



# For Love or Money

6 July – 25 August 2019

# ART/WORK

## Essay by Sophia Cai

*For Love or Money* is an exhibition about artistic labour and how artists and their practices are valued within broader economic, social and cultural systems. The title of the exhibition refers to the supposed contradiction that exists between pursuing work for reasons of 'passion' or reasons of 'gain', and how this false dichotomy leads to precarious working conditions for artists. Within the neo-liberal system in which we are living, everything one does is scrutinised through an individual's capacity to be productive and to contribute to capitalism. *For Love or Money* considers how artists are both critical of and co-exist within these larger structures.

One of the key struggles artists and art professionals face is that their labour is frequently exploited or undervalued. The recent NAVA *Fair Pay for Artists* campaign identifies there is currently no minimum benchmark of compensation for artists' time, ideas, labour and skills.<sup>1</sup> Maintaining an arts practice can mean dealing with little or no compensation while simultaneously trying to sustain and build a career.

**Make or Break, Artists' Subcommittee** and **Shannon Lyons** are interested in examining art world structures and how they inform artistic practice and notions of value. In the work *Valuation Reading* by Make or Break, the artists worked with an accredited valuer to determine the dollar value of a prior project. This amount has been represented in wallpapered replicas of bank notes, produced and installed by salaried gallery staff, to signify the 'cash value' of the work. A video work that provides a reading of the valuation is displayed alongside the wallpaper. By making this information visible, Make or

Break question the conflation of economic value with cultural value.

Visibility is also central to the *ARTSLOG* database created by Artists' Subcommittee, which invites submissions from arts workers to document their experience of working in the field. These stories capture a range of details including the payments received and the negotiations between artist and institution. Through making these testimonials publicly viewable, *ARTSLOG* aims to help improve working conditions for artists through a process of transparency and accountability.

As art audiences we may only ever see the results of completed and successful exhibition pitches, however it is these 'behind-the-scenes' stories that reveal a larger picture of artistic sustainability. The wall vinyl by Shannon Lyons draws attention to artistic rejection and the unpaid time and labour spent developing projects that are never realised or made. By removing any reference to specific information in the text, Lyons maintains both the confidentiality of the parties but also allows an audience to imagine their own versions of the exhibition outcome.

Given the precarious nature of working as an artist, this naturally creates barriers of access, as individuals with greater wealth and privilege are able to pursue and support their practices. As art critic Ben Davis identifies; "the art world is a system in which class and economic advantage play a significant role."<sup>2</sup> The works of **Elvis Richardson, Salote Tawale** and **Steven Rhall** draw attention to the discrepancies in artist representation within this system, directing a critical eye to the status quo of whose work is profiled and what that reveals about systematic oppression.



Elvis Richardson's works in the exhibition investigate how artists live and work within economic, social and cultural contradictions. In the *Artist Lifestyle* series, Richardson borrows from the style and format of glossy advertising and marketing campaigns to sell an artist lifestyle to the audience. The series provides a cynical look at how the stereotypes of artists (as 'starving' or 'wealthy') are shaped and perpetuated.

Richardson is also the founding editor of *CoUNTess*, a resource that captures and publishes data on gender representation in the arts sector of Australia. In the work *Men VS Women*, this disparity is demonstrated through the analysis of the artist names featured in an Australian art publication. It took Richardson three issues to fill the trophy shape with the names of male artists, and ten issues to complete the same sized trophy with names of female artists.

The video work of Salote Tawale continues this critique through a play on notions of success and failure. Filmed in the artist's former Melbourne studio, the work shows the artist continuously extending out a tape measure until it collapses under its own weight

– the futility of this task is a metaphorical contemplation on Tawale's experience of navigating the art world as a woman of colour.

Steven Rhall's installation *I want it that way* critically examines how the art of First Nations people is presented and consumed within both a gallery context and wider art and cultural milieus. This project brings together a selection of Rhall's previously (unsold) works, and re-presents them in conversation with a series of gallery display cabinets, referencing both museological presentation histories and ideas of value aligned with an object's presentation. By bringing these pre-existing works into this new context, along with bespoke new consumables, Rhall questions art market paradigms and what it means for a work to remain 'available for sale' in terms of its supposed value.

It would be impossible to talk about artistic labour without acknowledging the hierarchy of labour itself, and what type of work is deemed valuable and why. **Kay Abude** and **James Nguyen** are both interested in examining this in relation to migrant labour, and the disruption to employment opportunities that may arise due to migration.

Kay Abude's two works in the exhibition speak directly to ideas of factory work and exploitative labour. Informed by her parents' relocation to Australia and subsequent shift from white to blue-collar jobs, Abude's installation and textile works make direct reference to factory labour, mass manufacturing and the system of shift work. These ideas of production are also embedded in the way the works are fabricated, whether through the delegation of responsibilities to others or by Abude's own hands. Considered together within an art context, Abude's work raises significant questions about the ethics of work, and whether regarding art-making as a 'labour of love' contributes to further exploitation of artists.

*Lifters and Leaners* by James Nguyen similarly explores these tensions between white and blue-collar work, and what types of labour are more desirable. Using Modernism as an aesthetic and also cultural benchmark, Nguyen's work challenges the distinction made between 'skilled' and 'unskilled' labourers, and the way these demarcations are also used to influence migrant entry (or non-entry) to Australia.

One common thread throughout *For Love or Money* is a deep questioning and reappraisal of artistic worth, and the fraught relationship between being an artist and being able to survive (economically and socially) as an artist. For **Abdullah M I Syed**, this question of pursuing art for love is at the centre of his *Currency of Love* series. The work is an homage to his mother and the nurture and care she provided for her children to pursue higher education and professional prospects. By acknowledging his mother was unable to pursue the path of becoming an artist herself, there is a burden recognised by Syed in this work. The series further highlights most poignantly the aspect of love that is implied in the title of the exhibition – and the very personal sacrifices made to pursue an artistic career.

*For Love or Money* uses artistic interventions to critically examine the complex relationship between artistic work, labour, and value. The artists in this exhibition turn their attention to the frequently unseen labour of artistic creation and output, while also acknowledging the art world is part of larger social and economic systems. At a time of increasing financial inequality and growing wealth gaps, *For Love or Money* draws attention to the tension of artistic labour within capitalist structures.

**Sophia Cai is a curator, arts writer and knitter with a particular interest in Asian art history as well as the intersection between contemporary art and craft.**

- 1 'Fair Pay for Artists.' National Association for the Visual Arts. <https://visualarts.net.au/advocacy/campaigns/artists-fees/> (retrieved 9 June 2019)
- 2 Davis, Ben. 'Do You Have to Be Rich to be an Artist'. Artnet. <https://news.artnet.com/market/do-you-have-to-be-rich-to-succeed-as-an-artist-403166> (retrieved 3 June 2019)

██████████ EXHIBITION PROPOSAL

██████████

██████████ is not about inactivity or inertia. On the contrary, it is about having the enthusiasm to meticulously examine, analyse, interpret and re-present the prevailing conditions of a specified place to an audience that might not have noticed them otherwise.

██████████ is a proposed exhibition of site-specific artworks by ██████████ for the ██████████. The new site-specific artworks will be informed by prior studio research conducted during a ██████████ residency in the ██████████. Time spent reflecting on the studio research has led to a desire to produce site-specific artworks for public display.

Typically, contemporary exhibition design focuses on how to make the gallery space *recede*. Specific installation procedures and techniques are employed, and protocols adhered to, in order to 'make the gallery disappear.' By contrast, the artworks proposed for ██████████ will circumvent the gallery's typical tendency to vanish, in an attempt to instead illuminate the gallery space as a material, phenomenological and political reality. ██████████ will coalesce artistic content with the ██████████ gallery context.

██████████ would mark the first solo exhibition in a public institution by artist ██████████.

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*Above:*

Shannon LYONS, *Doing Nearly Nothing Exhibition Proposal* (2013, remade in 2019), matte black vinyl on gallery wall, installation dimensions variable, image courtesy of the artist.

*Centre spread:*

Salote TAWALE, still from *Weights and Measurements* (2013), video, image courtesy of the artist.



**For Love or Money** features Kay Abude, Artists' Subcommittee, Shannon Lyons, Make or Break, James Nguyen, Steven Rhall, Elvis Richardson, Abdullah M I Syed and Salote Tawale.

*Cover:*



Kay ABUDE, *Piecework* (2014), plaster, gold paint, cotton velvet, silk and rayon braided cord, silk and rayon embroidery, timber pallet, 36 x 80 x 60cm, image courtesy of the artist.

*Above:*

Abdullah M I SYED, *Currency of Love* (2016-2019), pure pigment print on cotton rag of plucked damaged and dead money-plant leaves mended with 24k gold-leaf and used and fresh banknotes, 13 x 18cm each, installation dimensions variable, image courtesy of the artist. Photography by Mim Sterling.



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