

Visual Artist interview questions

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What to expect

Interviews for visual artists are usually a conversation about your work rather than a test of correct answers. The panel wants to see how you think, how you talk about your practice, and whether you can hold a commission together on time and on budget.

- **Portfolio review:** You lead a walkthrough of selected works and take questions on concept, process and decisions you made along the way.
- **Technical and process:** Questions about materials, techniques, testing and how you get a repeatable result across editions or commissions.
- **Behavioural:** Past examples of commissions, deadlines, difficult briefs and how you handled them.
- **Client and negotiation:** How you manage scope changes, budgets and expectations with clients, galleries and curators.
- **Business and funding:** Applications, budgets, pricing, insurance and the administrative side of a freelance practice.
- **Scenario and judgement:** Hypothetical situations such as a tight exhibition timeline or an unexpected site constraint, used to see how you prioritise.

Most visual art interviews open with a portfolio walkthrough, which can run for fifteen to twenty minutes on its own, followed by panel questions on process, past commissions and how you run the business side of your practice. For a public art or commercial commission you may also be asked to respond to a specific site or brief, sometimes in a short presentation. Gallery and arts organisation panels often include a curator, an arts administrator and someone from the commissioning side, and it's common for the conversation to end with what you're working on next.

1. Walk us through the body of work you've brought today and the thinking behind it.

Why they ask

This is the core of most visual art interviews. The panel is checking whether you can articulate your own practice clearly and whether the work is intentional rather than accidental.

How to structure your answer

A guided walkthrough: context, concept, key decisions, and what you learned. Move through the work in a deliberate order rather than jumping around, and finish on the piece that best represents where the practice is heading.

Example answer

"The series I've brought is six paintings and a set of linocuts made over the past year, all looking at where the industrial edge of a city meets the river. It started with photographs I took on walks along the wharves, and I noticed rust and water were producing almost the same colour, so I pulled the whole palette back to iron oxide, ochre and a cool grey-green. The large canvases use layered glazing so the surface shifts depending on the light, and the prints take the same motifs down to two or three shapes so they read at a smaller scale. The last piece came out of a residency where I only had a small studio, so I moved onto paper, and that ended up feeding back into the bigger paintings."

2. How do you choose materials and techniques for a new body of work, and how do you test something you haven't used before?

Why they ask

Panels want evidence that you make material decisions for a reason and that you can repeat a result, which matters for editions, commissions and conservation.

How to structure your answer

Explain your process step by step with a real example: what prompted the test, what you compared, what you recorded, and how the result changed what you did.

Example answer

"I usually build a small test panel before I commit to a large surface, because pigments and grounds behave differently and I'd rather find that out early. I keep a notebook with each mix, the substrate, drying time and how it looked after a few months. If it's something new, like a cold wax medium or a different digital print process, I run a few samples and leave them near a window in the studio so I can watch how they hold up. For a recent commission the work had to survive direct sun in a foyer, so I tested three varnishes on offcuts and went with the one that didn't yellow, then wrote the mix down so I could match it if the client wanted a companion piece."

3. Tell me about a time a commission didn't go to plan and how you handled it.

Why they ask

Commissions rarely run perfectly. The panel is looking for honesty, early communication and whether you protect the client relationship without compromising the work.

How to structure your answer

STAR: the situation and brief, the task you were responsible for, the action you took and in what order, and the result including what changed in your process afterwards.

Example answer

"I had a commission for a large abstract canvas in a dining room, and about three weeks out the client decided the palette clashed with a new fit-out. Rather than repaint blind, I went back to the original brief and mood board and took in two small colour studies so they could choose a direction. We agreed on a warmer base with the same composition, I rescheduled my other studio work and finished on the original install date. I now build a colour approval step in before stretching a large canvas, which has saved that conversation more than once, and the client came back the following year for a second work."

4. A client wants changes that sit outside the agreed brief or budget. How do you handle that?

Why they ask

Freelance artists carry the commercial risk themselves, so the panel wants to see that you can hold a boundary and still keep the relationship workable.

How to structure your answer

A negotiation structure: work out the scale of the change, restate what was agreed, explain the impact on time and materials, offer two or three options, then confirm the outcome in writing.

Example answer

"I start by working out whether it's a small adjustment or a change to the whole scope, because those need different answers. Then I restate what we agreed, explain what the change means for time and materials, and give them two or three options, for example keeping the size but shifting the palette, or adding a second panel at a later date. If it's genuinely outside the brief I'll quote it as additional work rather than absorbing it. I put the outcome in an email the same day so we're both working from the same version, and I've found clients respond well because they get a choice rather than a flat no."

5. How do you approach funding and exhibition applications?

Why they ask

A large part of a sustainable practice is the paperwork: grants, proposals, budgets and acquittals. This question checks whether you treat that side as part of the job.

How to structure your answer

A process answer covering preparation, matching the criteria, budgeting and feedback, ideally with a concrete example of an application that succeeded or taught you something.

Example answer

"I keep a running document of works in progress with images and short descriptions, because application rounds open and close quickly and I don't want to be photographing everything the week it's due. When I apply, I read the criteria properly and match my language to what the panel is actually asking for, then get someone who doesn't know my work to read the artist statement. The budget includes materials, my own time and a contingency, and I check the acquittal requirements before submitting so I know what I'm signing up for. I also ask a peer or a gallerist for feedback on the support material, because it's hard to see your own images clearly after staring at them for weeks."

6. A gallery offers you a show in six weeks and you have about a third of the work ready. What do you do?

Why they ask

This is a judgement question. The panel is testing how you weigh an opportunity against quality, and whether you'll communicate honestly rather than overpromise.

How to structure your answer

Talk through your reasoning under pressure: assess what is realistic, talk to the gallery early, propose alternatives, protect the standard of the work, and explain your decision.

Example answer

"First I'd work out what's actually achievable in six weeks: how many finished works the space needs, what's already underway and what a tighter hang could carry. Then I'd talk to the gallery honestly rather than hoping it comes together, and offer a smaller, more resolved show or a mix of finished work and a focused series on paper. I'd block out studio time, cut anything that isn't the show, and look at whether an assistant or fabricator could take on part of the work. If the dates can't move and the work can't be ready at the standard I want, I'd ask to shift the show instead, because the relationship with the gallery lasts longer than one opening."