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Ellie Pennick – Guts Gallery – Q&A

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Images: Ellie Pennick and selected works from the recent Guts Gallery show, When Shit Hits the Fan.

Can you tell us about Guts Gallery? How you started it? And how you represent “underrepresented voices” within the art world?”

Guts supports underrepresented contemporary voices through initiating relationships between established and emerging artists and creating a platform and support system they are often denied. We do this by exhibiting and sharing their artwork physically and digitally, taking low percentages on art sales, paying assistants fairly, and giving much needed personal support.

After leaving uni in 2017, I was accepted onto the sculpture MA course at the RCA however, due to my financial position, I was unable to study there, I took this quite hard at first. At that point I was sofa hopping and struggling to survive in London, I felt studying a MA was the only option I had, and that had been taken away from me. However, I pulled myself together and thought practically, putting the negative into a positive. The set back spurred me on to think about how I could create a business venture that could help other struggling artists like myself.

Do you think it is possible challenge and change the dominant values and business models of the current art market and scene? And if so how?

The distribution of wealth within the arts operates on a model which mirrors that of wider social austerity; it disproportionately benefits people who do not experience racial oppression, gender or class discriminations. I am passionate about ensuring that the current structural formula that most galleries work in accordance with is refreshed and updated. To avoid following traditional, outdated modelling that is typically impermeable to marginalised artists and undervalued collectors. Gallerists need to stop being scared about challenging this model, your position may be compromised, but who cares? Morals are more important than profit! Give minority artists a platform, take a fair commission, help make the art world accessible for those who feel left out and flip the unequal percentages!

How were Guts Gallery and the artists doing before the crisis hit? Especially on the sales and financial side of things? How is Guts and the artists you work with doing right now?

We have all always struggled financially, even before the crisis. I guess being less privileged embeds a grafting state of mind into you. When the crisis hit, that was just another barrier to overcome. All of Guts Gallery's upcoming exhibitions have been either cancelled or postponed. I had phone calls with artists who were panicking about income and having no other choice but to go onto universal credits.

I decided to navigate this set back through the Instagram based exhibition 'When Shit Hits the Fan' (see images). So many collectors got in touch and invested in the artists I exhibited. The system of support between everyone was phenomenal. I then launched the campaign 'Guts Gallery Claps Back', Every 3 days we release a piece of artwork that goes for sale for £200. 50% of the profit is donated to the Masks 4 NHS Heroes, providing PPE for NHS workers.

This set back has forced a new generation of artists and gallerists to be vocal about the lack of resources available to a large number of artists and freelance workers who are systematically disadvantaged. There are solutions to these problems, and there are numerous ways we can do this, such as:

*Building a respectful relationship with interns/staff. Their time is valuable, and they should be paid at least the basic living wage for that time.

*Collaborate and support like-minded galleries, artists, and creatives, this will boost social wellbeing and create a system of support.

*Challenge traditional structures and prove redistribution and equality in the arts is possible.

I believe this is a pivotal point in society as a whole, austerity and inequality are now even more visible. The world is going to be very different when we come out of this.

What advice – practical or otherwise – would you give to students and those who are just starting or about to start in the art scene/world in the UK now?

My go-to advice, especially to artists from less privileged backgrounds, has always been, 'fuck if you have nothing to lose only to gain'. It's shit that you do not have the stability compared to other artists. But work your arse off, be vocal about your set back and challenge the system.

Who or what inspires you and helps keep you going on your path?

The artists and creatives I work with, also my family, they have gone through a lot and embedded a grafting mentality into me.