

## What Story Are You Trying to Tell? Simple Techniques for Great Art Displays

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Most artists focus their energies, rightly, on creating great work in their studios. But it's also important to think about how to display one's work in an eye-catching manner, whether at an exhibition or collector's home. Working from combined years of experience in the worlds of galleries and art display, we hope to offer advice that will help you effectively convey your artistic message to a wider audience or ensure enjoyable artistic vignettes for home placements.

Because works on display are always seen in a larger context, it's wise to start by thinking about the room – what does someone see when they first walk in a room? How will they walk around the space and to what will their eye be drawn? What story are you trying to tell with your artwork and any accompanying pieces?



*Figure 1 - Anchor Pieces at Beacon Gallery*

As in any storytelling situation, start with a bold first statement. Choose a prominent “anchor piece” for the display as a whole: something that can serve as the star of the show and set a tone. This item should command attention from people entering the space, and send a clear and inviting signal, drawing the viewer in. Fig. 1 provides two examples from Beacon Gallery in Boston: the Betty Canick work at right greets people entering the gallery, while the orange mixed-media piece by Adrienne Shishko at left draws visitors into the main space.

Once initial reference points are in place, you can think about the supporting players – pieces that can be placed near to the “star” and carry the story forward. You can think in terms of continuity or contrast; note the interplay between the Shishko piece in Fig. 1 and the “softer” Canick images to its right. Each situation is different, but your visual intelligence and instincts will help you find combinations that inspire you and work together towards your larger statement.

The arrangement of the artwork around the anchor piece will depend on the size and shape of available wall space, the relationship between the pieces, and the overall feel you’re seeking to create. You might find a salon-style approach effective, with the supporting pieces above and below the central work, or a linear arrangement where the story unspools in a row, as shown in Fig. 2 where the related images by Malcolm Montague Davis offer an intriguing sequence of perspectives.



*Figure 2 - Supporting pieces at Beacon Gallery*

Again, every wall is different, every combination of artwork requires its own unique arrangement. Take your time and experiment to find the best combinations. Test your ideas by stepping away from the display area for a few minutes and then walk back into the room with “new eyes” – try to see the space as you would when you would first arrive.

If you’re fortunate enough to have multiple walls for your display, you can apply the same principle to each one – choose one or perhaps two anchor pieces per wall plus supporting works. Try to be sure, though, that however you choose to arrange the art that you maintain a clear center for the display as a whole.

As an artist or art collector it’s tempting to display as many pieces as possible. However, in order for one’s collection to be truly appreciated it’s important to be a tough editor and not display too many works. Many displays (like the one in Fig. 3) inadvertently overwhelm the viewer and cause disengagement due to sensory overload. Help clients and visitors see and appreciate each work on its own. If you’re successful, they’ll develop an appetite to see more!



Figure 3 - Overload Photo credit: Flickr user Sheba\_Iso, used under Creative Commons

A related tactic is to pay attention to the negative space between works on display. Allowing enough breathing room will help viewers focus and not be distracted. Typically, about 8 to 14 inches is a good amount of separation for gallery shows, but again, it's very situation-specific, and you'll want to take your time and experiment. Sometimes intimate clusters will work well, sometimes a particular piece will simply need more space of its own. The paintings in Fig. 4 are nicely arranged, with each having room to itself but also connection with its neighbors (also note how the supporting works by Myra Abelson complement the central anchor piece from Shishko).



*Figure 4 - Negative Space at Beacon Gallery*

One final thought: because experimentation and testing of ideas is so central to the process of creating a good display, an art hanging system can be an extremely useful tool for making good decisions. Wall-mounted track systems use adjustable hangers and hooks to facilitate quick rearrangement, so you can assess different combinations and heights. It's easy to adapt to differently sized or shaped pieces, and you don't feel as locked into a configuration as you might after driving nails into a wall. It also cuts down on wall repairs and accelerates the process of taking down one arrangement of pieces and putting up the next one.

This flexibility in changing displays may allow your collection to be rotated more frequently and easily. Remember that even art in the home doesn't have to remain in the same space all the time: try to change at least 1-2 pieces every 6 months to give a room a fresh look.

We wish you every success in creating strong displays, and hope you'll share thoughts and questions in the comment section!

### **About the Authors:**

**Christine O'Donnell** is the Owner and Gallery Manager of Boston's Beacon Gallery, which she opened after living and working in Paris, Hong Kong, and Singapore. Representing artists from the US, Europe and Asia, Beacon Gallery connects emerging and mid-career artists with new and established collectors and institutions worldwide, with an eye towards activism and social justice. Christine has a master's degree from Tufts University and a bachelor's degree from College of the Holy Cross.

**Peter Dunn** is director of marketing for [Gallery System Art Displays](#), which supplies art hanging systems to thousands of galleries and other exhibition venues. He is the son and husband of visual artists, which has provided him with hands-on display experience both in residential and professional settings.

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All photos by Christine O'Donnell unless otherwise noted