

Published 3 years ago

New Digital Gallery, Artfull, Is Done With Art Being Exclusively Available to the One Per Cent



Ashley Taupaki – Swamp Playground II · Photo: Courtesy Of Artfull

Successful international sites such as Saatchi Art and Artsy have sought to democratise art by selling online. Now a local duo is bringing New Zealand's art scene into the digital age, allowing independent artists to sell their work "to anyone, anywhere, and at their own pace".

Words by SASHA BORISSENKO · Updated on 23 Jul 2022 · Published on 22 Jul 2022



The Covid-19 pandemic hit many in New Zealand's art community hard. Artists were forced to put their practices and livelihoods on hold as

galleries, studios and performance spaces shut down.

Seeing a gap in the market, film and television luminary John Barnett and former gallery manager and curator Jessica Agoston Cleary decided to put together a platform connecting Kiwi artists and galleries with collectors and would-be art buyers – regardless of whether they could be there in person.

“We wanted to create something that brings together independent artists who might be at the beginning of their careers or already well established”, Agoston Cleary tells *Broadsheet*, “and give them a chance to tell the story behind their work – and be able to sell it to anyone, anywhere, and at their own pace.”

After a series of Zoom calls during the city’s four-month lockdown, the Auckland-based pair decided to put their money and skills together in December 2021. They created Artfull – a purpose-built online space for visitors to browse, buy and learn about New Zealand art and its creators.

The seven-month process involved researching what was already in the market and working with a team of web designers, photographers and videographers. The resulting site is elegant but simple and easy to navigate.

“We didn't want the site to be clinical or to feel like a tech company. It was also important not to be too high brow but, equally, it couldn't feel like a bargain basement or bazaar,” says Agoston Cleary, who was previously gallery manager at Auckland dealer Ivan Anthony and got her start in advertising, branding and business development.

“The tone needed to establish that our arms are wide open and we’re passionate and committed to what we do. The design and brand had to be fitting for the calibre of the art and artists on the platform, too.”

The site has been live for just over a month and features 35 artists, plus a growing number of galleries from around the country.

The reception so far has been “overwhelming”, Agoston Cleary says. “It’s really heartening and humbling, because it just proves there’s an appetite for this in the New Zealand market.”

Artfull aims to make art accessible for people, in a financial and social sense, she says.

In curating the collection, staff assess whether an artist’s work is of a

standard that “a potential buyer who isn’t familiar with art can feel confident that there’s cachet and credibility behind the artist and the piece”.

“The art scene can be intimidating for a new collector. Being online means you can avoid that social transaction that happens when you walk into a space that feels unknown, new, or not right for you.”

The works are catalogued by price – currently ranging from NZ\$350 to NZ\$28,000 – in an attempt to demonstrate that art “isn’t just for the one per cent”. There’s also a lay-by system, allowing customers to pay in instalments.

Agoston Cleary says that, while traditional dealer galleries are an essential part of the arts ecosystem, they’re limited by what can be done within four walls in a particular timeframe. Only a finite number of artists can showcase their work at a time, and in the event of a global pandemic, exhibitions might be cancelled altogether.

“I saw first-hand how the lockdown restrictions impacted galleries and artists ... [exhibitions] would be scheduled years in advance, and the disruptions often meant two years' worth of work couldn’t see the light of day.

“An artist has to pay for the materials before they sell the work or put it out into the world. Dozens of artists spent a lot of time and effort for nothing. But just because you’re not ‘showing’ doesn’t mean you’re not creating.”

Prices are negotiated with the artists in line with gallery pricing, she says. But galleries won’t be made redundant as a result. In fact, they can use the Artfull platform to showcase works that might otherwise be sitting in storage.

But, she adds, there’s nothing like going to see an artwork in real life before deciding to purchase it.

“There’s a sense of hesitancy when you haven’t seen it in person. But it’s not too dissimilar to buying designer clothes, gifts, or even cars online, which is happening more regularly. And when you think about it, a work is going to look very different in a home environment than it does in a white cube dealer gallery.”

That’s why the company is working on augmented reality technology that will allow buyers to see a visual representation of artworks in their homes.

“We’re wanting to make it so the work is as close to the real thing as you can possibly get, Agoston Cleary says. “Even so, nine times out of 10, people are going to be delighted when the artwork turns up at the door.”

Artfull
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