**Interview Summary: Crista Cloutier and Susan J. Mumford on Art Mentorship**

This detailed conversation between Crista Cloutier and Susan J. Mumford covers numerous aspects of art mentorship, entrepreneurship in the art world, and supporting artists in their professional journeys. I'll break down the main topics and insights shared during this extensive interview.

**Susan's Background and Journey into Mentoring**

Susan Mumford, founder of Be Smart About Art and the Association of Women Art Dealers (AWAD), shared how she naturally gravitated toward mentoring early in her career. Even while working in retail management at Fresh & Wild (later Whole Foods) in London, colleagues sought her career advice. After moving to London from the US, Susan initially worked in natural foods before transitioning to the art world.

She formally entered the gallery world in 2004 and opened her own gallery in 2006. During this time, she recognized her need for guidance and handwrote letters to five established art dealers asking for mentorship. One responded, and though they only met once, this experience showed Susan the value of simply being seen and acknowledged by an established professional.

In 2010, Susan began mentoring artists, starting with one who sought career advice. By 2011, she was formally offering one-on-one mentoring sessions, and by 2012, she established Be Smart About Art as a structured business.

**Core Principles in Mentoring Artists**

Susan emphasized several core principles that guide her approach to mentoring:

1. **Listening deeply**: Being fully present with open ears and eyes to understand what's truly needed
2. **Agility**: Being willing to adapt and change direction when necessary
3. **Values-led approach**: Supporting artists who are guided by their own values
4. **Setting clear expectations**: Explaining her flexible approach to ensure it aligns with the mentee's needs
5. **Being open to changing course**: Sometimes the identified problem isn't the real issue needing attention

She shared an example of an artist who came to a session with a long list of issues to address, but Susan recognized the underlying problem was her creative practice - specifically, that the artist was taking months to complete a single painting, making her business model unsustainable.

**What Separates Successful Artists from Those Who Struggle**

Susan introduced the concept of "the thread" - maintaining continuity and momentum in both creative and professional aspects of an artistic career. She explained that successful artists keep multiple threads going simultaneously:

1. The creative thread (maintaining consistent studio practice)
2. The professional thread (maintaining business and promotional activities)
3. The communication thread (staying connected with their audience)

She shared the example of artist Marcus McAllister, who maintains a consistent sketchbook practice - he literally carries his sketchbook wrapped around his arm everywhere, capturing life as it happens. This dedication to consistent practice becomes the foundation for sales and exhibitions.

**Balancing Creative Vision with Business Realities**

One of the most effective strategies Susan recommends is dedicating specific time windows for business tasks. This might be Monday mornings or Friday afternoons - consistent blocks when artists shift focus to their business needs. Key points included:

* Identifying when an artist is most creative and preserving those times for studio work
* Scheduling business activities around natural energy patterns
* Using "habit stacking" (as mentioned by James Clear) to attach business tasks to existing routines
* Creating routines for different types of work and sticking to them
* Establishing regular check-ins to evaluate and adjust these schedules

**Entrepreneurial Mindset for Artists**

Susan drew parallels between entrepreneurship and gardening, emphasizing several key principles:

1. **Agility**: Being able to pivot when needed
2. **Resilience**: The ability to get up after falling down, sometimes with help from others
3. **Community support**: Having people who can offer a hand when you stumble
4. **Conscious awareness of "knocks" and "boosts"**: Recognizing both internal and external sources of discouragement and encouragement

She shared research from Be Smart About Art about "internal knocks" (self-criticism, comparing oneself to others) versus "external knocks" (rejection from opportunities), and emphasized the importance of balancing these with "internal boosts" (completing a successful piece) and "external boosts" (recognition, sales, exhibition acceptance).

**Persistence vs. Stubbornness**

Susan addressed how to know when to persist with an idea and when to let it go:

1. **Set timelines for experimentation**: Give yourself a clear deadline to evaluate progress
2. **Observe consciously**: Pay attention to feedback and results
3. **Sleep on decisions**: Take time to process before making major changes
4. **Capture ideas but prioritize action**: Document all ideas but focus on what's most important now
5. **Ask for feedback directly**: Don't assume people will volunteer their opinions

**Building Resilience**

For developing resilience against setbacks and rejections, Susan recommended:

1. **Journaling**: Writing about experiences to process emotions
2. **Physical activity**: Exercise helps with recovery from setbacks
3. **Mindfulness practices**: Finding whatever works for the individual
4. **Rest and recovery**: Allowing the brain's "default mode network" to process unconsciously
5. **Community support**: Sharing experiences with other artists who understand
6. **Reframing "failure"**: Viewing setbacks as lessons rather than failures

**Navigating Money and Pricing**

Susan, whose father was an economics professor, approaches money with a focus on value. Her "1-2-3 of pricing art" includes:

1. **Research**: Looking at artists at similar career stages and with similar practices
2. **Test**: Setting prices and observing market response
3. **Implement**: Establishing consistent pricing based on results

She emphasized that pricing isn't just about size or medium calculations but understanding market context. Pricing can be adjusted early in a career, but once established, should generally move upward. For early collectors affected by price increases, artists can offer complementary pieces or credit.

Susan also mentioned the importance of the "family and friends discount" as a formal way to acknowledge relationships while maintaining professional boundaries.

**Online Platforms and Marketing**

The conversation covered various platforms for selling art, with insights about:

1. **Artsy and 1stDibs**: Major transaction marketplaces that galleries use
2. **Finding the right fit**: The importance of research before committing to platforms
3. **Communication over promotion**: Focusing on genuine sharing rather than self-promotion
4. **Bringing audiences to platforms**: No platform works without artists actively directing traffic
5. **Caution about scams**: Being vigilant about unsolicited opportunities that seem too good to be true

**Marketing Yourself as a Mentor**

Susan shared strategies for establishing yourself as an art mentor:

1. **Build trust first**: Develop your reputation through demonstrated expertise
2. **Communicate your unique value**: Clearly articulate how your background makes you the right mentor
3. **Use preliminary sessions**: Offer short exploratory calls to ensure a good match
4. **Build and maintain an email list**: Regular, valuable communication keeps you connected to potential mentees
5. **Focus on referrals**: Eventually, word-of-mouth becomes the main source of clients

**Additional Insights:**

1. **The power of experimentation**: Susan tested Be Smart About Art for six months before formally establishing it as a business
2. **Success means different things**: For some artists, success is regular sales; for others, it's museum collections
3. **Alignment is critical**: Artists need to find galleries, platforms, and mentors that align with their specific needs
4. **Capture ideas but prioritize action**: Having systems to document ideas while focusing on priorities
5. **Know your limits**: Being clear about when to decline potential mentees if they're not a good match

This conversation highlighted the multifaceted nature of art mentorship and the value of personalized guidance in navigating both creative development and professional success in the art world.