

HeForShe: Richard Williamson | Founder, McKay Williamson

American born Art Gallery owner, and firmly established Londoner, Richard Williamson opened McKay Williamson in Notting Hill, West London in 2002, naming the gallery in honour of his two grandfathers as a family legacy.

Williamson's vision for the gallery is to help people 'think' about the sort of art they buy, almost gently educating them about the legacy of art, a shift change from buying art that matches the decor!

He believes that art should not only be aesthetically beautiful, it should also be personally meaningful. To ensure its beautiful, Williamson has curated a bevy of award-winning artists – including BP Portrait Award, Threadneedle Prize and Frank Herring Award winners. To ensure its meaningful, he gets to know clients, and helps them choose artwork which will resonate with them personally, at some level.

For Williamson, art had a huge impact on him from an early age. As a 6-year old, he was obsessed with museums but, far from encouraging him, the general view in 70s Alpharetta, Ga, from his parents to his art teacher, was that a creative life was a penniless life. This obstructive approach forced some deep questions, and as an 11-year old he wrote a piece for the school paper asking, What is the Purpose of Art? Eventually, he ignored his instincts and studied engineering at university. Even then, he spent more on his first painting, a Clifford Bailey, than his first car. Finally in his 20s, he moved to London and properly committed to his path of art and creativity.

Williamson's life work is to change clients' pre-conceived thoughts of what they expect from art, to help them raise their personal bar of expectation to a place where every piece of art and creative work they own is profound.

For Richard he sees Art as lasting for generations in a way that almost nothing else does, that it's a personal legacy and journey of someone's life, which is why above all else. Ultimately ..Art is worth it.



Did you ever sit down and plan your career?

Oh yes. Everything from official business plans to flashy goal-setting seminars. But personally, I question whether they had any influence on my career. I think the biggest impact came from venerating the smaller, everyday decisions – like purpose and habit. Why I wake up, what I do. I must have read Viktor Frankl's Man's Search for Meaning at least 15 times. And I'm certain my gallery's focus on selling art to people which is meaningful to them is a reflection of Frankl's influence in my life!

Have you faced any challenges along the way?

Of course – that's just life. A fun challenge is recruiting artists. A lot of my artists, including BP Portrait Award and Threadneedle Prize winners, have a policy of not accepting commission work. For artists of a certain stature, it can be like a badge of honour. And yet I've managed to convince them to take commissions from me.

What has been your biggest achievement to date?

Whilst its tempting to name-drop here, my biggest achievement is learning how to remain flexible AND stay true to the vision. Art is personal. Changing pre-conceived notions about art is hard. I am proud of the unique space we've carved out in the art world.

What one thing do you believe has been a major factor in you achieving success?

Learning to love the hard jobs. Like early on, with 3 kids, a mortgage, and no clients, I made cold calls to introduce people to my gallery. That was truly painful. But I learned to love it – I can honestly say that I learned to love working the phones. Which does not mean I'd want to do it again!! But I realised at the time that the quickest way through that stage was to get good at the phones, and I was only going to get good at it if I enjoyed it. So I did.

How do you feel about mentoring? Have you mentored anyone or are you someone's mentee?

I've been blessed with some incredibly insightful mentors, the whole relationship cultivates fast-track learning like nothing else. So I've always tried to mentor others, as a way of giving back. In fact, I'm probably looking for my next mentee right now.

What can businesses/government/allies do to help diversity and inclusion?

I think they're doing a pretty good job already, but I may not be the best person to ask. I'm a bleeding-heart liberal in the arts, and I've been hiring with diversity and inclusion in mind for longer than hashtags or trending were even cultural terms.

Why do you think it's important for men to support gender equality in the workplace?

Because it's the right thing to do. And because women are awesome.

If you could give one piece of advice to your younger self what would it be?

Go bigger/harder sooner! Risk it all every day!!

What is your next challenge and what are you hoping to achieve in the future?

We are launching the design arm of the gallery in France and Italy next year. My biggest hope is that, no matter how big we get, we remain focused on the daily detail of just producing incredibly beautiful work.