Interview with Can Bey, Curator and Gallery Director — ABC Art Gallery

Interviewer: Thank you for meeting with me, Can Bey. How do you define your role here at ABC Art Gallery?

Can: I usually introduce myself simply as the curator, even though I'm also the director on paper. "Curator" feels closer to what I actually do — shaping the exhibition program, choosing artists, and deciding how different works converse within the gallery space. The administrative side is unavoidable; budgets, contracts, and final approvals all come across my desk. But my daily thinking starts from the artistic concept and extends outward into organization and documentation.

Interviewer: Could you tell me a little about your background and how you arrived here?

Can: I studied art history and later specialized in collection management. That early exposure to museum procedures taught me that records are narratives in disguise. Each form tells a story about who touched the artwork, how it traveled, and why it matters. In a small gallery like ours, you can't afford to separate creativity from logistics. You have to speak both languages — one for artists, one for administrators — and make them meet halfway.

Interviewer: From your perspective, what does the overall rhythm of the gallery look like?

Can: Our calendar runs in seasons. We host two-month exhibitions and, between them, quarterly auctions. It's a constant alternation of quiet research and intense activity. Concept comes first, then the space responds, then documentation grows around what happens in the room. It's a loop: idea, logistics, visibility, memory, and analysis — repeated again and again with small variations.

The structure is quite flat. Elif orchestrates the physical and logistical parts; Kerem handles public communication; I hold the conceptual framework and overall direction. We overlap constantly, but each of us keeps certain types of data. Elif manages what touches the artworks, Kerem what touches the audience, and I bridge the two through curatorial notes and decisions.

Interviewer: Kerem told me he keeps visitor logs, mailing lists, and auction bidder registrations but not payment information. Is that correct?

Can: That's correct. Kerem's world stops at the public interface. The financial details — reserves, commissions, payments — are handled through a restricted folder that only Elif and I access, and even she only for the logistics side. Kerem's job is to make sure information flows outward cleanly and consistently.

Interviewer: He mentioned that before each event Elif sends him a file listing artists, titles, and some reference numbers. Does that sound familiar?

Can: Yes, that's part of our shared vocabulary. Every exhibition and every artwork receives a code that links internal documents to public materials. Kerem uses those codes to avoid mislabeling, especially when images circulate online. Exhibition codes appear openly, object codes only occasionally. Auction lots have their own numbering that everyone recognizes.

Interviewer: Elif described many record types: entry forms, condition reports, dossiers, loan and insurance documents, installation plans, and more. Are those the backbone of your system?

Can: Exactly. In a large institution all of that would live inside a formal database. Here we manage through structured folders and spreadsheets. The cross-references between files are what hold the

structure together. We work from three pillars: the exhibition identifier, the artist's canonical name, and the object code. Around those orbit everything else — loans, contracts, insurance certificates, even shipment notes.

Interviewer: Why maintain so many separate forms rather than a single master sheet?

Can: Because each form serves a different kind of accountability. Condition information is technical; contracts are legal; installation plans are operational; my curatorial notes are conceptual; press materials are public. Mixing them would flatten their meaning. Cross-references let us connect without confusing responsibilities. It's slower, but it protects clarity.

The identifiers make this patchwork coherent. We use consistent codes for exhibitions, artists, and objects, and we mirror them in every derivative record. The idea is simple traceability: if you pick up any document, you should be able to find its neighbors.

Interviewer: Could you walk me through, in broad strokes, how an exhibition comes to life here?

Can: It usually starts with an idea — sometimes mine, sometimes an artist's. We discuss the concept, the timing, and whether the gallery space can sustain it. Once we agree, Elif begins shaping the physical plan, preparing drafts for artworks that might fit. We talk with the artists, request portfolios, and review what's feasible. As we refine the list, she creates preliminary entries for the works, while I focus on narrative coherence. Insurance, transportation, and condition preparation follow in parallel. When dates are confirmed, the exhibition receives its official code, and a new dossier is opened. At that point Kerem joins in for public communication. Installation brings everything together — the point where design decisions meet physical reality. Then the doors open, and the record-keeping continues in reverse: what changed, what sold, what was returned.

Interviewer: And the auction process?

Can: The auction is a second heartbeat. We decide a theme, choose works either from recent shows or external consignments, and review their status. Elif prepares a concise summary of each lot, while the pricing and reserve values remain confidential. I review the catalog images and sequence; Kerem handles the registration portal and publicity. The day of the sale, bids are logged and verified. Afterwards, we close the loop with settlement notes and updates to status. I prefer to think of it as a conversation between our archive and the market — one reflecting the other.

Interviewer: Could you describe the types of data each of you manages?

Can: Curatorial data lives with me: conceptual notes, checklists, and wall texts. Elif maintains the object and technical documentation — entry forms, condition, installation, and logistics. Legal and financial data are shared between us with restricted access. Kerem maintains everything public: press releases, mailing lists, and visitor numbers. There are overlaps: an exhibition title might appear in all three contexts but for different reasons. His version exists for communication; hers for documentation; mine for meaning.

Interviewer: Do the object identifiers appear across these records?

Can: Yes, they're the thread that binds the story. You'll find them on condition reports, installation plans, insurance certificates — sometimes even in captions hidden from public view. When a cross-reference is missing, we attach a memo to repair the link.

Interviewer: Elif spoke of a canonical name sheet. How does that function?

Can: Each exhibition has one definitive list of artist names, artwork titles, and other descriptive fields. That's our "canonical sheet." Kerem copies from it for newsletters; Elif copies for technical forms. If an error slips in, we issue a corrected version with a small suffix, just like software releases. It's normalization, though we wouldn't call it that in daily life.

Interviewer: How do you monitor timing and progress?

Can: We maintain a simple timeline table inside each exhibition folder. It lists the key milestones — commitments, shipments, installations, press releases, openings, and closures. It's not minute-by-minute, but enough to trace decisions afterward. When something changes, Elif writes a short change note explaining what shifted and why. I review and annotate those; they become part of our institutional memory.

Interviewer: What about privacy boundaries?

Can: Personal contact information and financial data never leave the restricted folders. Public documents use initials or bidder codes instead of names. Even condition photos are checked to remove identifying marks. Students studying our materials should notice how the same event has multiple abstractions: one internal, one external, one conceptual.

Interviewer: Suppose something goes wrong — a frame damaged during installation, for instance. How do you record it?

Can: We open an incident entry: date, object code, description, images, immediate action, and cross-references to related reports. Elif writes it, I comment if policy adjustments are needed. If the work is repaired, a short treatment note follows. These incidents stay in the dossier even after resolution; transparency matters.

Interviewer: You seem comfortable leaving some steps undescribed. Is that deliberate?

Can: Absolutely. Real workflows are rarely perfect sequences. A little ambiguity invites analytical thinking. When students model our operations, I want them to reconstruct missing links instead of memorizing checklists. Ambiguity trains curiosity.

Interviewer: Let's verify a few details then. Kerem manages bidder registrations but doesn't validate identities — that's you?

Can: Correct. Final validation is mine.

Interviewer: Elif assigns object codes following a pattern you designed?

Can: Correct again.

Interviewer: Exhibition codes appear in both the press kits and technical dossiers?

Can: Everywhere. That's the connective tissue.

Interviewer: Reserve prices remain confidential?

Can: Of course.

Interviewer: Condition reports are paper-signed and later scanned?

Can: Yes. We keep both formats.

Interviewer: Which records do you personally author?

Can: The curatorial briefs, the checklist rationales, the label masters, sometimes a foreword for the catalog. I also write short approval notes when a loan or insurance issue needs closure. Occasionally I release a director's memo about policy — small updates that keep us consistent across seasons.

Interviewer: Let's focus on a single artwork. How does it travel from first contact to hanging on the wall?

Can: It begins with communication — a proposal or a request. We evaluate whether it fits the exhibition concept, then reserve a provisional code for tracking. While Elif organizes transport and insurance, I finalize placement and text. Once the piece arrives, it's checked, photographed, and documented. Only after that does it earn its spot in the gallery and a printed label derived from the canonical sheet. I sometimes describe it more simply: propose, prepare, receive, place, and label. That's the heartbeat of exhibition work.

Interviewer: How do you handle differences between canonical data and the public wording used in media?

Can: We maintain two surfaces: the canonical layer, which never changes without approval, and the public layer, which can breathe and adapt for communication. Kerem works on the public side, but whenever his version diverges too far we issue a correction note. That duality keeps both precision and warmth.

Interviewer: How long do you keep all these materials?

Can: As long as possible. Contracts, condition reports, and insurance files are permanent. Communications and social-media exports we sample — enough to show how a campaign looked. When an artwork leaves our responsibility, we mark its code inactive but never delete history. Deletion breaks the chain of provenance.

Interviewer: If you were to digitize everything tomorrow, what would the structure look like?

Can: I've thought about that often. We'd have tables for exhibitions, artists, objects, loans, condition reports, installation plans, events, auctions, and incidents — each connected by codes and identifiers. The canonical and public layers would exist as linked views so the system could separate factual from communicative data. It would still need a human curator behind it, though. Databases don't replace judgment; they document it.

Interviewer: Could you share how commission policies are stored or calculated?

Can: That's confidential. You can assume a separate policy entity connected to consignment and lot records, but not the details. Even in interviews, some boundaries remain.

Interviewer: What do you consider the key dependencies in your system?

Can: Three, always. The object code connects the physical work across its technical and legal lives. The exhibition code connects time and space. And role-based access connects ethics to data — who sees what, and for what reason. Everything else grows from those principles.

Interviewer: Do you personally approve the auction catalog sequence?

Can: Yes, every time.

Interviewer: And change notes always reference an identifier?

Can: They must. Otherwise they vanish in context.

Interviewer: Incident logs can exist even without an insurance claim?

Can: Certainly. They record reality, not bureaucracy.

Interviewer: Public labels can omit internal codes?

Can: They should. Transparency doesn't mean exposure.

Interviewer: Finally, what would you tell students who'll analyze this material and try to build models from it?

Can: Don't chase the perfect flowchart. Chase stability — identifiers that endure and relationships that make sense. Keep boundaries clear and links traceable. Records aren't a bureaucratic nuisance; they're the choreography of care. If your model captures that choreography, with all its small human irregularities, then you've understood what this gallery truly is.