Arts + Public Life presents On the Record, an exhibition featuring works by Greg Bae, Brittney Leeanne Williams and Savannah Jubic. The exhibition is a presentation of works by artists who currently, or in the past, worked as artist assistants to notable Chicago artists. This common and accepted practice of making work for an artist, without being named, raises questions about labor, visibility, and ethics in the art world. These labor and craft dynamics are not new and can be found throughout art history. While it is not a secret practice for renowned artists to employ unnamed studio teams, the reality of this phenomenon is routinely obscured by the preference to celebrate the individual genius of artists and their work. Presented together, these artists and the variety of mediums exhibited, form a field that sheds light on authorship and the working artist-to-artist relationship.
The labor of women and people of color are often the first to be undervalued and unrecognized. In the arts, artists have rightfully demanded ownership and recognition for their work in a multitude of ways, but one elephant still remains in the room—the artist assistants, ghost artists, apprentices—the artists behind the artists. When I first encountered assistants who work in artist studios, I was surprised by the level of anonymity they had, and was able to understand levels of involvement and complexity of this phenomena. At times I was taken by surprise to learn what the big name artists were not making themselves. By curating exhibitions and through our artist-in-residence program, I also began to learn more about the work of emerging artists who were also assistants. For some of these artists, their personal practice was strong and distinct from their assistants, and for others, they had put their own practice to the side to meet the demands of the consistent work they had as assistants. On the Record hopes to recognize the work of artist assistants who continually try to find their way back to their practice. It is an homage to invisible labor, in the arts and beyond. I am often preoccupied with the labor that folks do not see (domestic workers, undocumented laborers, the work of stay-at-home parents, etc.). As an arts administrator, I know that what the public sees and experiences is a small fraction of the artistic process. Arts administrators often work long hours with very little recognition for their cultivation, curation and practice.

The anonymous assistant is a cultural phenomenon that art-viewers have accepted in exchange for the ability to solely relish in the practice of the capital A artist. We all need heroes, but at whose expense? The anonymity of artist assistants is a newer practice. In the past, the master artist would work with apprentices and readily share their names, because a good apprentice/assistant was a positive reflection of the knowledge and methods passed on from the master artist. In more recent times, the majority of assistants are not viewed as pupils, rather most are brought on as hired help. While this major shift has occurred in many studios, some artists still maintain a healthy and positive environment. It is when artist assistants make a piece from beginning to end for another artist with no recognition, that things get murky. Who’s getting paid large sums of money? Is the artwork a work of art or a commodified product or both? Who is the author of the work? Should viewers critically examine authorship of artwork just as they do when considering form and content of a piece? By understanding and acknowledging the process of creating artwork, there is a greater sense of appreciation that can be garnered and ethical standards that can be upheld. But there is no script (or law) to guide these practices. Perhaps it is time to examine our values and push to maintain more transparency and critical conversations, as a pathway to far better practices in the industry.

Of course, there are nuances to recognize—artist assistants do the range of art making, so their involvement in any given process may range from small prep work to the majority of fabrication. Additionally, some artists publicly acknowledge the assistants working in their studios, while some assistants prefer to not be named, for fear of only being recognized as that particular artist’s assistant. For artists, being an assistant to another artist can provide the flexibility and financial security to continue their own practice. All of the artists in On the Record have worked for Chicago-based artists. Despite learning about the empires of white artists who have troves of assistants maintaining their practice (Andy Warhol rightfully called his studio The Factory, for the way in which it operated similar to an assembly line), all of the artists represented in this exhibition have worked for artists of color, an added layer of complexity to grapple with. The exhibition presents a range of works which capture feelings of intimacy and visibility. Gregory Bae, Savannah Jubic, and Brittney Leanne Williams, polar opposite to production based practices, engage long and intentional processes as part of their craft and technique. For all of the artists, part of their artistic voice involves a dedication to a repetitive process, whether it is continually painting the human figure, or long process hand weaving. Their practices demand their hands to produce.

In a time where we are shifting and reimagining who our heroes are, I hope we can also recognize and reconsider the complex and deep work of those in the arts who are not front and center. They are some of the most innovative thinkers, makers, and curators. I challenge us to recognize the craft and intentional processes of artists which are slow, careful, and involved. To always value those who labor more than a big name.

-Nadia Sulayman, Co-Curator
Seven days a week, Andi Crist is an art hero—in her work as the lead preparator at a very busy, venerable art center here in town. In our more than two years of being acquainted as colleagues within the arts community of Chicago, Andi—who is far too stylish to be called Ms. Crist—stands out in her unparalleled poise and generosity as a collaborative builder.

Labor that is not visible or known to the art-viewing audience, occurs on a daily basis in the work of preparators. Andi, for example, co-designs and co-constructs artworks and installations, as well as maintaining the gallery space in a way that mutually keeps artworks and visitors safe.
Andi and I agree that in a very basic way across all industries and fields, people are employed for their skills, their education, and their years of experience. That is what it means to be active in the workforce and hold a job.

Still, I believe that preparators are the unsung heroes of exhibitions. Therefore I am pleased to introduce and share this interview that casts increased visibility on the ins and outs of preparators’ very important work, as told to me by my esteemed friend, Ms. Crist.

“One of the coolest things about working with artists is that they have such amazing ideas. Ideas that connect people, history, and time. As part of our process together, I talk with each artist, doing sketches to see what they’re thinking, and to see how to translate the ideas into a material form that’s possible within the context of the space.”

Andi Crist: In my staff position at an art center, I feel strongly that it’s my role to support the artists who exhibit at our space. I bring my fabrication skills to projects, and work with the artists to bring their ideas into full fruition. I understand the potential of the space we work within—so what’s possible, and how I can help an artist make their project happen. Actually, I think translating is one of my greatest skills—translating the language of art into the reality of materials. I love my job, as someone who’s really familiar with a broad spectrum of material and techniques.

The reality in Chicago, is that there are maybe a dozen, maybe twenty people employed in a full-time preparator position that comes with a salary and benefits. I feel very blessed and excited by the fact that I’m not solely working as a crew installer anymore, because I’m also someone who has fabrication experience—and that comes in handy for so many artists’ projects. I like this work because I’m able to flex my creative muscles, but I don’t feel the constant pressure of being the primary representative of art ideas. At the same time, it’s not that I don’t have those desires, or that I don’t also enjoy showing my own work. It’s just that this job feels very fulfilling in a lot of ways. The work feels really important to me.

Again, working in an institution, I feel like I can show that I went to art school, that I’m familiar with materials, and that I know how to put things together and build. I can contribute, and I think that’s what everyone wants to feel in their work life.

Andi: As a preparator, you need to be able to communicate with artists and understand their crazy weird ideas that they’re trying to express to you in art speak, and not necessarily in material or technical speak. There is a special language for translating—from facility, space, walls, floors, ceilings, to understanding materials and then bringing those elements together. You try to shape an idea into a form that can exist between so many elements. I actually take a lot of pride in what I do for that reason. Again, I have skills in carpentry, woodwork, and general construction. This background can even be surprisingly helpful for artists that aren’t builders, but are showing their paintings in a space. I’ve spoken with artists about the types of hardware that can go on the back of a painting for an even hang. They might say, “I’ve been exhibiting paintings for years, and I had no idea what a D-ring was!” These are the technical aspects of display.

“Sometimes a crew person has skills in building and construction, and they kind of understand art, but they can’t quite reach that connection. I take a lot of pride in being able to do both of these things—so I rarely feel taken advantage of in fabricating and collaborating, because I feel that this is actually my strength.”

Andi: Being an artist myself can, on rare occasion, make my role as a preparator complicated for me. I remember being asked about that possibility by my director of exhibitions, in the interview for my current job. I think that for many people who do preparator work, there is a tiny element of jealousy that can happen because of your own behind-the-scenes, uncredited labor. I’ve made jokes about making alternative fives for exhibitions—putting iron on white vinyl on a white wall on the baseboards, beneath the actual fife. Like, “That’s my alternative fife, and maybe also my name.”

“You’re part of the labor for an artist who is getting an amazing opportunity. The success of their exhibition is your responsibility. Your labor elevates someone else’s career, but also you don’t have a person, team, or support doing that for you.”

Sincerely though, it’s an amazing thing to connect with other artists in this way, because a lot of them ask me if I’m an artist. Then they’re really curious about what I do, which is nice. It’s cool. I feel lucky honestly in a lot of ways, that as an artist myself I’m able to work with materials and people that interest me. It would be ridiculous to resent all those things, because I can’t imagine myself in an office job. In the past I worked as an attorney’s administrative assistant in the Sears Tower. For another job, I managed 47 individual artists across a building of studios. That was just crazy. But also, none of those studio residents earned their livelihood and the majority of their income from their art practice. That’s just the reality for most artists.

Andi: So yes, I feel excited to work in a place that’s like, ‘Yeah, show art!’ There are teaching artists, exhibiting artists, studio artists, and more. I’m surrounded by so much creating, and I have a role to make all this stuff happen. It’s an integral part of the full system, on the backend.

I feel that it’s pretty cool that I get to be a part of that. Although, I know that a lot of people take a lot of preparators don’t always feel the same as me. I think it’s just in my personality that I get really excited about being around creative people.

“My full-time job is a totally different experience than how I worked before, as a freelance preparator. There wasn’t the opportunity to collaborate with artists on their installations. The projects and vision are planned way before the freelance preparators even shows up.”

Andi: As a crew preparator, you’re expected to know how to use tools, how to cut wood, how to hang objects from the ceiling—but you don’t translate anything. You just understand how to read the schematics and take direction. There’s no fabricating involved. It’s a very different thing. The role is often very specifically to implement the vision of the artists and the curators.

In institutions where I’ve worked freelance, I wasn’t necessarily encouraged to feel very essential. The communication was, ‘Oh, I need you to secure this heavy thing. Oh, I need you to get on this really high ladder.’ That doesn’t make me feel like I have valuable skills.

“A while ago, I felt really strongly that I should put together a field guide or manual for people making artwork—whether students or otherwise—to be familiar with the options and technical aspects of how artworks can be installed in a space. So, I did it. I wrote a book, a full guide.”

Andi: As someone who graduated with a B.A. in art, I feel really strongly that after school I did not get the practical or technical skills that I needed to be ready to install my works in an exhibition setting—even though I did install my senior show, and even though I took professional practices and passed.

Nobody ever sat down though and said, ‘Hey, here’s how you write instructions for how to install your work and how to make a case for your work, to share with a curator and exhibitions team. Here’s what a D-ring is, Here’s how to measure your work on-center.’

This is something that I think is really essential, especially to artists who are starting out and starting to exhibit their own work in nontraditional ways or even in traditional ways. I think the more understanding you have about how your work ends up existing in the world beyond your studio is going to make you a more successful artist. It’s going to make you more capable of communicating with other people about how your work can be shown, exhibited, and stand outside of your hands.

It’s important to understand how your work is going to be shown.

Interview by Asha Iman Veal
artists

Gregory Bae
Savannah Jubic
Brittney Leeanne Williams