

Can Artists Survive in North Carolina?

by Maud Gatewood

The mercantile mentality and the pursuits of artists are more closely allied than most would admit. At least initially, the majority of artists must support themselves by some means other than their art. But an individual can "make it as an artist" by relying as much or more on skillful merchandising, public relations, personality play, and catering to popular demand, as on the innate power of his or her work. Financial success and popularity among the general public can follow with hard promotional work. This reality often results in the confusion or diffusion of an artist's goals.

Some artists produce great work and enjoy simultaneous success. Some whose work is good achieve little recognition, while others do neither. The artist's view of success can vary, and his or her priorities often determine the character and scope of "success." An artist's career is determined not only by innate ability, goals, work effort, and possibly luck, but also on the choice of priorities.

I personally believe that an artist's goal should be the making of a good work of art. Although I thoroughly enjoy whatever successes that come, to aim only for success is a shallow pursuit. Success is peripheral, and a benefit which may or may not materialize. So, I choose to remain here at home in North Carolina in order to enjoy a balanced quality of life, even though I might well be sacrificing career opportunities by not moving to an area like New York.

North Carolina could be termed an adolescent in its artistic maturation. As such, it is a future-oriented environment, holding promise, yet still lacking stature. The work of almost all artists in North Carolina remains localized. Reputations and achievements made in North Carolina carry little weight in New York or San

Francisco or Chicago. Only in the last 20 years has North Carolina begun to emerge as an arts area. Within this comparatively short period the change has been dramatic, both in scale and character.

In the cities, major new opportunities have emerged—for painters and sculptors at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, for dancers at the American Dance Festival in Durham, for performers at Spirit Square in Charlotte, and for actors at the Shakespeare Festival in High Point, to name just a few. Statewide, in rural and urban areas, the development of local arts councils has increased performance and exhibition opportunities, providing increased work space, funding, and audiences. And the Grassroots Arts Program enacted by the legislature ensures the broader dispersal of state funds for arts activity.

The state is gaining in reputation as an arts area. Increasing numbers of artists and arts-related professionals are moving into North Carolina. Still, there is an orientation in the state to future achievements, which is typical of an artistically emerging area. Like adolescents, communities of artists work cooperatively, with each other and with the public.

In a major artistic center, where artists have more opportunities for making a living, pressures intensify and competition often supplants cooperation. Recognition in prominent arts publications can become an important goal, and can easily begin to shape one's work. In such centers of art as New York, reputations of theaters, galleries, troupes, and publishing

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houses reinforce the competitive tone of relationships among artists. By comparison, North Carolina has more of a cooperative push than a competitive edge among artists and supporters of the arts. But this could be only a transition, especially as the state continues to assume a more influential role in the arts world. If greater stature results in greater competition, where will that leave the artist? How will the shift affect one's goals?

The artist in North Carolina today must function in a mix of regional optimism and constriction. Most do so out of choice. The majority of artists in North Carolina do not support themselves entirely through their specific arts medium, although some work in related activities such as teaching or arts management. While a limited arts market does exist, so is it cheaper to live here—particularly in housing costs—than in New York or Washington.

Usually, artists attempt to combine work in North Carolina with ventures into other states, including prime arts centers. Such flexibility generally has been easier for the individual artist rather than for one aligned to a performing group. But recently the Frank Holder Dance Company in Greensboro, musicians and dancers from the N.C. School of the Arts, and other North Carolina companies have begun to tour in other states and abroad. The more widely recognized North Carolina artists become, the more enhanced is the reputation of the state as a cultural area. Conversely, the more well-regarded the state becomes, the easier it will be for its artists to gain stature.

The larger public an artist has, the more likely he or she is to be able to make a living by working on the stage or behind a music stand or easel or typewriter. Arts activity breeds arts activity. As North Carolina begins to move out of its cultural adolescence, artists might reflect on several propositions:

***We must balance an inherited practicality with the resolution to maintain artistic standards and avoid dilution.** The fundamental role of the arts is different from the standard goals of business or politics. Both government and business often use quantitative factors in determining courses of action or in measuring success. Artistic value cannot be measured numerically. Quality cannot be determined by popular demand.

***We must develop a more assertive attitude and be willing to take artistic risks.** Historically, a prime difference between museums and galleries is that galleries take aesthetic risks while museums operate within the perimeters of accepted values. Small private enterprises or companies usually support the most daring artistic ventures, which only arrive later at ranking



Christine Alexander, Courtesy N.C. Arts Council

Painter Willie Baucom-Grimes in her studio. Currently she is a visiting artist at Gaston College in Dallas, N. C.

institutions. As the artistic opportunities in the state broaden, we must retain a determination to encourage experimentation and avant-garde efforts.

***We must promote North Carolina artists and arts companies outside of the state.** North Carolina's foundation and corporate communities do this to some extent, but more tours can be sponsored and original works commissioned (see article on page 37). State government could use the arts more and more as a handsome and sophisticated public relations tool. The state must also stimulate more private, for-profit arts enterprises through indirect supports such as low-interest business loans.

The arts are not a luxury but are essential to the flow of life. As North Carolina continues to grow in stature in the arts community, artists can better support themselves through their work. I dislike the word "artist." I prefer designations such as painter, writer, sculptor, flutist, dancer, choreographer, poet, actress, composer, or weaver. All of these artists must be willing to risk an edge of insecurity in order to stand back, observe, and comment on the world. Painters and poets do this as much as dancers and designers. But artists need opportunities in order to concentrate on their work. And the more an artist can concentrate on his or her craft, the more risk-taking is done. □