

Garrett Klein

Fine Arts BFA '06

Co-Founder / Director, Massey Klein Gallery

If there is a career path to becoming a fine art gallery owner, Garrett Klein didn't follow it.

A Long Island kid who "was always coloring, always drawing," Klein built a relationship with FIT beginning in high school—taking weekend Precollege classes to try out illustration and comic art before enrolling in the Fine Arts program as an undergraduate. There, a congenitally honest professor pushed him to develop his own taste while group projects in New York and Miami's Art Basel in Miami introduced him to the commercial side of fine art and the skills of creating public installations.

Knowing he wanted to be in fine arts but unsure of his precise role, Klein approached his career with a mantra his mother told him in high school: There's no such thing as a bad job. "There's always something you can learn," Klein recalls. "I never felt like I wasn't doing something worthwhile; even if I was doing dishes at a place, I developed interpersonal skills."

An undergraduate internship with the Central Park Conservancy led to Klein's first job after graduation, at a plaster company in Brooklyn where he rose to become the lead mold-maker. Another job through an FIT classmate had Klein working at a high-end suiting store in Manhattan. "That job got me comfortable with clients and selling," he recalls. That, in turn, led to a sales consultant role at a gallery in Chelsea, where "I discovered I was pretty good at selling art."

"Every experience I had, every opportunity I was afforded at FIT, daisy-chained to the next thing," he says.

Along the way, Klein met the woman he would marry, Ryan Massey. Both worked in galleries and had the urge to open their own. By the time Massey Klein Gallery opened on Manhattan's Lower East Side in 2018, "we had client relationships as well as artist relationships already in place. We had fairly extensive client lists, and we had worked with both emerging and mid-career artists."

The gallery has supported emerging American painters Lydia Baker, Bethany Czarnecki, Elise Ferguson, and Nick McPhail; it also serves as a New York foothold for nationally exhibiting artists such as Chrissy Angliker. As a smaller venue, Massey Klein is "able to take chances,

and find these artists that larger galleries aren't seeing," Klein says. "We've had the opportunity to give artists their first solo shows, or their first New York shows. It's very rewarding when it works."

Still, Klein had some close calls. "When we started the gallery, we had enough money to secure the space and maybe we had next month's rent. Maybe. There was no cushion," he recalls. "It was either you make it work or don't. I would not advise anyone to follow that path," he laughs.

They lucked out. "When we first opened, a client came in during our first month and bought a huge piece—that got us through that second month. Then another client purchased "two very high-ticket bronze sculptures—that was an amazing stroke of luck."

These days, Klein has to navigate the extremely volatile nature of the art world, where leads vacillate between one a day in the busy season to potentially a single one in the slow month of August. He prides himself on having an approachable gallery—a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere is key for attracting first-time buyers and others new to the art world. Still, he fights against the misconception that gallerists are "hanging out drinking wine waiting for collectors to walk in the door."

Work on a show starts up to two years before an artist's paintings see the gallery space, with Klein paying visits to the artist's studio while keeping in touch with potential buyers.

For art to actually sell, Klein and Massey have learned, it must be shown three times or more. "Sometimes we introduce a single piece by an artist to our mailing list several months before the show opens," he says. A press preview of the show and full images—all taken by Klein—must go out at least a month before it displays. When a gallery show opens its doors to the public, it's the third time potential buyers are seeing it.

And then there are logistics: "Who's going to transport the work? Who's going to wrap it? How far in advance do we need to get the work? Sometimes it gets held in customs for a week or two," Klein says.

"It takes everything, it takes every experience from every job I've ever had to do this job."

