

*Zoë Westhof, Hazel Dooney*

*Zoë Westhof:* Do you mind introducing yourself?

*Hazel Dooney:* Sure. My name is Hazel Dooney. I'm 30, I'm from Australia, and I'm an artist. I should add that I work completely outside the traditional gallery system.

*Zoë Westhof:* Yes, exactly. So the first thing I wanted to talk about was how you started off on the traditional path. So what made you decide that it wasn't for you?

*Hazel Dooney:* Well, I started down a traditional path by going to art school, but about six months into the course I knew it wasn't going to work for me. It wasn't skills based and it ... already seemed archaic to me. I left after six months and put on my own exhibition. It was a huge success. A lot of people came, it sold well, and it had great reviews. Then I accepted an invitation to show at a rather conventional commercial gallery. I was young and had a little confidence but I didn't really have any idea of what I'd accomplished by putting on my own exhibition. So I figured that the next step was to show at a conventional gallery. The trouble is, I did it a few times over the next few years, and every time, I found it unsatisfying. From the first exhibition, I did a lot of the work myself – including handling the PR – because even then I realized that what happened to the artwork after I had created it was as important to me as creating it.

*Zoë Westhof:* Right, right.

*Hazel Dooney:* I didn't feel that just delivering it to a gallery was the end of that process. I wanted to introduce it to a wider audience. Commercial galleries – the traditional gallery system – did not do that. It isolated itself from mainstream culture and little that went into the system was seen by a wider society.

*Zoë Westhof:* Yeah, it's very isolated compared to what you've created with your website. I remember reading in your essay called "Life Study" that you were happiest and most successful when you don't follow the

rules. So do you think that this is something that's become more possible because of the climate we're in now, or do you think that's always been a way to move forward?

*Hazel Dooney:* I think that it's made possible because of the Internet. Without that, I'm not really sure. The 'net allows you to connect to a vast amount of people on an individualized basis, to connect with them directly, whereas before, the galleries were in a much stronger position: artists took their work to galleries, then collectors went thru galleries to connect with the work. But the Internet eliminates the middleman. It connects people directly, without the need for mediation.

*Zoë Westhof:* Do you think that it's given you more artistic freedom since you left the traditional system?

*Hazel Dooney:* Oh, absolutely. I've exhibited at different commercial galleries, including some of Australia's best, and I found that each harbored certain presumptions or prejudices that conflicted with what I was doing.

*Zoë Westhof:* When you went independently, I'm sure although you were still involved in the marketing and the PR before, it must have been even more work. So do you ever feel like that takes away from your time doing art?

*Hazel Dooney:* To be honest, I feel that marketing completes the process of making art. I don't feel that I make art for part of the day and then I do business for part of the day. What I do in terms of the Internet and the business side of things is a facet of the art that I'm creating. It's not separate at all. Art is what I love to do, so I spend all of my time doing it. I don't feel it impinges on anything – or that anything else impinges on it. I much prefer it this way.

*Zoë Westhof:* Yes. So, I'm curious to know when you first decided that you wanted to represent yourself and be fully independent, what were the very first steps that you did to put yourself out there?

*Hazel Dooney:* Firstly, I developed a website. My initial idea for the website was that it would act like an archive of my work, somewhere that people could explore its development. This was back in the late '90s. However, I didn't really learn how to use the net properly for several years – when I began expanding my online presence from the site to the blog and social networks.

*Zoë Westhof:* So once you had your website set up, how did you actually get people to come and visit it?

*Hazel Dooney:* By adding more content, by ensuring that it changed and developed, by starting to make connections online. I sent out a monthly newsletter to collectors called Studio Notes. By beginning to create a direct dialogue with people and sending information to interact with or to read at a time which suited them. People responded. And it built: the more pieces that I did online, the more people came back to my site. One thing fed another.

*Zoë Westhof:* Yes, I've noticed that you have a very active blog and you're on Twitter, so it seems that you're interacting a lot with your network and that community of people who are looking at your art.

*Hazel Dooney:* It's exciting. It's also important to continue to develop that dialogue with those who are interested in my work. It's incredibly important to articulate the process of the work, to explain what it's about. I want it to evolve so that all these separate web presences cohere and become like a virtual studio, an online space like, say, Andy Warhol's famous Factory, where people could come to view his work, to experience the making of it, to hang out and talk either to him or to people who were involved.

The ongoing responses that I've had from various, disparate places and people – from West Africa, India, and Siberia, to the U.S., UK and Europe – indicate that I'm on the right track with this idea.

*Zoë Westhof:* Yeah, definitely. It sounds like what would traditionally be called marketing and networking, and I think a lot of artists kind of shy away from those words, it sounds like you've taken them and made something much more dynamic and made it something that's actually attractive and a way to get your work seen.

*Hazel Dooney:* I think that the tools can be used for things that are much more interesting and important than simply pushing a product.

*Zoë Westhof:* Did you always feel that way, or was there a time when you found it difficult to sell your work or to market yourself?

*Hazel Dooney:* I have always felt that way. And no. I have not found it hard to sell.

*Zoë Westhof:* I'm wondering if, especially when you started off, were you trying to target a certain type of an audience, or were you just putting your work out there?

*Hazel Dooney:* No, I've never tried to target a certain type of audience. I've just put my work out there as widely as possible so that anyone who felt some type of connection with it had a chance to see it and if they chose to, to communicate with me. I'm not into marketing, as in looking at a demographic or tailoring work to it. I can't *stand* that. I've been surprised by the sort of people who respond to my work. I have a pretty clear idea of the demographics but I've never targeted them. I think it's much more important for me to do exactly as I want to do and communicate clearly about what that is.

*Zoë Westhof:* So since you've gone out on your own, were there any things you did that looking back you think you could have done differently, or did it all go quite well, as planned?

*Hazel Dooney:* Looking back, perhaps if I'd had a little more confidence and done things harder, faster, better, sooner.

*(Laughing)*

*Hazel Dooney:* Maybe that's always what one thinks in retrospect. But on the whole, I'm very happy with the way that my art and my career have developed.

*Zoë Westhof:* Yeah, it seems like it's working out pretty fantastically. I think a lot of the people who might listen to this will be just starting to represent themselves online. What would you think are the most important things to do as a foundation?

*Hazel Dooney:* Well, the core of being an artist is to make art and to show your art to people. The most important thing is *always* the work. How, what and maybe even where you communicate about your art depends on what that work is, what the ideas are behind it. It's still important to exhibit offline, so that people can see the work 'in the real'. I also think it's really important to connect directly with your audience and to engage with them. But the Internet enables you to do even more in between public 'real world' events.

*Zoë Westhof:* Where are the primary places that you connect with people online?

*Hazel Dooney:* Through the blog, through Twitter and through my site, in that order. Individual dialogues emerge from these public for a — whether they're discussions about the work, interview requests, invitations to exhibit, or enquiries from potential buyers.

*Zoë Westhof:* Yes, that sounds great. I've noticed also that you don't — unless I missed it — but I didn't see any way to buy prints or artwork directly on your website, so how do you manage your sales usually?

*Hazel Dooney:* People e-mail me from my website. I don't have a very large stock room of available work. Nearly all of my work is done on commission. I don't particularly like the art 'shops' online. Art is about communication and interaction. It's not about art-on-demand, 24 hours.

*Zoë Westhof:* So do you feel like you connect more with the people who buy your art because you create this step of e-mailing you first?

*Hazel Dooney:* I connect because I am entirely focused on the work and the ideas around and beyond the work. I am not really focused on *selling* my art. Instead, I'm focused on connecting with those who are stimulated by my art. Sales are just a by-product of that.

*Zoë Westhof:* Yeah. So you said you do mostly commission work now. Some artists seem to have an aversion to that, so I'm wondering what kind of commission work you do.

*Hazel Dooney:* By commission I mean that I develop a series of work, and because there's so much demand for my work, people want to buy it before I've even begun it.

*Zoë Westhof:* Oh, okay.

*Hazel Dooney:* I develop an idea, a concept, something I feel compelled to express in art. Key collectors are then offered the opportunity to commission a piece within that emerging body of work. I often write in detail about the ideas within the work, and people respond (or not) to that. I don't do requests. I don't change what I'm doing. I don't reserve works for a specific exhibition.

*Zoë Westhof:* Yeah, that sounds pretty ideal.

*Hazel Dooney:* Well, it's been a lot of work to get to this point.

*Zoë Westhof:* I can imagine.

*Hazel Dooney:* And a lot of trust as well.

*Zoë Westhof:* What do you mean by that?

*Hazel Dooney:* It's important to be completely committed to your work and to demonstrate that commitment in every aspect of your activities, as I have done. This develops trust among collectors in who and what you are and what you're doing.

*Zoë Westhof:* Yes, I do think that's extremely important, because once it's online, it's much easier to feel like you don't know someone, so it's much more important to develop that level of trust. Now, going more on trust

and selling, do you ever think that people are not willing to spend above a certain amount buying artwork online if they haven't seen it in the flesh?

*Hazel Dooney:* No. In my experience, that's never been a problem. People who have never seen my work 'in real life' have commissioned works from me and they seem unfazed by the sizes of the works or the prices they have to pay for them. I think it's because I represent the work incredibly accurately and I have a very open and transparent process of creating the work. I document the way that I create the work, the materials used. If anyone has any questions about it, I'm more than happy to answer them.

Again it all comes down to trust.

*Zoë Westhof:* That's really encouraging to hear, because I've seen that as an argument against selling online, so it's good to hear that it's not necessarily a limit.

*Hazel Dooney:* Well, in my case, commissioned work is always completely paid for before it is delivered. It's very rare that people view it in person until it's delivered, often because they're buying from interstate or increasingly, internationally.

*Zoë Westhof:* Yeah. So a lot of the people listening will be trying to see what it's like to go online and take their career online. So I think it would be helpful if you could explain to us what the journey was like for you financially, going from gallery representation to where you are now, where you represent yourself.

*Hazel Dooney:* Sure. During the time that I had gallery representation, I lived at my father's house for the majority of the time – and other times at friends' houses. I borrowed money for each exhibition and after each exhibition was a sellout, I would have enough just able to pay this money back. I worked at a loss.

When I began self-representing, when I finally gave up working through galleries, I had enough to completely support myself, in my own place, operate a staff, a small studio and begin producing my own exhibitions. In terms of figures, well, I don't want to say exact numbers. However, over the last four to five years, it's gone from pretty much nothing or just paying for materials to mid- to high-six figures.

My exhibitions have become sort of annual events, almost like Warhol-like happenings. At my last, in Melbourne, I had Deborah Conway perform as well as fire-eaters. The catering was by a leading local restaurant. And I funded it all myself.

*Zoë Westhof:* I think that your level of success is unusual, so it's not necessarily that I can say, "Oh, well, look at Hazel Dooney. If you go independent, this will happen," but I think it's –

*Hazel Dooney:* Why not?

*Zoë Westhof:* Well, I think it's a really solid example that it's very possible and it looks like you accomplished it though hard work and through being really determined to expose yourself and your work in all the places that you thought were relevant.

*Hazel Dooney:* Absolutely. But there are a couple of points there. One is that I am completely committed to this. I think that you have to be. The other is that this is my sole focus in life. This is all I dedicate my time to. I am totally undistracted by anything else, even a love life. It was clear to me from when I first started out, in my late teens, that most artists only became independent around age 40. I just decided then if I put in twice the effort, I could probably get there quicker. I am openly, incredibly ambitious.

*Zoë Westhof:* Right. Now, did you find – or do you still find that you need to maintain a certain consistency in the style of your work, or do you mean more consistency in just how often you're creating?

*Hazel Dooney:* I don't think it's important to show consistency in the style of one's work at all. I think that it's important to put the same amount of effort into your work and to create on a regular basis. It doesn't have anything to do with style. It's about consistency in the quality of your output – not being lazy or not just throwing something out for the sake of it. It's about the way you show your intellectual and technical evolution as an artist. In short, it's not enough just to put your work – or yourself – online. You have to back that up in every aspect of your life and art.



*Zoë Westhof:* Yeah.

*Hazel Dooney:* Without that, no amount of work online is really going to do much for you.

*Zoë Westhof:* Right. That's a really important point to think about. I think it's easy to get caught up in which social networks to join and how to design your website, so I think it's good to have a reminder that ultimately the focus should be your actual work.

Now, this is tangentially related, but as far as consistency and trust, I've been looking into how different artists price their work, and it seems that one of the main things is that a standard pricing system helps buyers trust that you have consistent way of deciding it. Now, I've seen other artists who prefer to price based on how attached they are to a piece or how much they like a specific piece. So I'm wondering what your process for pricing is.

*Hazel Dooney:* When I began, I priced very inexpensively. I noticed that some people price quite high right off the bat. Now, I don't have anything that's less than five figures but I grew my price with my collector base. As a result, my prices, though relatively high for a young artist, are realistic and very well-supported. They are also very consistent and well-maintained. I believe in an across-the-board price, because it's a product with a value. If you want to create a consistent value for that work, it needs to be consistently priced. This is evidenced by the very few works that find their way into the so-called secondary gallery market – and the price they are bought for there.

*Zoë Westhof:* All right. Now, on your blog, you've written about why it's important for artists to take advantage of the Internet and do sort of the same path that you're doing. And I'd just love for you to talk about that a little bit here, why you think that the middleman, such as galleries or art dealers, is becoming less important or less relevant.

*Hazel Dooney:* Well, the middleman is a buffer, an obstacle in a lot of ways. If you're trying to communicate with someone and you pass your message through another person, it becomes diluted. On the other hand, the message can be conveyed more powerfully when you can interact

directly. The Internet gives you that ability. It gives you the ability to interact directly with your audience, no matter where they are, no matter what time it is, and at a time that they choose.

The gallery system is a business. It's set up so that galleries make a profit. It's not set up as a charity for artists. It's not set up as a business for artists. It's an independent business to sustain gallery owners. And it's a business that has never been of enormous benefit to *artists*.

The most interesting and, arguably, successful artists have broken away from the gallery system at some point in their career. Andy Warhol is probably the most obvious example. As is, more recently, Damien Hirst. I'm trying to be diplomatic...

*Zoë Westhof*: That's okay. You don't have to be polite.

*(Laughing)*

*Hazel Dooney*: Galleries are inconvenient. Worse, they're quite often arrogant about what is considered art. They'd love to decide who can see what art at what time and even who should and should not be able to see it. A gallery is such an impersonal, sterile environment. It's cut off from the real world and has little to do with art. It's just another business. Artists have been frustrated by them, in every sense of the word, for a long time.

The internet enables people to have a much richer relationship both with the work and with the ideas behind the work — with the process of the work, as well as with the person who created the work. And I think that's so powerful that it renders the traditional 'white room' of the bricks-and-mortar gallery that you have to physically journey to go to — where you see the art completely removed from the context of meaning or personality — obsolete.

*Zoë Westhof*: Yeah. Thanks so much for sharing that.

*Hazel Dooney*: It's my pleasure. I am aware that I am at the beginning of this. That's why I find it really exciting. But I do think that it's just inevitable. I do think that it is possible for each artist to use the internet in their own way to create real freedom for themselves.

Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to talk to you about it.

*Zoë Westhof*: Yeah, it's been my pleasure. Thank you very much for taking all this time to talk to me.