

Smithsonian MAGAZINE

How Artists' Day Jobs Shape Their Craft

A new exhibition examines the generative relationship
between work and creativity

While working in an intensive care unit in the early 2010s, [Nate Lewis](#) started collecting electrocardiogram readings that tracked when patients' heart rates rose too high or dipped too low. He saw the strips as a tangible manifestation of physical distress, an irrefutable record of patients' most vulnerable moments.

In his time off, Lewis started making art with the readings. He wasn't an artist—he was a nurse, just like his father—but every night, [hours passed](#) as he worked with paper, lines and patterns.

“Those pieces were really intimate because they were all patients in very critical condition,” he told Chenée Daley of [BRIC](#), a nonprofit arts group, in 2021. “What more would I want to make art with, other than these records of somebody's life?”

In 2017, Lewis left nursing to become a full-time artist. Still, he said his artistic proclivities come from “the diagnostic lens of MRIs, CT scans, X-rays that see the unseen.”



Signaling XXIII (2020) by Nate Lewis, whose work in an intensive care unit changed how he approached art Nate Lewis / Fridman Gallery

Now, Lewis is one of 38 artists featured in “[Day Jobs](#),” a new exhibition at the [Blanton Museum of Art](#) in Austin, Texas. The show examines how artists’ day jobs influence—and sometimes enhance—their creative endeavors.

“Artists are some of the hardest-working people I know, but I am struck by how misunderstood they often are,” says exhibition curator [Veronica Roberts](#), now the director of the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University, in a [statement](#).

The show aims “to dispel the misguided myths of the starving artist or the romanticized artist struck by a dramatic epiphany,” she adds. “At the core of the exhibition is a desire to acknowledge the precarious and generative ways that art and economic pursuits are intertwined.”

Along with up-and-coming artists, the show also features big names: [Jeff Koons](#) was once a commodities broker. [Barbara Kruger](#) started out as a magazine graphic designer. [Vivian Maier](#) took 150,000 photographs during her 40-year career as a nanny, then died in obscurity. [James Rosenquist](#) worked as a billboard painter.

“I brought artistic skill to my sign painting,” Rosenquist told *Smithsonian magazine*’s Courtney Jordan in 2007. “I made movie stars look better. I made them real. That experience helped my fine art.”

Even [Andy Warhol](#) worked as a fashion illustrator. The Pop Art icon was “one of the first artists to talk about art as a business,” Roberts tells *Arts and Culture Texas* magazine’s Donna Tennant. “He understood branding and marketing.”

At the Blanton, the featured artists have worked as caretakers, lawyers, dishwashers, hardware design engineers and water meter readers. Their 75 artworks are broken into several categories: “Art World,” “Service Industry,” “Media and Advertising,” “Fashion and Design,” “Caregivers,” and “Finance, Technology and Law.”

The first section, “Art World,” spotlights artists who worked at museums. Many of these individuals once worked at the [Museum of Modern Art](#), in roles ranging from security guards to elevator operators. They weren’t *making* art in their working hours, but they were able to remain immersed in it. Beyond the Blanton, this trajectory persists elsewhere: The [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) even stages a [secret exhibition](#) of staff artwork every two years.

“I think we overlook how much mundane moments can shape creative discoveries and directions,” Roberts tells the *New York Times*’ Travis Diehl. She adds, “When we view artists as living in this rarefied realm, we do a disservice to ourselves and to them.”

Of the artists featured in the exhibition, only two still have day jobs: [Virginia L. Montgomery](#), a video artist, works as a graphic facilitator. [Ragen Moss](#), a sculptor, works as a lawyer. Both tell the *Times* that even if they could quit their day jobs, they wouldn’t.

“If I was constantly thinking about myself and my own needs all the time,” says Montgomery, “I would go a bit crazy.”

By working in law, says Moss, “I feel authorized to ask huge questions: Where did law begin? What is it for? Who does it serve?”

In other words, for art to be transformative, artists need something to transform—perhaps something out of their own heads. As the *Times* writes, “Great artists need the world, maybe more than it needs them.”

“Day Jobs” is on view at the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, Texas, through July 23.