Landmark exhibition that examines the overlooked impact of day jobs in the visual arts comes to the Cantor in expanded form with new additional California artists and accompanying catalogue featuring commissioned essays and interviews by pioneering artists.

(November 1, 2023—Stanford, CA)—The Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University is pleased to present Day Jobs, the first major exhibition to examine the overlooked impact of day jobs on the visual arts. On view from March 6 to July 21, 2024, Day Jobs is curated by Veronica Roberts, the John and Jill Freidenrich Director of the Cantor, who originated the exhibition at the Blanton Museum of Art at The University of Texas in Austin, where she was the curator of modern and contemporary art. Now featuring a larger selection of works by standout California-based artists such as Margaret Kilgallen, Jay Lynn Gomez, Barbara Kruger, Ahree Lee, Jim Campbell, Narsiso Martinez, and Sandy Rodriguez, the exhibition has significantly expanded to comprise more than 90 works by 36 established and emerging artists based in the United States. The accompanying publication has commissioned essays and
interviews from 24 pioneering artists such as Larry Bell, Mark Bradford, Tishan Hsu, Howardena Pindell, and Julia Scher, who offer first-hand accounts of how their day jobs—as a frame shop technician, hair stylist, word processor, museum employee, and security systems installer, respectively—altered their artistic trajectories in surprisingly profound ways.

“Day Jobs upends familiar narratives and myths around artists, challenging romanticized notions about how ideas are formed and what success looks like,” said Roberts. “My hope is that this exhibition will help dispel the misguided myth of the solitary artist genius and make clear that much of what has determined the course of art history in the late 20th and 21st centuries are unanticipated—often accidental—discoveries brought about as much by pragmatic experiences as by dramatic epiphanies. I also hope it encourages us to more openly acknowledge the precarious and generative ways that economic and creative pursuits are intertwined.”

The vast majority of artists based in the United States take on day jobs due to the high cost of living and modest government support for the arts in this country. Success is often measured by their ability to quit a day job and focus full time on creating art. Yet these day job positions, even if unrelated to an artist’s practice, are not always impediments to their careers. This exhibition reveals how day jobs can, in fact, spur creative growth by providing artists with new materials and methods, hands-on knowledge of a specific industry that becomes an area of artistic investigation, or a predictable paycheck and structure that enable unpredictable ideas.

The exhibition is organized loosely in seven sections that reflect the diverse industries represented by the artists: “Art World,” “Service Industry,” “Media and Advertising,” “Fashion and Design,” “Caregivers,” and “Finance, Technology, and Law.” Since artist day jobs are not commonly shared, recommendations were solicited from nearly a hundred curators, artists, and other colleagues in the field. Artists were selected based not only on the strength of their art, but also the extent to which their day job tangibly changed their practice. While the process for selecting artists occurred as part of the customary work of curatorial practice—informal studio visits and conversations, visiting residency programs, and encountering work in gallery and museum exhibitions as well as art fairs—notably, a third of the artists in the show were recommended by colleagues and unfamiliar to Roberts when she began assembling the exhibition checklist roughly five years ago.

Some of the most commonly-held day jobs—teaching art and working as an assistant to another artist—are threaded through participating artists’ careers but are deliberately not represented in the exhibition because their extensive and particular histories could be exhibitions unto themselves, and because the nature of those roles is so adjacent to being an artist. “Day Jobs ultimately seeks to demystify artistic production,” according to Roberts. “The show is part of a larger ongoing interest on my part to take contemporary art out of its rarefied realm and into everyday life. The exhibition also supports the Cantor’s mission to serve as a vital site that connects art to a wider public.”

**Art World**

Conversations with artists over two decades sparked Roberts’ inspiration for the exhibition. Offhand comments about the importance of day jobs became a pattern, while institutions and art historical scholarship seemed to conspicuously disregard the relationship between artistic and economic labor. One of Roberts’ first conversations to this effect was with Sol LeWitt, who reflected on his time as a receptionist at The Museum of Modern Art as one of the most instructive experiences of his life: As he
later remarked, “Knowing these people and talking to them was really more of an education than I ever got in art school.”

Featuring Wall Drawing #48 (1970) by LeWitt, this section introduces a central conceit of Day Jobs—that art does not emerge from a vacuum or in isolation but is a rich interplay of ideas and experiences with colleagues or even coworkers. It continues with artists who likewise worked in the art world. However, for this latter group of artists, access to museum collections, archives, and art-related materials, such as frames and crates, was particularly impactful. Included is work by a former frame shop technician (Larry Bell), a library page and book repairer in the Conservation and Preservation Department at the San Francisco Public Library (Margaret Kilgallen), a member of MoMA’s curatorial staff (Howardena Pindell), a member of the Getty Museum’s education department (Sandy Rodriguez), and a freelance museum educator (Fred Wilson).

Some of the connections between employment and artistic practice are ideological or conceptual. For example, Wilson’s extended time in museums influenced his engagement with institutional critique. Others offer more formal and material responses: Kilgallen’s mixed media works, often made with salvaged wood and old book pages, take inspiration from hand-painted signs found throughout San Francisco’s Mission District and letterforms she encountered while working at the library, and reflect her appreciation for the hand-made. Three watercolor portraits by Rodriguez, added to the exhibition at the Cantor to complement two other large-scale works, picture three migrant children who passed away while in the custody of the U.S. Customs and Border Protection. Painted on amate using hand-processed pigments, Rodriguez’s intimate knowledge of methods and materials for painting emerged from her research conducted as a museum education specialist at the Getty Museum with curators and conservators. Pindell’s work is also grounded in the material resources of her day job. Working full-time as an exhibition assistant and later associate curator at MoMA meant that she lost access to daily natural light and had to abandon the figurative painting practice she developed in Yale’s MFA program. She turned her attention to materials and processes that could be experimented with after hours. Taking home

Sandy Rodriguez, Juan de León Gutiérrez (age 16), 2019
discarded file folders, paper, and mat board scraps—the very hallmarks of a museum desk job—Pindell began experimenting with these materials, attaching hole punched paper and board to unstretched canvas that she sewed together in pieces. The result, Untitled #21 (1978) transforms these quotidian office materials into a striking, large-scale abstraction.

Service Industry

It is hard to imagine the service industry without artists, actors, and musicians. As the broadest sector in the exhibition, it features the work of Allan McCollum (meal preparer, LAX), Violette Bule (server), Tom Kiefer (janitor, U.S. Customs and Border Protection), Narsiso Martinez (agricultural worker), and Julia Scher (cleaner, handywoman, and security systems installer).

Works by artists in this section address the nature and challenges of these occupations through their subject matter. The decade or so that Martinez spent as an agricultural worker picking produce in Washington state directly informs his paintings and drawings that honor fellow workers on cardboard produce boxes. In his monumental work, Legal Tender, he places an undocumented farmworker from Mexico at the center of an oversize dollar bill to address the crucial, often backbreaking labor by immigrants that has sustained America’s agricultural bounty and wealth. Homage to Johnny by Venezuelan-born Bule also highlights the essential, and sometimes invisible, role played by immigrant and undocumented workers in the United States. In this work, Bule pays tribute to a former co-worker who was paid $5 an hour to take out the trash and polish silverware in the basement of a New York bakery. The arresting shrine-like sculpture simultaneously captures the vulnerability and dedication of Johnny’s labor.

Media and Advertising

Many artists have used their training in media and advertising to critique the industry’s appeals to consumption. In order to dismantle a language, you first have to master it. Artists in this section include Gretchen Bender (commercial film editor and director), Marsha Cottrell (production designer, Condé
Nast), Barbara Kruger (graphic designer, Condé Nast), Chuck Ramirez (graphic designer, H-E-B Grocery), James Rosenquist (billboard painter), and Andy Warhol (commercial illustrator).

Barbara Kruger, Untitled (Your Fact is Stranger than Fiction), 1983

Barbara Kruger was one of the artists who helped inspire the show. She spent nearly a decade as an award-winning graphic designer for Condé Nast, acknowledging: “my work as a graphic designer, with a few adjustments, became my art.” James Rosenquist similarly credits his training as a billboard painter for giving him the techniques he transferred to his enigmatic, often unsettling paintings—in particular, his ability to work effectively on a monumental scale and fascination with extreme close-ups that become abstractions.

While historically New York City has been the center for the media and advertising industry, this exhibition also includes the late San Antonio-based artist Chuck Ramirez who designed and photographed brand packaging for the beloved Texas grocery giant H-E-B. His photo Whatacup (2002/2014) riffs on the recognizable cups from the state’s iconic Whataburger chain, blowing up the design in a life-size six-foot photograph that focuses on the element of the packaging that makes a humble request of its consumers: “When I’m empty please dispose of me properly.” Here, the commercial product has become a poignant self-portrait and reference to the artist’s HIV-positive status.
Fashion and Design

The fashion and design industries have natural affinities with the visual arts, so it is not surprising that artists would seek employment in these arenas. Included in this section are Emma Amos (assistant to textile artist Dorothy Liebes), Richard Artschwager (furniture maker), Genesis Belanger (prop stylist assistant), Mark Bradford (hair stylist), and Jeffrey Gibson (visual merchandiser, IKEA). Many of the artists in this section gained a heightened awareness of how to maximize the dramatic presentation of objects through their jobs and deliberately blur the distinctions between art, fashion, and design in their artwork.

Regularly scouring New York City for eclectic items to accentuate photo shoots for magazines and fashion labels, Belanger encountered a diverse array of unconventional materials and learned how to make any kind of prop that might be needed. Working as an assistant to a prop stylist offered the artist, as she expressed, “a backstage pass to how the most powerful images in our culture are made”--something that she channels into her stoneware sculpture in smart and seductive ways.

Mark Bradford frequently refers to his mother’s beauty shop in Leimert Park, Los Angeles, as his “first studio.” The endpapers that he used as a hairstylist there serve as the foundation for many of his early large-scale paintings, such as 20 minutes from any bus stop (2002): “I learned my own way of constructing paintings through the endpapers–how to create space, how to use color. And how to provide a new kind of content. They were the beginning for me…It all began in the beauty salon.”

Caregivers

As the economics of care is typically under-acknowledged, Day Jobs seeks to rectify this with a section that highlights the crucial work done by mothers (Lenka Clayton), nannies (Vivian Maier, Jay Lynn...
Gomez), and nurses (Nate Lewis). The fact that caregiving occupations have historically been dominated by women and people of color also registers itself significantly in this section.

A monumentally scaled painting titled Melrose Avenue, Eastbound (2016), as well as various collages made by Gomez during her time as a nanny for a family in West Hollywood, California, highlights the ethnic and class distinctions that define these relationships between caregivers—most often immigrant laborers and Mexican Americans like Gomez—and the affluent white American families they support. In portraying caregivers, she makes visible the “invisible.” As Gomez shared, “It was inspired by saying, ‘I’m here. We exist.’” Also working in collage, Lewis draws upon practices and materials he used during the eight years he spent working as a nurse in the ICU. Using the human body as his main subject, he treats paper like an organism, cutting it into the intricate patterns that he considers connected to the diagnostic tools he used as a nurse and considers an expression of care.

**Finance, Technology, and Law**

The sectors of finance, tech, and law might seem like areas that would less frequently intersect with art making. For Ragen Moss, however, the seemingly disparate fields of art and law offer a kind of productive cross-training. As she states, “having a very different kind of work (such as practicing law), rather than drain energy away from making art...seems to serve as a counterintuitive lever to crest-up waves of creative ideas.” The exhibition’s section features work by Sara Bennett (public defender), Ragen Moss (attorney), Jim Campbell (hardware design engineer), Tishan Hsu (word processor at a law firm), Jeff Koons (commodities broker), Ahree Lee (UI/UX designer at Apple, HP Labs, and J. Paul Getty Trust), and Lillian Schwartz (resident visitor, consultant in computer graphics, Bell Labs).
At Bell Labs—a hotbed of technological experimentation in the 1970s—Schwartz was a resident advisor and consultant in computer graphics, where she created video works using graphic processing technologies and authored a computer artist's handbook. Featuring two of her early video works as well as a selection of laser etchings on anodized aluminum, Day Jobs highlights her pioneering use of new media. Hsu is another pioneering artist included in the exhibition. For nearly ten years, in the 1970s and '80s, Hsu worked as a word processor for a law firm at night while making paintings during the day. Although he works within the timeworn tradition of painting, as a word processor, he considered society's relationship with screens and their daily effect on lives and bodies. The resulting works feature rounded corners that presciently echo the shape of technologies that are now omnipresent. Bennett's relationship to her legal career diverges dramatically from Hsu’s. During her nearly two decades as a public defender, she began photographing women with life sentences both inside and outside of prison. Bennett took up photography because she felt that capturing the stories of incarcerated women in pictures and their own words could change public attitudes around criminal justice. In works such as JUDY, 69, in the nursery at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility (2019), the artist asks us to consider women in prison beyond their crimes.

Sara Bennett, JUDY, 69, in the nursery at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, 2019.

Matthew Angelo Harrison, Manuel A. Rodríguez Delgado, and Virginia L. Montgomery
The final two galleries of the exhibition, the Ruth Levison Halperin Gallery and Lynn Krywick Gibbons Gallery, feature work by several of the youngest artists in the show: Matthew Angelo Harrison (modeler, Ford Motor Co.), Manuel A. Rodríguez-Delgado (crate builder), and Virginia L. Montgomery (graphic...
facilitator). While Harrison and Rodríguez-Delgado’s day jobs have little in common, their sculptures are paired to illuminate their shared interest in labor itself; for Harrison, informed by his experience growing up and ultimately working in the epicenter of the automobile industry in Detroit, for Rodríguez Delgado, informed by his experiences as an immigrant from Puerto Rico. Their sculptures simultaneously suggest historic relics, or containers of precious artifacts, while conjuring futurist possibilities. The final gallery of the exhibition is dedicated to a trio of videos by Montgomery, one of two artists in the show who continues to hold her day job. Reflecting her belief that all beings, things, and objects have consciousness, Montgomery uses a lexicon of symbols and recurrent motifs that is connected to the “mind map scribing” she performs in her job as a graphic facilitator. Together these three artists point to the continued precarity of creative labor in this country, while also underscoring the ways that day jobs can lead to new ways of thinking and making.

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION CATALOG
A major catalogue will function both as an essential reader for the exhibition and as a standalone compilation of stories by many of the country’s most compelling artists, detailing the impact of their day jobs in their own words. Published by Santa Fe-based Radius Books, over 300 copies of the catalogue will be distributed to community art centers and public libraries across the country via their Donation Program—further enhancing the educational reach of Day Jobs and its core ethos about how to better support creative practices. The catalogue is edited by Roberts; Jorge Sibaja, curatorial assistant, Cantor Arts Center; and Lynne Maphies, former curatorial assistant, Blanton Museum of Art. Other contributors include Francesca Balboni, Sarah C. Bancroft, Meg Burns, Jenny Dally, Lucy R. Lippard, Aja Mujinga Sherrard, Kenta Murakami, and Rebekah Rutkoff.

ABOUT THE CANTOR ARTS CENTER
Serving the Stanford campus, the Bay Area community, and visitors from around the world, the Cantor Arts Center provides an outstanding cultural experience for visitors of all ages. Founded when the university opened in 1891, the historic museum was expanded and renamed in 1999 for lead donors Iris and B. Gerald Cantor. The Cantor’s collection spans 5,000 years and includes more than 41,000 works of art from around the globe. The Cantor is an established resource for teaching and research on campus. Free admission, tours, lectures, and family activities make the Cantor one of the most visited university art museums in the country.

EXHIBITION CREDITS:
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IMAGE CREDITS:
Image 2: Sandy Rodriguez, Juan de León Gutiérrez (age 16), 2019. Hand-processed watercolor on amate paper, 22 ¾ × 15 1/3 in. (57.8 x 38.9 cm). Collection of Kaiser Permanente Bernard J. Tyson School of Medicine © Sandy Rodriguez.

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