

# Christine Berry & Martha Campbell: “Art is essential because it opens up new avenues and different perspectives in which to view the world; It fosters creativity in math, science, language and literature”

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By [Yitzi Weiner](#), A "Positive" Influencer



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*I had the pleasure to interview Christine Berry and Martha Campbell. Christine and Martha opened Berry Campbell Gallery in Chelsea in 2013 and have many parallels in their backgrounds and interests. Both studied art history in college and began their careers in the museum world, but mostly importantly both share a curatorial vision. Berry, from Geneseo, New York, graduated from Baylor University in Waco, Texas in 1992. Campbell, from Greenville in the Mississippi Delta, attended boarding school at Groton School in Massachusetts, and graduated from Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, in 2006. Berry received a Master's Degree in art history and criticism at the University of North Texas, along with a certification in museum studies and education. She worked at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas, as Assistant Curator before moving to New York for a position at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Campbell went directly from college to a job at the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. She then decided to explore the gallery world before pursuing a further degree in art history and was hired at age 24 as an associate director at Spanierman Modern in New York. "I loved everything about the gallery world, from curating exhibitions to rediscovering artists," Campbell recalls. Spanierman Modern, which focused on mid-twentieth century abstraction and mid-career artists in the modernist tradition, was part of Spanierman Gallery, one of New York's most prominent American art galleries since the 1960s. Berry, who moved from the public to the private sector in several roles, had come to Spanierman Gallery as associate director in 2003. Both art dealers developed a strong emphasis on research and networking with artists and scholars during their art world years. They decided to work together, opening Berry Campbell Gallery in 2013 in the heart of New York's Chelsea art district, at 530 West 24th Street on the ground floor. The two recognized that they shared a curatorial vision based in "an understanding of art, history, languages, business, and people." In 2015, the gallery expanded, doubling its size with an additional 2,000 square feet of exhibition space. Highlighting a selection of postwar and contemporary artists, the gallery fulfills an important gap in the art world, revealing a depth within American modernism that is just beginning to be understood, encompassing the many artists who were left behind due to race, gender, or geography—beyond such legendary figures as Pollock and de Kooning. Since its inception, the gallery has been especially instrumental in giving women artists long overdue consideration, an effort that museums have only just begun to take up, such as in the 2016 traveling exhibition, *Women of Abstract Expressionism* curated by University of Denver professor Gwen F. Chanzit. This show featured work by Perle Fine and Judith Godwin, both represented by Berry Campbell, along with that of Helen Frankenthaler, Lee Krasner, and Joan Mitchell.*

**Thank you so much for joining us! Can you tell us the story about what brought you both to this specific career path?**

**Martha Campbell:** I've always loved art from as early as I can remember, but it never dawned on me that I could pursue art as a career path until college. When I entered Vanderbilt, I intended to major in Econ and get a job on Wall Street after college, however, I always tried to take as many Art History classes as I could. One day, as I was talking to my parents about my career after college, they said, "well you know you can major in art history and pursue it as a career." They outlined that I could work in a museum or an art gallery and with this knowledge, I majored in Art History and upon graduation, decided that I would try out working at a museum and at a gallery to see which I liked better. After getting a job at the Phillips Collection in DC and working there for a year, I was offered a job at Spanierman Gallery in New York. I loved that in the gallery world, you could still do research on historical artists as well as interact with the public on a daily basis. Thus, as soon as I started working in the gallery world, I knew that this was the career path I wanted to pursue.

**Christine Berry:** My mother was a 5th grade teacher in rural Western New York state (where I grew up). One year as a Christmas gift, she brought home a huge coffee table book on Renoir. I was enamored as I turned every page—memorized by these beautiful painted scenes and rosy-cheeked people. Just after Christmas, we traveled to Boston to visit my mom's sister. Aunt Dot was painter (with a day job) and brought us to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. As we were working our way through the museum, we came on to the French Impressionism room, my heart skipped a beat as my eyes found the painting I had been starring in the book, Renoir's "Dancing in the Country (Dance at Bouvival, 1883)." It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen (and it was real!). I started to love art, and later realized it was something you could actually study. (Two college degrees, several museum jobs and now owning an art gallery; the coffee table book made a huge impact!)

**Can you share the most interesting story that happened since the start of Berry Campbell?**

Every day we get approached by all kinds of new people, but one morning our assistant received an email that a Prince would be arriving in the next hour. It looked like just another scam of some "wealthy benefactor" coming to buy all the paintings in the art gallery. But it turned out to be a real Prince, thirteenth in line to throne, who has ended up being a great supporter and colleague of our gallery.

Another story, the great contemporary artist, Frank Stella, came to one of our first gallery opening receptions, to support his college roommate, Walter Darby Bannard, who was opening a show that night. He stayed the whole night, and even came to the small gathering at Martha Campbell's apartment and was the first guest to arrive that night and one of the last to leave. He is now a regular visitor at the gallery.

**Can you share a story about the funniest mistake you made when you were first starting out as a team? Any lessons learned?**

This is something that we feel sets us apart but from other galleries but we always try to be friendly to every person who walks in the door. When the gallery first opened, we put both of our desks right up to the front door. We realized after a week or so, that people were walking in and then quickly walking back out as they felt bombarded with our welcoming and over the top energy! So, we separated and moved our desks throughout the gallery and we noticed that people were more eager to step in and actually see the whole gallery. We learned that people want you to say hello, but they also want personal space to think and appreciate the art on their own.

We went on a studio visit to see an artist's paintings—he was in the later part of his career and had a large body of work—an art dealer's dream. When we got there, he showed us a beautiful selection of works that we were so impressed by. We felt we may have found another important artist to add to our Berry Campbell's roster. At the end of the visit, he decided to let us know that his current performance/art project was to destroy each and every one of his paintings starting with the earliest painting to his most recent. What would we have to sell? We had failed to do our research on him before the studio visit.



**Are you working on any exciting new projects now? How do you think that will help people?**

We are organizing a major exhibition of works on paper by women Abstract Expressionists that will open at our gallery next year. Artists include Joan Mitchell, Elaine de Kooning, Lee Krasner, Perle Fine, Judith Godwin, Yvonne Thomas, and Charlotte Park, among many others. While their histories are similar, many of these women will not be known to the greater public. By helping bring attention to these artists, we hope to promote their legacies for their families' sake and expand the canon of art history to include more women and show that women paint equally as well as men. We also want to do a works on paper show this time to give some of our new collectors a more accessible price point.

Another project is one of our Abstract Expressionists artists, Syd Solomon, is finally getting widespread attention, having a major museum retrospective at the John and Mable Ringling Museum in Sarasota, Florida opening in December 2019. As a young Jewish man from Pennsylvania, he joined the Army to fight in WWII (he enlisted before the attack on Pearl Harbor as he had read about what was happening in Germany). As a result, he missed the early years of Abstract Expressionism in New York City (Pollock, de Kooning, Motherwell all stayed back in NY for various reasons). Having fought in the Battle of Bulge (and liberated the French town of Roye), he suffered from serious frost bite in his feet. When he returned from the war he had to live in a warm climate, so instead of coming to the center of the art world, New York, he started an art community in Sarasota, FL. He was the first contemporary artist to be collected by the Ringling Museum of art in Sarasota, FL. There is a new scholarship offered on his behalf prompting this exhibition and a 96-page catalogue to accompany the exhibition.

**What advice would you give to other female leaders to help their teams to thrive?**

Quit questioning yourself and just do it.

**What advice would you give to other female leaders about the best way to manage a business?**

Surround yourself with people who you respect and who will respect you in return.

None of us are able to achieve success without some help along the way. Is there a particular person who you each are grateful towards who helped get you to where you are? Can you share a story about that?

**Christine**– I will always be grateful Dr. Marla Price, Director of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. When I was a young professional right out of art history school, Dr. Marla took me in as an intern to the museum and eventually gave me a job. She always invited me to parties and art installations that only more senior staff were supposed attend. She saw something in me that I wasn't able to see at that early stage in my career. With this support, she helped me build my confidence and encouraged me with every project in a subtle but strong way. We're still friends today and continue to do business together—the museum is a client of Berry Campbell!

**Martha**– When I started at Spanierman Gallery, I was the youngest sales person invited to join the team at age 24. Christine Berry had been working in the art world for fifteen years at the point. She was always available to answer questions, give her advice, and be supportive in a very competitive world. At the end of their time together at Spanierman, they launched the Berry Campbell gallery.

## **How have you used your success in art to bring goodness to the world?**

We bring renewed attention to artists who have been over looked in recent years. We help bring renewed attention to their names/artwork and continue the artist legacy they have started. In turn, this often helps bring some financial security to the artists/their families at the same time as bringing the artist's name back to the glory they once knew.

On the client side, we consider ourselves more accessible than most galleries. We are willing to initiate a conversation and educate our client's on art, the art world, and the art market. Art can be considered an elitist pursuit and we try to run our business in a way that if you have interest, we will tell you more.

## **What are the "Top 5 Leadership Lessons Learned from Experience" and why. (Please share a story or example for each.)**

Networking is not about people only at the top. Christine Berry: I became a curator for a billionaire by working with a fine art trucker. He worked with the collector and recommended me for the job.

Dallas Museum vs. Ft Worth—bigger doesn't necessarily mean better Christine Berry: When I was finishing graduate school, we had to do an internship at a local museum in Dallas or Fort Worth. Everyone wanted to go to the Dallas Museum of Art (maybe 15 raised their hands). I made one of the best decisions of my life starting at a smaller museum, the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. After my internship, I was offered a job and my art career was fostered by some of the greats in the field.

**Mentorship. Martha Campbell:** You learn basic art history in our field, but there is nothing like on the job training in our line of work. We all start at the bottom and work our way up. If you are lucky, you work with someone who will take the time and teach you. With our own business, we try to do the same.

You can't anticipate everything but you need to be prepared. When we first opened the gallery, despite all of the research we did on real estate, we found out there was an additional commercial tax on our store front rental that even the best lawyers and accountants failed to mention to us. Fortunately, we had extra money saved-up, so we learned about this and it didn't make an impact on our financials.

**There are highs and lows every day.** You have to celebrate the highs and learn from the lows.

## **If Berry Campbell could inspire a movement that would bring the most amount of good to the most amount of people, what would that be?**

The movement would be offering art education for every young person. Art opens up new avenues and different perspectives in which to view the world. It fosters creativity in math, science, language and literature. It also offers young people who aren't necessarily enthusiastic about typical school subjects a means in which to excel and broaden their confidence. People learn in different ways and visual learning in this visual world is important to foster.

**What is your favorite life lesson quote? How is it relevant to both of your lives?**

“Look closely at the present you are constructing; it should look like the future you are dreaming.” -Alice Walker

It's relevant to our lives since we are both in the middle of our dreams coming true!

**Is there a person in the world with whom you would love to have a private breakfast or conversation with, and why?**

Betty Parsons. She was an early pioneer in our field as a gallerist and showed artists like Jackson Pollock while at the same time promoting artists who were lesser known, but in whom she believed. She was also an artist herself, and a lesbian, who left her husband at a young age. We also represent many of the same artists whom she represented like Judith Godwin. We are fortunate to hear many of the Parsons stories from Judith herself (who is 89 years old), and we would love to talk with Betty directly to get a sense of her character, her strength, and her dedication to pursuing her passions.

