



INVISIBLE
LABOUR:
APPRECIATING
THE WORK
*THAT NO ONE
SEES*

BY CHRISTINA NAFZIGER

If you are an artist, chances are, you are sharing your work over social media—and if you are sharing images of your work, I can bet you’ve shared an image or two of a work in progress. (#wip!) And if you aren’t sharing these photos, it is hard to avoid this behind-the-scenes look into an artist’s creative process. (Perhaps the more fitting word here would be creative progress.) The pressure to physically produce and create and to then show and share your progress and output is something Create! Magazine often discusses. The guilt of not producing can be overwhelming. We often forget about the labour that goes unseen, the work that is overlooked and undervalued that doesn’t always necessarily translate into something physically. I’m talking about the research! The constant gathering of inspiration, of reference images, of reading materials that help develop your concept—even something as simple as taking a trip or having a discussion with a friend. This invisible labour is so easily forgotten perhaps because it may not be as glamorous—the act itself is not an act of physical creation. Instead, it is the constant churning of thought, reworking a concept over time until it seeps into a piece that you are working on, informing a body of work. The infamous artist Robert Mapplethorpe spent countless hours in porn shops looking at nude images for inspiration that later informed his photography; the ground-breaking artist Kerry James Marshall surely spent time and research when mixing his own unique tone of black for his subjects, one that differed historically from that of white artists; contemporary painter Jen Mann looks at image after image of reference photos before choosing one to base her next painting on. This essay is a celebration of the invisible work that all artists do and have done throughout time! We may just not know it.

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After discussing this topic with several artists I know, I was not surprised to find out that they each had their own form of unseen work that went into their practice—and some were quite unexpected, but nonetheless time consuming. Abstract painter Sarah Leuchner is endlessly fascinated with our society’s obsession with reality television. Investigating this topic has led her to watch many episodes of different reality TV shows. Sarah explains, “My media consumption during my studio time is an important aspect of my process that isn’t necessarily always present in the finished piece. Reality TV is something I think about and pull from often. A main theme/investigation for me is what draws people to reality TV, and I really think its tourism, and knowing that ‘those people are just like me.’ It’s an on-going research for me and my practice.”

Chicago artist Abena Motaboli infuses materials like tea, dirt, and coffee into her paintings. Originally from Lesotho in Southern Africa, her work reflects on displacement, memories, and her home country. Abena is interested in the dialogue of colonialism and western world powers, and explores these concepts during her travels to Southern Africa as well as during her time reading philosophy, which she says helps inform what she paints.

Texas-based artist Nadia Waheed (who we featured in issue 14) beautifully describes what it means for this artistic research to become infused in your day-to-day life:

“I want to make it very clear that I don’t believe in inspiration. I believe in complete immersion. Everything I do in my life feeds into painting, every waking moment is research. It’s difficult to clearly indicate what specifically I do that goes into making a painting because the truth is that every action I make is relevant. The things I buy at the grocery store, the clothes I wear, my daily schedule... because the root of my work lies in attempting to convey a personal feeling or question, everything I do and think and feel as a person feeds into a vital element in the development of my work - the identification of what that feeling or question is. A clear understanding of that thing does not mean that it is completely legible and articulated - but I need to know what the shape of it is, not literally a “shape” but the metaphorical shape of a particular feeling. The work that goes into identifying that shape is complex - a lot of looking at art, a lot of reading, listening to NPR or podcasts, watching movies, taking walks, staring at the ceiling... the reality is that I never know when something is going to click for me, so it’s imperative I follow my curiosities - if I have an interest in something I know that somewhere down the line it will serve a purpose in my painting. This myriad of information, along with my base experience as a human being, (which is most relevant) becomes the “input” and the drawing or painting (how I process) becomes the “output.”



“Once I have the aforementioned shape it becomes clarified into some part of a figure, e.g. the shape of an arm or a bend in a neck, and that shape further is clarified through the physical act of painting, an intuitive process with every move building on the one made before it. It is a methodical exercise with many attempts proving to be unsuccessful, as the image falls short of the feeling or question I was attempting to depict; so I begin again, realizing that I needed more information, a better understanding of that shape to portray it more accurately.

Maybe most succinctly - on my studio door right at eye level, so that I see it whenever I leave the studio, is a post-it that says “incrementally and by osmosis”, a reminder to myself that my work is not to be done overnight. My work is done slowly and eternally, a constant shifting in and out of information and understanding. I know that I am a permeable organism and if I don’t understand something today, I might tomorrow, if not tomorrow, then the day after. My understanding of the world is mirrored in my painting and will continue to change and evolve as I do, forever.”

This invisible labour is truly on going. It is time consuming. It isn’t glamorous, and it is never ending—but we do it anyways! It is the unseen work that is intertwined with our practice, becoming a vital part of our life. It is important to know that these acts are still work, it is just work in a different sense, but it still holds immense value. Even if it is unseen, you are not alone. It comes from a long history of artistic practice and research that is necessary for development and breakthroughs.