stacks of unfinished work."

Storing art in the studio may be convenient, but over time it can become cluttered, lessening the

amount of available space for new pieces. Watercolorists, printmakers and others who create works on paper may have it the easiest, since large numbers of their pieces can fit in flat files, but those who paint on canvas usually keep their works on stretchers, which calls for vertical shelving. Frames can make the problem worse for painters, but sculptors face the biggest hurdle, since they can't stack works on top of one another.

New York City painter Tom Christopher solved his storage problem 15 years ago, when he bought a 6,000-square-foot former factory and dedicated a third of the space to storage for his artwork. "I also send out a lot of my work to the galleries that represent me," he says, "and they hold onto it. That's free storage."

An even larger-scale solution was the creation of the 18,000-square-foot Bo Bartlett Center at Columbus State University, in Columbus, Ga. The center was given seed money by

painter Bo Bartlett's brother-in-law and is filled with the artist's works, which are continuously on display with others kept in storage. "I've never liked to keep work around," Bartlett says. "I'd give it away rather than hold onto it. An empty studio makes me get to work. I have to fill it up again."

Storage solutions are less easy to come by for three-dimensional media. Phillip Grausman, a sculptor in Washington, Conn., says he moved out of New York City, in part, because he "needed room to do sculpture and to store it—and storage facilities in New York City are very expensive." Another problem he has recently encountered is that the foundries he uses to produce his editioned work no longer have the space to store molds, so they're now charging artists to store them or asking artists to take them back.

LETTING GO

Eventually, too much is just too much—and artists have differing ways of dealing with excess. Nechis distributes many of her unsold paintings to family and friends as gifts and as loans. "I've also donated my artwork to hospitals, schools and libraries," she says.

Others have taken a more draconian solution to the problem. "There's enough bad art in the

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world," Mundy says. "I want to spare the public bad art, especially if it's mine." Because city ordinances in Indianapolis prohibit bonfires, he has knifed unwanted paintings, cutting them up and putting them in trash bags. In 2001, he destroyed 180 paintings at one time. Still, Mundy generates approximately 100 paintings annually.

Another prolific artist, Frank Webb, of Pittsburgh, who died in 2022 at the age of 95, took a ruthless approach to work he decided didn't measure up. "I store surviving paintings in boxes labeled A, B, C and D," he once said. "If inventory becomes unmanageable, I destroy the paintings in the D box, then some of the grade C are downgraded to the D box."

How to destroy artworks is, like the art itself, a personal decision. Johanna Harmon, a painter based in Highlands Ranch, Colo., uses a table saw to destroy any paintings that, she says, "burden and clutter my space and mind."

Christopher has taken a box cutter to a lot of his work. "I think I saved the art world a lot of grief," he says. "Of course, these were paintings that made me cringe. I wish I could take back a lot of the early works I sold and just paint over them."

Recycling work is another option, and something that Manhattan artist Mark Tennant does with some regularity. He often scrapes the paint off an unsold canvas and begins anew. The new paintings, he claims, are often improved by the mix of the old and new images. "The pentimento comes through and adds depth to the new painting," he says. "A painting without an underlying image forcing its way to the top is too clean. A painting needs to be besmirched."

STOCKING UP

Unless all artists go on strike, the question of what to do with unsold art will remain. Discarding art can be quite freeing, unburdening an artist of the weight of every piece of paper or canvas they have touched over time. On the other hand, overproduction can serve a purpose, too.

TRASH OR TREASURE?

Disposing of unwanted art comes with its share of practical problems, especially for those who've reached a level of prominence in the art world—artists whose works are regularly sought-after and sell for thousands of dollars when brought onto the market.

Jamie Wyeth stated that "it has happened a lot" that he and his father, Andrew Wyeth, often found people going through their garbage. Some of Wyeth's sketches and false starts, along with classroom demonstrations created by Wayne Thiebaud—originally thrown out with the trash—have since been put up at auction, according to Wyeth's stepson and business manager Matt Bult. As a result, both Bult and Paul Thiebaud, a San Francisco art dealer and Thiebaud's son, periodically and methodically tear up works on paper, efface printing plates and slice up canvases. They became more diligent about this in the 1980s. "Sometimes, we'd find someone trying to sell a piece of a drawing," Paul Thiebaud says. "Dad would have torn the paper in half, but that half had a figure on it."

For his part, Jamie Wyeth—who claims, "I destroy a third of what I do," sometimes tears artworks up into small pieces, although his method of choice is burning. "It's an integral part of my work, destroying unwanted art," he says.

If an artist gets sick and can't work, having a collection of pieces at the ready to sell can be a lifeline. So in that sense, maintaining at least a small inventory can be a good type of insurance plan. ♣

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