

Q&A with Debra Force

Tell us about your professional journey? What inspired you to pursue a career in this field?

I was interested in American History from early childhood. During my teenage years living in Williamsburg, VA, I worked as a guide in costume for Colonial Williamsburg. While I was not an art major in college, a course in American Art History sparked my interest. Graduate studies at the University of Pennsylvania deepened my passion for American Material Culture and proved that I had a knack for understanding American art. My first job was a corporate art curator and director for INA, later CIGNA, Corporation in Philadelphia, there I further honed my expertise in American art by expanding the collection. I later moved to New York City to work at Christie's in the American Art Department and loved every minute of it. After nine years there, I worked at Hirschl & Adler Galleries as Director of American Art, and then moved to the Beacon Hill Fine Art which was sponsored by the prominent American Painting collector Richard Manoogian and MASCO Corporation. When that gallery closed, I was given a generous severance package which enabled me to start my own business. While I had never intended to have my own gallery, I was excited by the opportunity to work for myself. I established Debra Force Fine Art in 1999 and have made a go of it ever since. Throughout, various mentors have encouraged me, which has served to deepen my dedication to this field.



What challenges have you faced in a typically male-dominated industry, and how have you overcome them?

The traditional American art gallery scene has long been dominated by men, although figures like Edith Halpert, Martha Jackson, and Betty Parsons, as well as more recent names like Virginia Zabriskie, Joan Washburn, and Barbara Mathes, have made notable contributions. In my early career, male counterparts often assumed a paternalistic attitude, and were sometimes condescending or dismissive. They would critique my exhibitions and offerings as well attempt to undermine my negotiating abilities. In addition, colleagues often barred my acceptance into art fairs, while recommending male counterparts.

By consistently focusing on quality and integrity, I've built a solid reputation over time. Being approachable

and transparent has set me apart from some of my male competitors. Despite market fluctuations and the shrinking landscape of traditional American art galleries, I continue to navigate independently. Thanks to long-term relationships, art fairs, and social media, I have been able to promote the material I love and handle some of the most extraordinary works of my career.

How has the role of women in the art market evolved over the past decade?

Women in leadership positions such as gallery owners or directors are absolutely more recognized, accepted, and successful than they were a decade ago. This progress can be attributed to the broader impact of the feminist movement and the ongoing push for gender equality. The mindset that previously doubted a woman's capabilities is fading away. As a seasoned member of the art community, I find myself being sought after for advice and collaborating with male colleagues on equal terms.

Women tend to exhibit greater transparency and flexibility in their interactions with clients compared to men. This, I believe, results in increased client satisfaction and repeat business which, in turn, leads to a more successful business. Additionally, women tend to demonstrate empathy and concern for others, providing them with a competitive advantage. Being approachable and personable is just as important as possessing expertise in one's respective field.

How can you best support the next generation of women art dealers?

By serving as mentors to young women throughout their college or graduate school journey, providing guidance for career advancement, facilitating connections within the industry, and emphasizing the significance of networking. I also believe in encouraging young colleagues, providing internships, and offering employment opportunities whenever possible to support the progression of the next generation in the field.

What woman – in your estimation – has been a trailblazer in the industry and has helped bring scholarship, expertise, and visibility to a particular field.

In my field, I think Joan Washburn from Washburn Gallery. She has made remarkable contributions to American Modernism and the promotion of women artists like Charmion von Wiegand, Alice Trumbull Mason, and Anne Ryan, among others. Through decades of dedicated scholarship, outstanding exhibitions, and advocacy for the abstraction period of the 1930s-1950s, she has established an unparalleled reputation. Although she has had to close her gallery in her later years, her absence is keenly felt, and she remains an inspirational figure for women in the field.

If I were to choose someone outside my area, Joan Mirviss stands out for her unparalleled expertise, impeccable aesthetic presentation, and unwavering integrity in her field [Japanese art]. I've always admired her program and the values she upholds.



Joan Washburn



Joan Mirviss

*Photography:
Timothy Greenfield-Sanders*

What advice would you give to women looking to enter the art field?

Seek out mentors in your field and actively engage with professionals by attending art fairs, visiting museums and auction houses, and frequenting galleries to expand your network. Be willing to start from the ground up if necessary; there's much to learn through observation and even the simplest tasks. Approach established individuals with humility and respect, and don't hesitate to ask questions or seek guidance. Never feign knowledge—admit when you're unsure. Genuine enthusiasm and passion for your chosen field will set you apart.