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Can free photos save the art business? One gallerist hopes so.

Lilly Fowler | Off-Ramp | May 24th, 2013, 1:28pm

SLIDESHOW

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Lilly Fowler

Gallerist Jennifer Schwartz and her 1977 VW bus. She's driving around the country to promote art collecting, as part of her "Crusade for Art" tour.

The economy is slowly recovering, or so they say. But that doesn't mean people aren't having a hard time selling certain things. Take, for example, art. Just this past month a gallery owner named Jennifer Schwartz drove from her home in Atlanta to Los Angeles in a 1977 blue Volkswagen bus so that she could literally give away art.

Off-Ramp contributor Lilly Fowler visited Schwartz to find out why.

On a warm, sunny afternoon, 37-year-old Jennifer Schwartz made her first West Coast stop for a nationwide tour she's dubbed "The Crusade for Art," camping out on the streets of Venice's Abbot Kinney neighborhood. Alongside busy shops and restaurants, Schwartz and a handful of local artists vied for the attention of passersby. "Free photos," she shouted. "Artwork for your walls!"

Schwartz said she's giving away art to lure everyday consumers into art collecting. "We're seekers and we're curious and we care where our food came from and how our coffee is roasted," said Schwartz. "Art is a natural fit into that."

For Schwartz, getting people interested in fine art is a battle against the ordinary. "If I could stand at the register of every IKEA, when someone came up with a big gallery wrapped canvas of a tulip that matched their throw pillows, I could say, well, here's an original piece of art that also matches your throw pillows," she said. "I really felt that most people would choose the original, all things being equal, and since I couldn't stand at the register of every IKEA, I was like 'I'll just drive a bus around the country and talk about it.'"

Schwartz says that while the photography focused gallery she left behind in Atlanta is doing well--not everyone is that lucky. Outside the top tier of artists and collectors, many artists and galleries are still struggling, especially those stuck somewhere in the middle of the art market. So people like Schwartz keep thinking of more and more inventive ways to push art.

Local photographer Aline Smithson says she's seen that struggle first hand. "What's been successful in the last few years are sites that are selling their photographs at greatly discounted prices" she said. "I think it's just a really hard time to sell art."

At the boardwalk, Long Beach artist Jeff Rau hands a prospective patron a print. "The series that I have a print from today is from a project where I photographed the LA Basin from Signal Hill down near Long Beach, which is where I live, every day for a year," he said. "And then I would take each month's worth of images, so 30 days worth of images for each month, and splice them together into singular landscape to show the variation in the kind of smog cover and the way the city is kinda appearing and disappearing into the smog day after day."

Artists like Rau talked to people on the street about art, hoping that just maybe, maybe, they would gain a new fan or two. Ruzica Vuskovic, a visitor from Croatia, was stunned "It's amazing, stunning, so cool. LA is just an amazing city," she said. "This was such an uplifting, surprising cool thing starting with this cool van."

Schwartz says she tries to be realistic about what a road trip like hers can do. The folks she encounters on tour might not turn to art collecting the very next day. But Schwartz hopes by having the opportunity to connect with artists personally, they may more clearly see the value of art, which could lead to art buying. Someday at least.

Schwartz just rounded out the West Coast portion of her tour. She heads out East after that before returning home, and to her gallery, in June.

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