



The "Living and Sustaining a Creative Life" exhibition at Exhibit by Aberson in Tulsa, Oklahoma, includes some of the artists from the book. Image courtesy of Ralph Cole photography.

Book with artist-filled essays becomes part of exhibition

By **Brenda Hope Zappitell**

Recently, I read a wonderful book, *Living and Sustaining a Creative Life* by Sharon Louden. Louden compiled a book of essays from 40 working artists. The essays are written in the artists' own words. Louden explains in the preface, "The idea that one needs a gallery to justify one's existence as an artist is, I believe, outdated: the gallery is just one venue through which to share a visual vocabulary with others."

Louden chose to compile essays for a book because she felt that when she graduated with her MFA in 1991, it was difficult to find out from other artists how to pay the bills. She wanted to change that and help others by sharing examples of artists who had done so. It is her hope "that readers will be inspired to follow their own paths or gain ideas so they can establish their own 'successful' journey — whatever course that may take."

There is now an exhibition at **Exhibit by Aberson** in Tulsa, Oklahoma, that includes some of the artists from the book. This exhibition kicked off with a book-panel discussion a couple weeks ago. I recently had an opportunity to chat with Louden about the book, the event and other thoughts.



Living and Sustaining a Creative Life by Sharon Louden

BHZ: It is very interesting that this book has translated into an exhibition; did you ever think that was a possibility when you originally decided to choose this group of artists for the essays?

SL: I never thought about it; I never thought that something like that could happen. However, Kim Fonder, the director at Exhibit by Aberson, came up with the idea. It turned out to be a wonderful, successful event. I think it is fantastic how she opened the door to a lot of other possibilities from the book. I really love the exhibition as it is beautiful, and it's nice to see examples of the work of some of the contributors while having the book on hand in the gallery to read their essays. Kim is a visionary; she is passionate and through her determination and dedication to this special project, she did an awesome job.

BHZ: What do you think artists who are starting out or even mid-career artists will take away from this book?

SL: I think there are many different ways in which to live a creative life. I also believe that every artist is on the same page, whether or not they are making a lot of money or making no money. This book is a wonderful survey of essays that start a conversation or complete a discussion and thought as to how to sustain a creative life today. I am hoping that through this book, there is a sense of comfort, community and that artists can find ways as to how they may live their creative lives.

BHZ: Your work has appeared in museums, not-for-profit organizations and commercial galleries; do you prefer a particular type of venue?

SL: I think life is about the people you meet, so I am interested in the collaborative process with a curator or gallery dealer. I prefer to show in museums for many reasons:

- There is not a commercial side to it, so I can experiment, and I can explore different ideas never performed before, and I can create something that is site specific.
- Museums have educational programs, so I am interested in that extension of the work into the public realm, which is extremely important to me.
- Exhibitions at museums tend to be on view longer, which allows for more discussion and then selfishly for me as an artist, allows me to ponder the work a lot more and learn from that experience to grow further.
- I am most interested in the collaborative process with the particular people that run these institutions, galleries, etc., as I love the conversations, growth through collaboration, community outreach and building relationships through the work.

BHZ: I have heard you use the term “culture producers.” Can you define what that means to you and how it is relevant to artists today?

SL: What I mean by that term is an artist who extends themselves beyond just making the work, who gives to a community through some kind of outreach. Maybe they are producing/running a blog, maybe they are curating, maybe they are running a not-for-profit organization. I think artists have been doing that for a long time; it is not a new thing. However, in this time, I think it is extremely important, more than ever, for an artist to engage in community in some way. It is beneficial to the artist and everyone. Opportunities come from collaboration, exchange and active correspondence.

This book is definitely an interesting read; some of the artists included are Michelle Grabner, Julie Heffernan, Jenny Marketou and Amanda Church. Their frankness about their experiences is refreshing. I highly recommend it.

The exhibition at Exhibit by Aberson ends Dec. 7. Check it out if you are in the Tulsa area or visit the website, abersonexhibits.com.

For more information about Sharon Louden's book *Living and Sustaining a Creative Life* and to see her artwork, visit her website, sharonlouden.com.



Sharon Louden



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