



# Jen Bekman

Curator, Jen Bekman Gallery and 20x200.com

On a recent summer day, I got an e-mail from the online art galley 20x200.com announcing a new batch of “[Ridiculously Affordable Prints.](#)” They were indeed affordable—some about the cost of a movie and a half—and were priced according to size (which varied), rather than quality (which was strikingly high). More than a few were certainly worth owning, such as a hilariously dysfunctional jigsaw puzzle by Kent Rogowski. Jen Bekman, proprietor of 20x200.com and owner of the Jen Bekman Gallery in downtown New York, **is not only a bold advocate of art for the masses, she’s also a powerhouse dealer, curator, and design maven.** What distinguishes her as a curator is her commingling of fine and applied arts: Designers, photographers, painters, and printers all make paintings and prints. The ingenious business model of 20x200.com is as follows. [Each week, the site introduces exclusive, limited-edition prints. They’re beautifully produced and inexpensive; if you want to start collecting, the site is a smart place to begin.](#) And if you’re an artist keen on selling art, Bekman is the perfect person with whom to take the leap. I’ve been itching to ask her about running her dual galleries, especially in this wrenching economic time, and we finally got a chance to talk.



“Verlag 3” by Carol Padberg (2008), sold on 20x200.com.

STEVEN HELLER

Print contributing editor, author, co-chair of the Designer as Author program at the School of Visual Arts

JEN BEKMAN

New York City gallerist and curator of 20x200.com

[What is 20x200?](#) We sell limited-edition fine-art prints at ridiculously affordable prices. I personally introduce each new release via a newsletter where I write about the work and the artist. We release at least two new pieces a week: one photo and one work on paper. Most images are available in three sizes. When we first launched, the smallest size was reprinted in the largest batch—an edition of 200—and sold at the lowest price, \$20.



Hence the name 20x200. “200x20” just didn’t sound as good. [So which are you, cheap or affordable?](#) I always emphasize that our work is affordable, but it’s most definitely not cheap. We work with artisan printers who use archival inks and papers. All the editions are supervised by the artists, and they always approve a final proof before we produce the work. Each print is accompanied by a certificate of authenticity, signed by the artist, along with the artist’s bio, statement, and instructions about caring for your new art. Our edition formula was pretty rigid to start with: small, medium, and large prints priced at \$20, \$200, and \$2,000 each.



“think-make-think” by Clifton Burt (2008); sold on 20x200.com.

[You were the founding correspondent for MediaBistro’s design blog, UnBeige. Your background includes pioneering web communities and communications. How did you transition from that to promoting art?](#) It was an impulsive decision to open the gallery. I was not involved in the art world at all. When I was working in executive jobs, before the internet bubble burst, I was making decent money. I wasn’t rich, but I could afford some nice things—furniture, a small collection of pottery. When I was unemployed for 18 months, I started taking inventory, asking myself what had real value for me. It occurred to me during that process I hadn’t bought any art, and that if I had, it would’ve gone on the “real value” list. The reason that I hadn’t bought art—

that I didn’t know that I could—was what motivated me to open the gallery. [What are your criteria for selecting artists, photographers, and graphic designers to exhibit and champion?](#) On my blog, Personism, I have a quote pulled from the Frank O’Hara poem for which the blog is named: “You just go on your nerve.” I started out as, and hope to always remain, something of an art-world outsider. I think of myself as a fan rather than an expert. I am drawn to certain styles, colors, and subjects. I’m appreciative, and a little envious, of the people who can express ideas and emotions visually. One of the things that’s so amazing about 20x200 is that I am allowed to be incredibly promiscuous in my tastes—I work with at least two new artists a week! That means I can indulge all my aesthetic desires: text, narrative, bright colors, humor. I’m a sucker for references to graphic design, the American West, and the American experience overall (big tent!), and I like animals, especially birds. I love the color green so much that I’ve developed what I call my “green filter”: If I see something and I love it and it’s green, I force myself to look twice and then a third time (at least!) to be sure that there’s actually something there beyond the allure that this color holds for me in and of itself. [Who are some of the key players in your gallery, and why?](#) Beth Dow, a photographer who makes gorgeous contemporary black-and-white photos using very traditional techniques—her platinum-palladium prints are stunning, not just as images but amazing objects as well. Sarah McKenzie, a painter, has a very sophisticated, insightful practice. She makes paintings of buildings and construction sites that are really engaging and appealing—my aforementioned attractions to bright colors and graphic references are well satiated, and I’m always happy to ponder the impact of sprawl on American culture. Speaking of sprawl, Brad Moore’s amazing landscapes of painfully pruned Southern Californian foliage are a commentary on cookie-cutter conformity while also being witty and, well, green. Very, very green. Last but not least, Nina Berman, whose powerful portraits of veterans of the war in

“

I LOVE THE COLOR GREEN SO MUCH THAT I’VE DEVELOPED WHAT I CALL MY ‘GREEN FILTER’: IF I SEE SOMETHING AND I LOVE IT AND IT’S GREEN, I FORCE MYSELF TO LOOK TWICE AND THEN A THIRD TIME TO BE SURE THAT THERE’S ACTUALLY SOMETHING THERE BEYOND THE ALLURE THAT THIS COLOR HOLDS FOR ME.

”

Iraq have had a huge impact on me personally and professionally. [Do you find that you’ve succeeded in convincing patrons that design, or everyday art, is a viable investment?](#) Absolutely. But more important to me is the fact that there are now thousands of people who consider themselves collectors who never thought that they’d ever be able to collect. Let there be no doubt—the balance is important. I love that we have a lot of serious, established collectors and curators buying work from the gallery and 20x200 regularly. [How do you see this sad economic spiral affecting what you do?](#) Well, having spent the better part of the last decade in my own sad spiral, I’m a lot more optimistic than most people are. Being broke was good for me—that inventory-taking that I did? It was formative. I feel like I have a playbook for what lies ahead, and what we offer has a crucial role. I am really proud to be the intermediary who enables that relationship. [You are an entrepreneur. Can you predict whether entrepreneurship will grow or not in the current economy?](#) It kind of has to, don’t you think? Most of the passionate, creative people I know are at their wits’ end if they’ve got time on their hands. If someone else isn’t going to keep them busy, they’ll get busy on their own. It’s kind of exciting to think of what innovative and exciting projects will come of this. ●