

GENTLING

8 December 2001

Dear Ted and Holly,

It has always been Scott's and my habit to engage in post mortems following any opening of our exhibitions. While events are still fresh in mind it is helpful to examine what we did correctly or where we erred or what might be improved next time. Each of our past shows has had its own particular dynamic so that, whether a sellout or not, there is always something new to learn. We can learn from success of course, but, as in the rest of life, failure is always the better teacher.

To say the least, I was as embarrassed as I have ever been by our poor performance at your Christmas opening at what amounted to a mini-debut in Dallas after an absence of twenty-five years. When you both asked me how I liked the look of our show, I hated myself for playing the hypocrite with smiles and praise. It was not a time for criticism, and it was simply too late to do anything about it.

From the moment I entered the building and saw a glimpse of our work in the back room I was worried. When I finally entered our display my heart sunk low as I saw before me a show that was but a fragment of the exhibit that Scott and I had assembled for the gallery. Our work had been severely edited without any input from us whatsoever. While there were simple installation problems which could have easily been remedied such as the gross overlighting and the general sterility of the rooms, the overall look of the edited exhibition was unfocused. Without the absolutely necessary balance and variety offered by our deleted images our pictures looked out of context and even idiosyncratic. The show bored me, and that has never happened before.

Finally - and this is a serious problem that is going to take time to fix - it is now apparent to me that you have absolutely no client base for our work, in spite of the fact that Dallas has been very fertile ground for Gentling sales. All four of Scott's past shows at Valley House Gallery were complete sellouts. Some shows sold out within half an hour; one show in twelve minutes! Scott even had 5,000 people attend one of his Valley House exhibits (a Dallas gallery record) during its month-long run. This was due primarily to good publicity from Janet Kutner who kept mentioning that Scott's art sold out at hefty prices. However, these completely sold out shows, when adjusted for the inflation of many years, were priced at about the same as our work currently on display.

I remember once telling you that, in my opinion, paintings priced at more than \$7,500 do not sell well to the casual walk-in trade in our area. And, of course, there is the factor of the stressed economy and current war mentality to be considered. But it is still true that most important sales are made by telephone to your established clients. Your rollerdex (sp?) will prove ultimately more important than your gallery walls

for a successful business.

You have asked me several times to give you a list of my clients. Scott and I are willing to do so once we have firmly established ourselves with your gallery. But to do so now would be financially disastrous. We didn't join Gerald Peters Gallery or Pillsbury - Peters Gallery to take an automatic 50% cut in our income. We joined because of the national prestige of your galleries and the hoped-for opportunity to sell our work to important collectors beyond Texas. I tried to tell Peters (who wanted us to show in Dallas as well as Santa Fe and New York as I suggested) that selling paintings in Texas was not our problem. Although we still are not widely known in Texas, we don't really need to be better known here to sell pictures.

As I see it, we are now in the full maturity of our careers, and the next few years will either offer us the opportunity to get the national attention that I and many others think we deserve or we will simply settle down as successful regional artists and accept our fate. And it's not a bad fate. But, if that is to be, we do not need an art gallery to help us make a comfortable living. We have long been able to afford to live the life we want and earn the needed revenue to indulge in our life-long studies. As you know, they are as important a part of our lives as is our art.

*Delays
of building*

I am sorry that Scott and I have not been engaged in creating the kind of debut show that would do justice to Gerald Peters Gallery or to Pillsbury-Peters. Since we joined the Peters Gallery in 1996 we have had that five year commitment to the Bass Hall, our Aztec project, various publishing efforts, and Gerry's new gallery in Santa Fe that have prevented us from focusing on a substantial debut. Also I wanted to time such a debut with an important publication which would survey all our work, our still lifes, portraits and landscapes, our birds, our Aztec studies, the Bass Performance Hall designs and much else. Now that I have a firm commitment from UT Press for such a book following the success of our bird book, I think I know what to do to achieve a successful gallery debut. Scott and I want Pillsbury-Peters to be involved.

You are going to have to do your part as well. Simply hanging pictures on the wall and expecting our almost legendary past gallery successes to sustain you without seeking new clients will not work, as you probably can now see. That you have been unable to sell just one of the four paintings that we sent you when your gallery first opened a year and a half ago is troubling. I could sell at least two of those paintings for sure tomorrow. The lack of sales seems to indicate that we really have no one on staff there to actively champion our work. As you surely know, most big time New York galleries usually have one employee who looks out for the interests of a particular artist and who personally cultivates clients.

Finally, there is the problem of communication. While I fully recognize your right to hang pictures where and how you choose, I do have the right to have some *input* on how, when and where they are to be displayed, or not to have them displayed at all. The unfortunate display of our paintings the

other night should never have happened. I can bear a show that does not sell well as long as the presentation of that show is well done and handsome, the best we could have done. That was not the case the other night. When you first suggested some kind of Christmas show months ago, Ted, you promised that we would be showing in at least one of the two front rooms. It was to be a group Christmas show with Jim Blake showing near by. I promised you eight paintings not previously shown at Pillsbury-Peters. Along with the four you already possessed, the new holiday exhibit would have twelve Gentling works in all.

Your promise of the front gallery rooms was what made me agree to the show in the first place, because they are the warmest and most congenial spaces in the gallery. The back galleries are beautifully finished spaces, but they are meant to be neutral for the display of differing styles of art and have little warmth and do not provide the kind of comfortable and intimate surroundings which best suit our paintings - and our clients.

As the months passed, Scott and I were not informed that we were to be moved to the back galleries nor had I been told that the group show had been reduced to Jim Blake and us, with a spectacular Chilhuly show in our promised front rooms. When Holly came to Fort Worth just two weeks before your show and asked us to lend more pictures, I began to worry. In all we were to send thirty-six works including a substantial number of framed Giclee prints. I had no choice but to include them. The show was already in the works. I could not back out which I would have done had I known that we were being drawn into creating a substantial exhibition, almost a debut show, without our usual careful planning. It was like being in a small boat being inevitably sucked down into a giant whirlpool. I did decide, however, to hold back and not to show Holly five new beautiful bird paintings and one of the best still lifes I have ever done so that I would have something to sell if your show did not do well. I did lend our recent painting "September 1st" because Holly told me it was to be on your invitation, though I did at the time have a client for that painting.

When I walked into our display and saw how the show had been cut without our knowledge, and how odd and cold it looked without the other works and because it was so overlighted (something you never do to watercolors), my heart sank low. Had the Giclees been included and if you had a sales person at a desk to sell bird books, you could have sold a hundred books easily and many giclees for Christmas presents. Their significantly lower prices would, I'm sure, have attracted a number of young, less affluent collectors. In the end the whole exhibit appeared to me to be a depressing series of lost opportunities - of bad display and poor marketing. And what was more depressing, the mistakes made were elementary ones.

I hope you understand that I am being blunt so that we can communicate to each other clearly. Scott and I want to be a part of Pillsbury-Peters Gallery, a productive part. I feel that I must bear part of the blame for this disappointing showing

because I was not thoroughly engaged in the process. Also, Ted, because of your well-deserved reputation as a great director and the stunning commitment you have made to build a world-class gallery, I am somewhat intimidated about intruding into your business, even when I see that mistakes are being made.

Believe it or not, I have gained a lot of experience in the last thirty-five years both in the display and retail marketing of art, especially our art. It would be a shame not to use some of my experience to help you. You only have to ask for it. If you still want to work with us and build a future with us as part of your gallery, we want to work with you. That we have remained regional artists and relatively unknown in the rest of the country has largely been a matter of choice, especially with Scott. In the early 1970's he even turned down an offer from Bill Acquavella to join Acquavella Gallery because he thought himself not ready for New York, and he really did not like the New York art scene anyway. He is actually rather happy with his art career as it is, but is willing to stretch his wings with a major gallery in order to reach important clients outside of our current territory and, of course, to raise our prices.

And, frankly as I see it, that is the only reason for us to join any gallery. There is nothing wrong with admitting that our mutual goals may not be the same, to wish each other well and go on our separate ways. But if that is to happen, I certainly would have liked to have had at least one decent opportunity to have done a good job for you with an exhibition and setting of my own choosing. I really know how to make us look good.

As I see things now, I would like to forget this very forgettable "debut" and concentrate on the new book for UT Press. If all goes as planned, it will take about two years before the new book appears. Then will be the time we will debut with a spectacular show that should travel to other venues. I guarantee you something special that will attract a lot of interest from the press and put us in the spotlight. Until then we should work quietly together to build a client base of new clients. We will have a modest participation in future group shows if possible and have paintings for you to show privately as we prepare for the kind of exhibition that both you and us deserve.

I would like to meet with both of you at your earliest opportunity, perhaps after the holidays, to sit down for a couple of hours and without interruption to discuss candidly what needs to be done. Sorry about the length of this letter, but I needed to say these things. Until I hear from you I remain

Sincerely yours,