

Is The Art World As Cutthroat As The Show Gallery Girls Makes It Look?



Cast of Bravo's Gallery Girls

“There exists, in fact, in Chelsea and Soho and Williamsburg and Bushwick, a compelling clan of young women (and men...), often of independent means, who sit all day, mostly in silence, in the icy tombs that are New York’s top galleries. A lot of them could paper the white walls around them with their advanced art-history degrees. Yet they are paid a pittance to do clerical work and look pretty, with as much of a chance of getting promoted to gallerist as I have of finding a Pollock in my attic. And I don’t have an attic.”-**Emma Allen** on *Gallery Girls* for *The New Yorker*

Tonight a new show airs on Bravo called [Gallery Girls](#) which focuses on young women working in the New York City art industry. But let’s get one thing straight. This show is not about art. It is about the the lives of seven twenty-something women as they “tackle the cutthroat environment of the art world while vying for their dream jobs.” The show, like all Bravo shows that take place in Manhattan, is attempting to be that perfect blend of *Real Housewives of New York*, *Project Runway*

and *Sex & the City*. Women who work in this world, sometimes known as “gallerinas,” provide great fodder for a reality show. “In New York, everyone wants to work in the art world,” says gallery girl **Amy Poliakoff**, an art history major from [Coral Gables](#), Fla., in the first episode. Art is glamorous, it deals with a lot of rich people, parties are a big part of the industry and most importantly, one of its biggest markets is New York City. With over 300 galleries in Chelsea full of young, fashionable, attractive, ambitious women vying to get out of their unpaid internships and make a name for themselves in this business, how could Bravo not do a show about this? Except, it is television and the producers just want people to watch their show so they are obviously going to get the most extreme people and guide them towards exaggerated drama. But is the cutthroat aspect exaggerated? We decided to talk to some real women working in this industry and see if that part of the show is true?

Maria Kucinski is the Associate Director at the Cristin Tierney Gallery in New York. She has worked at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Robert Wilson’s The Watermill Center, the Merce Cunningham Dance Company and is a graduate of New York University’s Gallatin School of Individualized Study. She graduated from college in the midst of the financial crisis and her and her friends found it quite difficult to find any jobs in the art market. But Maria had done enough impressive internships and jobs while at NYU to land her current position at the Cristin Tierney Gallery.

Though she found the glamorous aspect of the industry to be quite exaggerated on the show (she spends a lot of her time up ladders and picking up paintings in addition to wooing clients at parties) but the cut-

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throat aspect is accurate (though a bit more catty and colorful on the show. It's only a matter of time before someone throws a drink.) "Information in the art world is power. If you have a good relationship with a director or an artist then you hold on to that and that's how you get ahead," she said. You have to be able to get along with the people you work with though, because it is a very small group. She said part of the reason she enjoys her job so much is that her boss, Cristin, is extremely intelligent but also very down to earth, a rarity in the art world it seems. "That is very hard to come by. I would love to continue working with Cristin. She has a very clear vision in mind for what she wants from her artists. There are a lot of pretentious people in this industry and she is definitely not one of them."

Natasha Rottmann holds a Master's degree from Christie's Education in London, as well as completing the Art and Business Certificate Program at the Sotheby's Institute. After graduation she worked as a "gallery girl" at the Vanessa Buia Gallery in Chelsea. Natasha left the gallery after two years due to the drama of the art world including the cat fights, arguments over paintings, sleeping with owners, art snobs and Ivy league snobs. Natasha still spends much of her time in the gallery and art fair scene but in a different capacity. She successfully transitioned from the gallery world to a career in art behind the scenes. Currently Natasha is the Director of Operations for Collectrium, which counts Eli Klein Fine Art gallery as one of its App clients (Full Disclosure: Eli Klein is included in the show.)

Photo: Bravo

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Real Gallery Girl: Maria Kucinski, Associate Director at the Cristin Tierney Gallery

A masters and a degree from Sotheby's would make Natasha stand out as a young woman in the industry, right? Not so much, she says. She says everyone has to have this kind of extensive education to even be looked at twice unless they went to Italy straight after high school and studied one artist obsessively for six years becoming an expert on that one subject. But for the most part, having a masters which will then lead to an unpaid internship most likely, is de rigeur. Natasha actually managed to beat out someone with a PhD for her first unpaid internship at a gallery. "It is a really tough job market and you have to know what you are talking about," she said.

She agreed that the glamorous aspect of the industry often overshadows just how tough it is. "Sotheby's in New York got a horrible reputation for hiring all these young girls and just paying them nothing.

There was so much turnaround," she said. "It is extremely competitive. You need to watch your back at all times. Every girl is vying for your position and at a small gallery there really isn't that much direction to go in [there is the assistant director, the director and the owner.] The director has to watch her back too!" Natasha ended up leaving the gallery world in order to go to London for her masters. She thought about returning but "I felt I wanted to work with all the players in the art world – from collectors to galleries to art fairs and advisors – working for a company that provided services to everyone in the art world gave me that opportunity."

Suzanne Julig is founder of the Suzanne Julig Art Advisory and is a 20-year veteran of the gallery world. She told **The Grindstone:**

"It is challenging and fast-paced, one is constantly learning about new art and artists – how to promote and sell their work – and building relationships with collectors, museums and others in the field. It can certainly be very competitive, as in any organizations where sales are involved, but hard work, scholarship, smarts and the ability to build relationships are valued – at least in my experience."

The show is also getting a lot of attention for showing the separation in the industry between women who come from money (and tend to have attended an Ivy League school and live on the Upper East Side) and those who don't and live in Brooklyn (and wear bright red lipstick.) "There wasn't so much a starting point or a big fight that made us not like each other," **Maggie Schaffer**, 24, of Murray Hill, told *The News*. "It's just a very different scene between Brooklyn and Manhattan. You'll definitely be able to

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tell the differences. This brings the competitiveness to a whole new level as now the fight is between those who were born into privilege and have the connections and pedigree versus those with passion that have to claw their way into the inner circle by way of the F train. **John Caramanica** of *The New York Times* wrote, “At the outset, [Gallery Girls](#) is old money versus no money. Liz; her co-intern Maggie; and a childhood acquaintance, Amy, all live off family largess — some on the Upper East Side — and work without pay. On the other team are Claudia and Chantal, owners of a Lower East Side gallery-boutique, End of Century, and their friend Angela, who is committed to her ongoing campaign of letting down her parents, who are doctors, by choosing to model, sometimes nude.”

Rottman said the old money versus new money dichotomy definitely exists but she doesn't know how anyone could start off in the business without some financial support. But she insisted that even the ladies who come from money and may have nepotism going for them, still have to have the awesome education credentials. “It is very rare to not have the education,” she said.

It seems that *Gallery Girls* does get a lot wrong. “I feel like they are misrepresenting the galleries and the commercial art market. I did watch the first episode and cringed through the entire show. The girls seem to be living in a fairy-tale world of what it's like to be a young professional in the arts,” said Maria.

But what they did seem to get right was that this is an extremely tough industry to thrive in let alone get into. That picture is quite clear.