

## A&amp;E

## Artists on an assembly line

A surge in art buying, fuelled by fairs, is pushing 'suppliers' to boost productivity

BY SHERRY BOYLE  
TORONTO STAR STAFF WRITER

Kim Dowland, a Toronto artist copying his first batch of instructional manuals, has recently moved to a rigid schedule: Get up. Paint. Sleep. Repeat.

"I'd burn out if I kept painting like this," says Dowland who, as soon as he can, intends to stop. But there are miles to go before he sleeps. Paintings are needed for a slate of fast-approaching solo shows in Chicago, Los Angeles, Milan and here at home. And then there's the art fair circuit, a gaping mass of art buying that needs more and more work to satisfy appetites.

**'Artists become formulaic — they become a brand, and they can't change'**

Sherry Boyle writes

During Toronto International Art Fair started just sight, but it's a small stop on an increasingly crowded circuit. Major fairs in London, Mexico, New York, Los Angeles and Basel, Switzerland, have led on a host of international art fairs, attracting thousands of buyers and inciting acquisition frenzies.

"I've been painting as much for the art fairs as I have for shows," says Dowland, who plans to have a presence at the Miami fair next month. "They're a great way to have an international audience see your work. But yeah, I'm starting to get a little tired."

Dowland means not to complain. Few artists are able to enjoy art-making as a full-time job, but some see that as their job and goal. But as Dowland, 32, has learned, in an increasingly overwhelmed world-wide art market, the demands of a voracious — and growing — necessity of buyers is putting pressure on artists to produce more work, faster, than ever before.

According to Artprice, a Paris-based firm that tracks the art economy, auction sales of contemporary art, a key market indicator, increased by more than a third in the past year, to \$200 million (US). And there's little doubt the fairs are driving demand.

After a do-over showing at the Toronto Fair last year, Jamie Angoff, Dowland's gallery, decided to bypass the event this year, choosing instead to allocate his time and money to larger fairs in the U.S. and Europe. It's a results-based decision. A successful tour of the fair's last year netted a heavy catalogue of demands for Dowland's works, heavily featured recently. Make no mistake: The goal of the routine is to sell art, Angoff says, but not recklessly.

"I'm very protective of my artist's work. This kind of success in every artist's dream, but there are true sales to it. People are hungry. They want to make big while the sun shines. And you can make mistakes because of that."

It's a risk shared by buyers and



Toronto artist Kim Dowland in his sweet-and-studio. He's under the gun to complete canvases for a number of upcoming shows. "I'd burn-out if I kept painting like this," he says.

artist alike. But for the artist, more than money is at stake. A creative pursuit can start to feel like a sweat shop, said Sherry Boyle, a newly-arriving Toronto artist whose work will be represented at the Toronto fair. "There's this constant demand for product. That's what you're made to feel like, because there's so much emphasis on sales," says Boyle. She cites her unsettling recent encounter with an art consultant, who counsels collectors on low investments.

"He said, 'How fast can you do three paintings?' I'd never heard that before," Boyle says.

He went on to tell me what her current strategy should be: lower-percentage New York and London markets she should produce as much work as possible over a two- or three-year span to maximize profits, before she dropped off and was no longer "hot."

"He was saying those things like it was totally normal, and I was just shrinking," Boyle says. "The always had this romantic idea that you're an artist as a public and aesthetic, and that I'll be doing it my entire life."

Boyle hasn't shy in her galleryist Jessica Bradley, who is showing her work at the Toronto fair this

week. Bradley feels that the exploding fair phenomenon, where the emphasis is on quick acquisition rather than studied examination of artists' entire careers, might be detouring the field. The quick sale stands in contrast to the traditional gallery system, she says, where collectors develop relationships with dealers and artists over a period of years. For many dealers in today's market, she says, "the gallery's just a front for their activities as art fairs."

Bradley was chief curator of contemporary art at the Art Gallery of Ontario for many years

before she struck out on her own with her gallery, Jessica Bradley Art + Projects. She's wary of over-expanding her artists to the market-driven sub-field of the international fair circuit, and buffers artists like Boyle from its demands.

"It's a huge danger," she says. "You have to be careful not to let it run away with you when things are really good. And it takes someone who's been around the block to resist it."

Boyle has had little trouble resisting the market's lure; her approach is simply to avoid it. "So many artists become formulaic, and that's because of the market — they become a brand, and they can't change," she says.

Boyle works in multiple disciplines — painting, drawing, music, film — and resists a narrow focus, skirting the narrow demands of investment-minded buyers. "If she can't take steps it she simply creates the scene for a time. Last year she opened a small studio in a tiny town in Finland for eight months. "You one know who I was and no one cared," she said. Her success is rather modest, her strategic. She's shown and exhibited at significant public galleries in Canada and abroad, art is her full-time job. And she knows that is a rare privilege.

But she sometimes feels her well-wrapped with an odd provoking. "I have so much nostalgia for being in my 20s, and not having a flying carpet about anything I did. I was making so much work, and I really progressed as an artist," she says.

"It's really your heart and psyche you're putting out there, you can't push it out like it's an assembly line."