The Solid and the Fragile: CSA Bath Hub exhibition at 44AD in March 2024

Notes on running a small sculpture exhibition



We thought some notes might be helpful for other hubs, or other members, who might be considering running their own exhibition:

Timing: It was almost a year from the time when we decided to exhibit together and the actual event. We turned down an opportunity within three months, which was a good decision. We originally booked for a week but took up an opportunity to run on for a second week, which was worthwhile. A deadline for work to be completed two months before the exhibition enabled photos to be used for publicity, the brochure, etc. and dimensions to be available for plinths and layout.

Theme: It was hard to choose a theme that we all liked which would also be a good title for the exhibition (and attract visitors). In the end we also chose a second theme for smaller pieces.

Purpose: We wanted both to show our work and be visible, and to sell. There can be a compromise between artistically innovative work and what is commercially saleable.

Organising ourselves: Time consuming. Several face to face meetings and many emails and WhatsApp messages. We had one main curator (JMY, not the hub co-ordinator) with other people or sub-groups having key responsibilities for main tasks. We might have been more disciplined in that. It was important for each person with a role to have back-up - not just to spread the load but to take over completely if the original person was temporarily unable to work. Not all communications need to be shared with everyone, but there is a compromise to be made. We could have delegated more strictly and been more efficient, at the expense of sharing the experience. Too many opinions can be hard to accommodate!

Sculptures: We did not want to clutter the space so we agreed to show only one or two major pieces each, together with one smaller cheaper piece. We did not operate any selection process. The smaller work would all be displayed in a glass display cabinet - but in the end some were too big anyway and we used a separate shelved display area for them. Exhibiting so many different styles and materials was a highlight of the show.

Venue: We are lucky to have 44AD - an arts venue in Bath which is cheap and easy to hire, centrally located, with its own email and instagram following, plinths, etc. It has regular visitors as well as casual tourists popping in. We had between 25-65 visitors per day. The management is relaxed and expert in curating and helping people to set up and run their own exhibitions.

Publicity, Social Media, etc.: A major concern. Probably the biggest task. Nobody will come if nobody knows about it. Twelve collaborators means twelve sets of friends and family and SM contacts and followers, so that is an advantage in spreading the word. But someone has to produce a design for the flier/poster/adverts/listings/SM output/personal emails/display boards/ banners. That person may not be the same person who coordinates the outward communications. We had good support from the CSA committee.

Prices: We chose our own prices, but some changed theirs after seeing what value others had put on their work. There is a lot of conflicting advice, but we found along with conventional wisdom that lower prices sold more easily! It was a good idea to have a range of prices.

Setting up and taking down: Previous experience was that more than two curators makes for confusion. Physical help may be needed. We were able to have a session a bit in advance to see the actual works and give the curators a chance to make a plan for layout and plinths. Vehicular access is important. Taking down is easy by comparison, but very important to leave the venue in a good state.

Plinths, Lighting, Music: Dependent on the venue. 44AD supplied some plinths, we were able to borrow others.

Cards: We had a display of greetings cards in a rack, which sold well, and business cards.

Invigilating (minding shop): We shared the load, so there was a rota and it was very important to have a back-up person identified who kept the date free just in case. It was needed several times.

Price list, brochure: We had separate price lists, and brochures with photos of the work and brief notes. Beware, visitors will take away anything they can, and printing is costly.
Visitors choice: We had post-it notes and a box for visitors to vote for their favourite. It encourages closer inspection.

Private view: We had a fixed number of personal invitations each - for fairness, and to prevent any overcrowding. We supplied wine and soft drinks, no food. It was well attended (the restricted personal invitations made it more special) and there was a lovely buzz.

Open Forum and 44AD artists meetings: We also hosted a CSA Open Forum meeting and a 44AD morning meeting at which sculptors presented and talked about their work.

Money: We borrowed the CSA machine to take card payments, so payments went initially to the CSA account, so the CSA treasurer paid a lump sum to the curator less fees for the paying machine. The curator then paid the 44AD commission fees (normally 20%) and the proceeds to the sculptors. The machine is easy to use. We had a hard copy of notes on each sale (sculptures each had a number as well as a name; and we took contact details of purchasers). We had a process for notifying the sculptors about their sale, which included a WhatsApp message to the whole group, and it was nice to share congratulations. We also had a float for cash sales of cards and a note of which cards had sold. We insisted on payment in full and collection by the purchaser at the end of the exhibition if possible. We did not lose any sales as a result.

Overall: All of the above needs to be considered for any exhibition of whatever size. Having a group of artists collaborating should spread the load, but it adds greatly to the complexity of decision making. Hence the advice to use sub-groups who make their own decisions. It is more straightforward to run your own solo exhibition, but more satisfying and educational to run one in collaboration. It was good to get to know each other and build a little community. If we do it again we will be able to do it more easily.

Conclusion: It was worth it.

Notes by JMY (curator) and ME (hub coordinator). April 2024.