

Zoë Westhof, Leah Piken Kolidas

Zoë Westhof: Hi Leah. Do you mind introducing yourself?

Leah Piken Kolidas: Sure, my name is Leah Piken Kolidas, and I sell my art at BlueTreeArtGallery.com and blog at CreativeEveryday.com.

Zoë Westhof: Okay, great. Thanks for talking to us today.

Leah Piken Kolidas: You're welcome.

Zoë Westhof: So the focus of the conversation is going to be what it's like to be a full-time artist who's independent and representing yourself. So I want to start off by asking if you ever started off by taking the traditional path in trying to find someone else to represent your art.

Leah Piken Kolidas: You know I never really did that. For whatever reason, it just didn't ever work that way for me. I started with my website and I've worked with some galleries here and there, and I still do that. But I guess I've enjoyed selling from my website, so I never pursued the traditional way.

Zoë Westhof: So what gave you the idea in the first place to start in your online gallery?

Leah Piken Kolidas: Well, gosh, I guess it was just the way things are going now. So much is happening online, and I didn't feel like my art fit into a lot of the galleries, at least that were around me. So having the website allowed me to connect with people from all over the world so that I could sort of find my fans in that way and not have to worry about the location.

Zoë Westhof: Yeah. Do you think that's given you a lot of artistic freedom to be so independent of any gallery or institution?

Leah Piken Kolidas: Absolutely. Yeah, I don't have to think too much about if this is gonna fit into this space. It's – you know, I create what works for me and then find my audience.

Zoë Westhof: Yeah, that's great. So how long have you been doing this full-time?

Leah Piken Kolidas: Full-time, I think it's been about two years now. I was doing it for a while on the side and then built it up to the point where I could do just that.

Zoë Westhof: And you went to art school, I think I saw in your bio.

Leah Piken Kolidas: I did. I went to Mass College of Art in Boston, and I graduated in '99.

Zoë Westhof: And what was your degree in?

Leah Piken Kolidas: I started out as a painting major and – well, I have a BFA, that's a bachelor of fine arts. And I ended up majoring about half the time in art history, thinking I might want to work in a museum or something like that, which I did for a couple of years, but then got back to painting after school.

Zoë Westhof: So, I'm curious. Do you think that – from your perspective, do you think that art school is a valuable thing for artists, or are there downsides to having a more formal training in art?

Leah Piken Kolidas: It totally depends on the person. I think you can go either way. I think for some people it's great, and I don't regret going at all. I learned a lot. I think it's great for learning the fundamentals. It's great for meeting other artists. I think it depends on your temperament too. For me, what was really hard was there were – not all the teachers, but some of the teachers were really – they have very strong opinions about what art should be. And you had to have a really strong personality to fight with that sort of teacher.

And it kinda got into my head, so even though I did sort of fight back, after a few years of that, I noticed that after school I wasn't painting as much, and it took me a couple of years to shake that off so that those voices weren't in my head so much and I could create what I wanted to create again.

Zoë Westhof: That's interesting. I had a friend tell me the exact thing about it an MFA in writing. She had to go through a period afterwards of detox.

Leah Piken Kolidas: Yeah. Yeah, it's funny how that works. I think sometimes there are a lot of teachers – and there are great teachers too, so I don't want to make it sound like all teachers bad 'cause they're not. There are great ones. But I think a lot of teachers are frustrated artists, and they take it out on their students a little bit. And so, you have to realize that they're just people and take it with a grain of salt.

Zoë Westhof: Yeah. Did they teach you anything about the business of selling your art in art school or was that not addressed?

Leah Piken Kolidas: Yeah, I know that it's addressed more now, from looking back to see what's being taught. But when I was in school, not so much.

Zoë Westhof: So when you began to sell your own artwork, especially because you were doing it yourself, was it ever difficult to kind of put a price tag on your work?

Leah Piken Kolidas: Oh totally. Yeah, I really struggled with that in the beginning. I'm one of those people who have trouble asking for money. So that was a real struggle. And I have to kind of check in with people in my life, who are more sales, business oriented and say, "Does this sound right?"

And I also got some advice about it – I read a lot of books about selling your artwork that were helpful. And one of the pieces of advice that I took was looking around to see what similar artists were selling their work for. And that gave me a starting point to say, "Okay, well this person is selling similar work for this price. Why don't I start out at that level and see how it goes." And that worked for me.

Zoë Westhof: So were you looking at other work online or locally?

Leah Piken Kolidas: Online.

Zoë Westhof: Okay. And as far as how you set the prices, did you ultimately end up using a system based on size, or based on medium? I think a lot of artists struggle with how to have a pricing system.

Leah Piken Kolidas: It's tricky, and I think over time you figure out a system that works for you. My process is sort of internal, and I haven't really figured out how to describe it exactly. But it's a combination of the time, and the size, and the value to me, whatever that means. So there's this intangible piece to it. But at the end of the day I have to say, "How much am I willing to let this go for?" And that kinda helps me figure it out too.

Zoë Westhof: So do you think that you kind of changed how you thought about being an artist when you started selling your work?

Leah Piken Kolidas: Not really. I had to start to think about, "Okay, well if originals are going for such-and-such price, if I'm gonna make it as an artist, I might want to have some other options for people." And so I had to start thinking about prints, and calendars, and cards, and stuff like that. So I had to change the way I thought about it in that way, but not necessarily about what I was creating.

Zoë Westhof: Yeah. Yeah, I've seen some people say that, selling online, people aren't as willing to pay above a certain price for something they haven't seen in real life. So have you encountered that? Did that make you focus on prints a lot?

Leah Piken Kolidas: Yeah. I mean and I understand it to a degree. You know, it's hard to put that much money right off the bat onto something you've never seen in person. But I also think that having a print is a good introduction.

It's like a starting point, so when people see the quality of your prints they start to get to know your work, and then they'll feel more comfortable spending more on the actual piece.

Zoë Westhof: I think on your website you sell the prints yourself, or do you use an outside service?

Leah Piken Kolidas: I do it myself. One of the first things I invested in was a high-quality scanner, like a large-format scanner and printer, so that I can do it at home. I started out – originally, I was hiring a photographer to take pictures of my art and then do the prints. But when he found out that I was selling the pieces from the digital files, he kinda wanted a cut. So I had to figure out my own way of doing it. And the scans are gorgeous, so that's worked well for me.

Zoë Westhof: Yeah. Yeah, they looked really accurate on the site. I imagine they're very true to life, which I think is important when you're selling artwork online, so people can trust that they're getting what they see.

Leah Piken Kolidas: Absolutely, yeah.

Zoë Westhof: So is your income primarily from selling prints and originals, or do you have other art-related projects?

Leah Piken Kolidas: That's the main source. I do other little things on the side. Like I sometimes teach art lessons and do some illustration work. Occasionally I do some Web work, just little things to fill in the gaps. But it's mainly selling art.

Zoë Westhof: Yeah, that's great. I think a lot of the people who will be listening to this might be artists who are just starting to go online, and they're kind of trying to understand what they can expect. So if you don't mind talking to us a little about how your financial situation changed since you've become a full-time artist, and only get as specific as you're comfortable doing, of course.

Leah Piken Kolidas: Sure. Yeah, I mean I can't say that it's been, like, smooth sailing all the way. It's definitely not easy. It's definitely a drop in income from working at a regular job. But it's also been totally worth it for me. And if you can make it work, I say go for it.

Zoë Westhof: Yeah. I think for a lot of artists, the freedom does make it that much more worth it because you're not tied to someone else's expectations of what you're gonna create and what you're supposed to do.

Leah Piken Kolidas: Yeah. It's a really awesome thing to be doing what you love, and it's hard to put a price on that. So of course, I want to keep growing my business. I never want to be a starving artist. But you know it's a wonderful thing to be able to work for yourself.

And my business has continued to grow, so that's a good thing. I've continued to make more money over the past two years. And I feel like I've got some momentum. So I can't really complain. Things are good.

Zoë Westhof: Yeah. What was something that was very difficult to change or some mistakes that you look back and see that you made while you were trying to figure this all out?

Leah Piken Kolidas: My husband works in Internet-marketing type stuff for big businesses, and so one of the things I tried in the beginning was doing stuff with Google Adwords, and that was a total flop for me. It just did not work. It didn't apply in the same way as it did for his businesses. But you know, you try things out and you see what works.

Zoë Westhof: Yeah, exactly.

Leah Piken Kolidas: So that was just one thing that didn't. No big deal. It's a lot of trial and error when you're doing stuff like this, and you can't be afraid to make mistakes.

Zoë Westhof: Yeah, that's great. So I think a lot of artists kind of shy away from the idea of marketing or networking.

Leah Piken Kolidas: Totally.

Zoë Westhof: Yeah. And I'm wondering how your understanding of that has changed over time because I've noticed that you have a really active blog and you're interacting with so many people on your blog, and on Twitter, and I'm sure in other venues as well. So how has your understanding of what marketing is shifted over time?

Leah Piken Kolidas: I think when I started out doing the full-time artist thing, the word “marketing” really freaked me out. And I was like, “Ugh, networking.” Plus I'm really introverted so the word “networking”'s sort of, like, ugh, yuck, yuck, yuck, no thank you. But through developing my blog, I found that marketing in that way is a blast for me. I really enjoy connecting with people.

I love telling the story behind the process of making art. I love sharing creativity tips, and doing the challenges, and connecting with people on Twitter, and that's all marketing. And I find art buyers that way. So it's really fabulous when things that you actually enjoy doing are actually working in a marketing sense as well. And it feels authentic. Even with the word marketing, you think, icky and fake. But when you can do it in a way that's real and true to you, then yeah, it's a big bonus.

Zoë Westhof: Yeah. When you first started out, how did you go about finding people? You've got your Web site and how did you put yourself out there, really?

Leah Piken Kolidas: Well, I've been blogging for a really long time, and at first, I wasn't really connecting my art with my blog. They were sort of separate entities. But you end up blogging about the things that you care about most, when you're blogging in a personal way.

And so, over time, I started blogging more and more about my artwork and doing these creative challenges. And that sort of just naturally developed an audience in that way. So a lot of my art buyers come to my blog because they learned about me, they learned about the story behind what I'm creating, and that's interesting.

And the challenges were a big way of building my audience too. And I actually really enjoy doing it. I don't do it to build my audience per se, but it's just a bonus of part of the process. And on Twitter, I don't know, I just – I enjoy it.

I love sharing things that have inspired me, and I share the links to stuff in my blog. And that's just been building in a really organic sort of way. So I'd say to other artists that it's all about connecting with people, sharing something that's valuable and real to you, and making real connections with other people.

Zoë Westhof: Yeah. Did you have an idea when you first started of what kind of audience you thought you would connect with, or who you were looking to connect with? Or did you just kind of put yourself out there and see who came?

Leah Piken Kolidas: Yeah, I guess I just more put myself out there. And I know a lot of people will start to think about, "Well, who's my audience?" And that's fabulous. I guess I didn't quite do it that way. I've learned over time who my audience is by who shows up, and who stays, maybe who buys. So then I can take that and tailor things to them a bit. I've noticed that a majority of my audience is women in the 30 to 60 age range. And people buying my art are a lot of times men buying for the women in their lives. So that's something I've noticed over time. But a lot of times it's people interested in a bit of a more feminine approach and people who love the stories behind art.

Zoë Westhof: Yeah. Yeah, I notice that you tell a story for each piece, and I think that also allows people to connect to it and to connect to you more as they're looking through your artwork.

Leah Piken Kolidas: Yeah, I think people seem to like that. And I can't really help but tell the story, so it's there. People want to read it and I think it does help people connect in a different way to the artwork when you know the story. I think that's probably the reason I loved art history 'cause I loved hearing the stories behind why things are created and what was the inspiration, that sort of thing.

Zoë Westhof: Now, have any of the connections you've made on line led to so-called "real world" opportunities?

Leah Piken Kolidas: Oh totally. Through a connection online I had my art in a book this year. I have been asked to be in some magazines through connections I made online. A couple of shows transpired because of

connections online. It seems like most of the stuff that happens *[laughter]* real world for me right now is happening because of connections I made online. So absolutely, good things can happen through online connections.

Zoë Westhof: Oh that's wonderful. Yeah, I think when people are starting out they're kind of trying to decide whether they should go the real world or the online route and it sounds like, ultimately, it begins to become a synergy. Just one leads to the other, and if you start off online it will result in physical exhibitions, or books...

Leah Piken Kolidas: Well, I mean do both. Do what feels right to you, but do both. And I think nowadays, it's really essential to be active online if you really want to get going. And so yeah, utilize the connections. It's just that there are so many opportunities for connecting right now. It's pretty amazing.

Zoë Westhof: Yeah, it is. So for any artists who are just starting to make their presence online, what would you say are the most important things to start learning or doing as a foundation.

Leah Piken Kolidas: For selling your work you mean?

Zoë Westhof: Yeah, for an artist who wants to start selling art online.

Leah Piken Kolidas: I think it's great to start with a blog. You can do that for free, and it's a simple, really easy way to connect with an audience, and with other artists, and oftentimes when you connect with other artists, it leads you to opportunities.

You know, put it out there that you're looking. Utilize things like Flickr. Etsy is a great way get started for artists, and a lot of artists are starting out there. If you can't afford to get your own Web shop started, Etsy's a great place to get going.

Zoë Westhof: Etsy.

Leah Piken Kolidas: So I placed – yeah, Etsy. It's E-T-S-Y.com.

Zoë Westhof: Yeah.

Leah Piken Kolidas: Big online marketplace for artists and crafters. So I'd say start in those two places and, you know, continue to add on with other things like Twitter, you know, whatever it is that speaks to you.

Zoë Westhof: Did you sell on Etsy in the beginning?

Leah Piken Kolidas: No, I added that on later on. I have maybe 10 or 11 prints on there right now just 'cause if people are looking for me there, I have a list where my Website is so people can look for more art. But some people like shopping from Etsy and it's very inexpensive to use. So I keep some of my art there too.

Zoë Westhof: You brought up how when you first started off and you're blogging, it's an easy way to connect with other artists. And I think that's something that I've seen people say, "Oh, when you use social media online, you're just gonna connect with other artists. It won't connect you with people who want to buy your art." So what would you say in response to that?

Leah Piken Kolidas: I have a lot of artists who buy my art. *[Laughter]*. A lot of them. So I say artists are buyers too. And a lot of the artists are where I've found my connections to galleries, those shows. And it's good to network with people. What will happen is people will start to share your work with their audience.

That's happened with a lot of artists. A lot of artists will really do this. And you know, they'll highlight your work on their blogs and it gets out to more people. Just the other day someone highlighted my art on their blog, another artist who I've highlighted on my blog. And it led to someone buying a piece of my artwork. So I say connecting with artists is a good thing.

Zoë Westhof: Yeah, I've noticed that on your blog you link to other people a lot. And I'm wondering how that kind of attracts or enforces your community.

Leah Piken Kolidas: I actually really enjoy linking to other people. It's not something I do out of some ulterior motive. I really enjoy sharing stuff that's inspired me. And also, you know, encouraging other people. So that's part of it. And community is also built that way. I mean share links to things that interest you, and make relationships and connections with other people — it happens back for you and your work gets passed on. So yeah, connecting, and linking, it's a beautiful thing, and it's so easy. It's such an easy way to share and connect with people.

Zoë Westhof: Yeah, I completely agree. I think the Internet makes it so easy to very genuinely give value to the people that you appreciate and help the people who are listening to you and looking at your work understand what you're looking at as well.

Leah Piken Kolidas: Yeah, absolutely. And I think people come back a lot because I'm not just sharing my own work, I'm sharing things that I've found that have inspired me. And so that's part of the value and part of the reason people come back.

Zoë Westhof: So I'm also curious why you chose to primarily sell prints and all your work on your own website instead of through another online gallery network or some other sort of service.

Leah Piken Kolidas: Part of it is that I like creating my own space. I'm not in competition with other artists too, like if I were to use a service sort of like Etsy. When you're on Etsy, it's fabulous. But with the click of a button, you're looking at other people's pieces and it's easy to get lost and go off. So when you're on my website, you're on my website and you're seeing all my work.

And I also like the control factor, I get to design how my site looks, how it acts, and all that good stuff. And I'm also not paying extra fees to show my work on another site. So those are the main reasons.

Zoë Westhof: Yeah, so did you design the website yourself or did you have someone do it for you?

Leah Piken Kolidas: Well, the Blue Tree site, I designed it myself. I went around and looked at other websites that I liked and, you know, took different pieces of what worked and didn't work for me. And then I used my artwork and Photoshop to put it together and then I hired a coder to help me with the PHP stuff 'cause I don't really know how to code too well.

I can do some things in Dreamweaver, but he did the basic coding and then I took that all into Dreamweaver and built the site from there. And with the Creative Every Day blog, I just hired someone to help me move my blog from TypePad to WordPress because even though I could do it, it was gonna take me a long time and probably a while to wade through. I hired someone to help me and he offered to do the design work in exchange for some illustration work. So it worked out great and I love, love, love the new design, and I didn't have the know-how to do that myself. So it's good to know what you can do and what you can't.

Zoë Westhof: Yeah, for sure. Otherwise a lot of time can be spent trying to figure it out.

Leah Piken Kolidas: Absolutely. And it's great to learn these things. But it's also good to know, like okay, where am I spending my time and is this absolutely valuable. And if you can do bargaining stuff, with artwork or whatever for Web work, then it's an especially beautiful thing.

Zoë Westhof: Yeah, as far as how much time you put into this, how many hours a day do you find yourself working? Do you feel like you're working more than full time since going out on your own?

Leah Piken Kolidas: Possibly, yes *[laughter]*. Well, practically, you know, because whenever the networking stuff added in, some of that seems like playtime to me, but it is for work. And that can go all hours of the day. And then you have to kind of step back and go, all right, this is enough. This is still work-related, and you've gotta spend time with actual people. *[Laughter]*. My husband is feeling neglected. So, yeah, I definitely spend a lot of time working on my business, but it's also something I enjoy doing. So it's kinda hard sometimes to know where the line is to what's work and what's fun.

Zoë Westhof: Yeah, of course — I think it's good. That sounds like you very consciously try to keep track of what you're putting your energy into. I think that's probably really important when you're all day kind of *in* your art.

Leah Piken Kolidas: Yeah. You have to have your priorities in order, and know what's most important to you in life. If you don't have a boss telling you what to do, what are your — what are the top things that need to get done, and you have to watch things like your health, getting out and getting sunshine, and exercise, and all that good stuff.

Zoë Westhof: Now I just have one more little question. You mentioned Twitter and blogging, and I'm wondering if there are any other networks or any other types of social media that you enjoy using, and that you think connect you well with other people.

Leah Piken Kolidas: You know I think it's mainly, right now, my blog and Twitter. I have a newsletter for my art website. I'm on Facebook, but I mainly use that for old friends, and I don't talk too much about my business on there. I know a lot of people do. And I take classes online sometimes, and that's been a great way for me to network with people, just connecting in a different sort of way, and meeting different people in different fields, and that's been kind of fun.

Zoë Westhof: Cool. Well, thank you so much Leah. It's been really great hearing about how your business evolved to where it is today.

Leah Piken Kolidas: Yeah, no problem. Thanks for asking me.

Zoë Westhof: Is there anything else you wanted to add or talk about?

Leah Piken Kolidas: I feel like we covered it. I'd say, if anyone's thinking about becoming a full-time artist and learning to spread the word about their work, just remember to be yourself, and create what's in your heart, and if you put yourself out there in that realm, you'll find your audience.

Zoë Westhof: Excellent. Thank you so much.

Leah Piken Kolidas: Okay. Thanks so much.

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