

5 QUESTIONS Melissa Kepke Grobmyer



Photo by James Nielson / Houston Chronicle

Melissa Kepke Grobmyer founded MKG Art Management in 1998, the only art advisory and appraisal firm in Houston at that time. Melissa has assembled collections for Fortune 100 companies as well as for private collectors. These collections focus on various topics in American and European art, spanning the 19th through 21st centuries, and include painting, photography, sculpture and new media. She has also researched, assembled and administered collections of Texas Regionalism, American Modernism, Abstract Expressionism, 19th century Realism, Impressionism, and Beaux Arts painting.

Melissa has taught classes on various aspects of the history of art and architecture. Most recently, the Church of St. John the Divine invited Mrs. Grobmyer to lecture on Christian art and iconography, some of which are available via podcast at: www.SJD.org.

Melissa is a trustee of the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, and she serves on the Modern and Contemporary Acquisitions subcommittee and the Antiquities subcommittee of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. She is a past board member of Lawndale Art Center, which is dedicated to exhibiting work by emerging artists in Texas. She is a member of ArtTable, and an approved educator for the ASID, IIDA and AIA.

www.mkgart.com

How did you first become involved in the business of art?

Back in 1989, the summer between my junior and senior year of college, I received a summer internship at Sotheby's in NYC... my first exposure to the art world. I returned to Austin and finished at University of Texas, and decided I wanted to work in the art business. My father told me that my parent support would end two weeks after graduation, so I was encouraged to find a job quickly. I sent out 500 resumes to every gallery in NYC. I got 7 interviews and 3 job offers. I took Robert Miller Gallery's offer, and I moved to NYC in June 1990, becoming a "gallerina" in the Fuller building on 57th and Madison. I worked as John Cheim's assistant. It was quite an adventure. I learned enough to decide to return to graduate school, earning a Masters Degree in Art History from UT in 1994. In trying to decide whether to stay for a PhD or not, I sent a resume to a consultancy in Houston I had become familiar with while working in NYC. I received a job offer as an associate at that firm, and my career as an art advisor launched.

Have you had any mentors or models that helped guide you in your career?

I have had many important influencers in my life. The first would be my first employers, where I learned work styles I wanted to emulate, as well as work practices I wanted to rethink. Another influence has been my husband of 20 years, Albert. I graduated with a Master's in Art History, not a MBA, and he helped me put best business and accounting practices into place early on. Further, I have always gone by the mantra "hire up." I have looked for the best people who bring unique talent, vision, and experience to the company. This attitude has allowed individuals to grow and develop under the MKG umbrella while making the company strong and diverse. Finally, I never gave up, through raising children, a hurricane that destroyed our office and records, and economic downturns. I have prayed a lot over the years.

How long have you been in your current position and what drew you to it?

I started MKG from my front bedroom in 1998 and grew the company slowly, expanding as my client base grew. I have always been a self-starter, and I wanted flexibility and life/work balance as my family grew and life became more complex. That being said, I am also tenacious and challenge driven, which helped a lot in the early years of cold calls and pitches. From the beginning, MKG has been dedicated to "flex time." Frankly, the model for the business was residential real estate firms, which offer employees the ability to set their own hours. Not every person is well suited to this work style, but over the years the company had grown to include 4 partners and 3 associates. We look for independent problem solvers and creative thinkers who nevertheless thrive as part of a team.

What do you consider to be among the biggest challenges facing you today?

Our biggest challenge has always been the boom/bust aspects of the energy economy in Houston. While the economic base in Houston has become much more diverse over the last 30 years, the business climate is still very effected by the oil economy, ➤

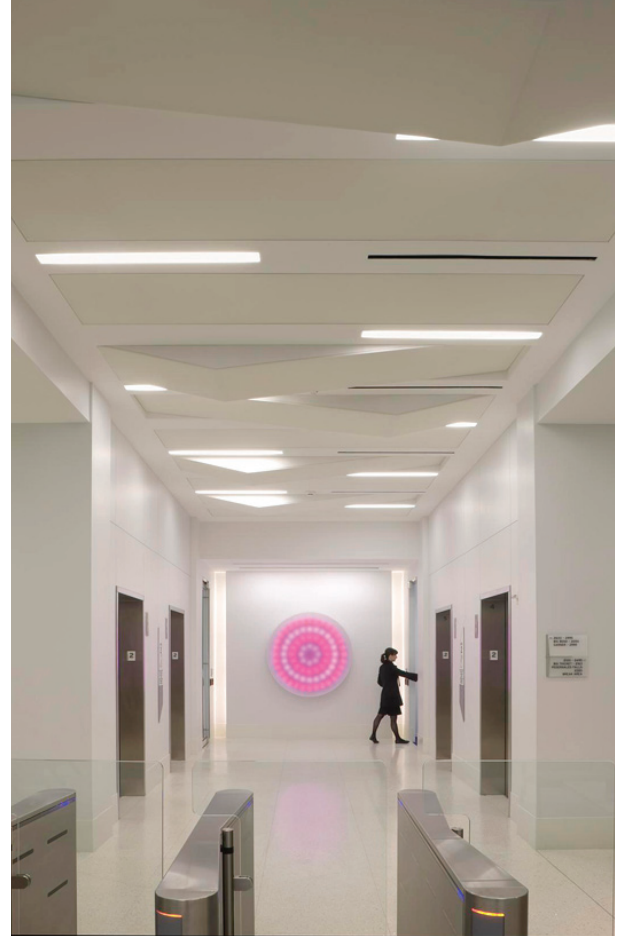


Aurora Robson, *Plant Perception* (2013); sculpted polyethylene terephthalate plastic bottles taken from the waste stream, airbrushed with tinted water-based polycrylic, mica powder, aluminum rivets, aircraft cable and stainless steel suspension hardware. Installation at Noble Energy.

which trickles down to business spending across the spectrum. The first budget that is cut from a project is the art budget, so we have found ways to diversify our services, including working with many more private collectors and providing appraisal services. Today about half our company income derives from our appraisals business. We appraise fine art, furniture, silver, and china, and we serve institutional and private clients nationwide.

What's your favorite city for art, and what do you recommend we see when visiting?

I really enjoy looking at art outside the market setting. While the market is exciting and vital, it squelches contemplation and thoughtful response. The Menil Collection in Houston, on the other hand, invites a more thoughtful and nuanced response to art and its historical reference points. Of course, I will always love looking at art in NYC with the city's superb collections and museums, and some of my most profound art experiences have been in Rome and Istanbul. But for a wide-open experience of Modern and Contemporary art, Marfa, Texas, is astounding. The Chinati Foundation and its collections give art breathing room to be fully realized in terms of scale and object-hood. The relationship of art and the minimal landscape is a breath of fresh air.



Leo Villareale, *Solaris* (2005); light emitting diodes, microcontroller, custom software and plexiglass. Collection of NRG.

Why Do You Value Your Membership in APAA?

TODD LEVIN

The core reason that APAA exists is not to service its members. The core reason APAA exists is for its members to service one another. APAA exists because we mutually believe as a group that certain standards of ethics and professionalism need to be maintained in a field where there are no (or low) barriers to entry. We achieve that by banding together and mutually agreeing to behave by those standards. We do this because it forces people to view advisors as professionals, to treat advisors as professionals, and to pay advisors as professionals.

APAA members are there for one another to draw on the experience of its membership when a sole member has a professional query requiring specific expertise and discretion. APAA also supports the next generation(s) of younger advisors so that they in turn understand and accept APAA standards, building upon the community concept of 'paying it forward'.

While it is nice that APAA provides programming for its members, it is more crucial that APAA provides "the voice of the advisor" to the press and public to explain and clarify what advisors do, how they operate, and to identify problematic practices. To paraphrase the old enthymeme, "...Ask not what APAA can do for you, but what you can do for APAA..."

LISA AUSTIN

I belong to AAA (Appraisers Association of America) for the credentials and the guidance on best practices. Every single program and event at AAA is a la carte expense, and the membership cost is \$600. For that you get... membership.

MEGAN FOX KELLY

Being a member of APAA, just like my AAA membership, is a credential. That credential has helped build my business. In addition, I just received a new client project by someone who found me on the APAA website. It is a large project and part of what the client wants is outside of my area of expertise, so I've asked another APAA member with that expertise to help me. I feel confident turning to a member whose credentials I trust.