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For many artists, a day job is not just a way of keeping body and soul together—it also feeds and sustains their creative work

by *Barbara Pollack*

It was the best kind of training," says James Rosenquist, recounting his days in the 1950s hanging from a scaffold and painting a mammoth advertisement for Castro Convertible sofas on the side of a building. Rosenquist entered the art world after seven years of working for Art Kraft, the leading billboard company in New York City, and the grand scale and bright colors of those massive signs clearly influenced his later work. But, he explains, the job taught him a lot more than merely how to approach a wide-scale canvas. "It was a school of learning that doesn't exist anymore," he goes on to explain—"a union-trade schooling in how to be a professional, making paintings for real people, not for graduate school."

Rosenquist is only one of numerous artists of his generation who look back with nostalgia on their first jobs, positions they held long before they could dream of supporting themselves through their art. Mark di Suvero, a welder and licensed crane operator, worked in construction, and Robert Rauschenberg decorated department-store windows. Wayne Thiebaud worked for Disney and Rexall Drug Company, training as a commercial artist, and Andy Warhol, of course, got his start in advertising. Robert Ryman, Sol LeWitt, Dan Flavin, and Brice Marden did stints as security guards at institutions including New York's Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim Museum, and the Jewish Museum.

"Today, it is a very different problem because the cost of living is higher," says Alex Katz, who worked as a carver at a fine-art frame shop two or three days a week for ten years before his first commercially viable show at New York's Stable Gallery in 1960. "I lived on a shoestring, so it paid the rent. Today, it would be impossible," acknowledges Katz. He has often said that it takes a decade for an artist to mature, "but now it would be impossible to be an absolute failure for ten years and survive."

"Don't quit your day job!" used to be a derogatory remark, thrown at amateurs. No longer. True, while a number of young artists today achieve instant success straight out of art school, most artists are survivalists who know enough to find a day job that can sustain them through the ups and downs of a long-term art career.

Video artist Janet Biggs, 46, has worked for the past 15 years fitting patients for prosthetic limbs at Park Avenue Orthotics in New York, despite having had numerous gallery and museum shows throughout the U.S. and Europe. This spring, she was one of ten recipients of the \$25,000 Anonymous Was a Woman grant, a prize awarded by recommendation to under-recognized women artists.

"After I received the Anonymous award—in fact, every time I sold a major installation or it looked as if I might be able to sustain myself for a year or so—I thought about quitting my day job," says Biggs. "But I have a lot of freedom at my job—to take time off to travel for exhibitions or shoots. And keeping the job allows me to work in the studio without thinking about market trends."

Greg Stone, 44, whose labor-intensive sepia-tone drawings have been shown at Pierogi Gallery in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and Gallerie Fruehsorge in Berlin, laments, "Art school preps you for almost nothing to do with supporting yourself as an artist." Unlike many artists who choose blue-collar jobs in construction or art handling, Stone works in the marketing department of one of New York's largest investment firms. "It's a kind of code, steeped in stereotypes, that artists work blue-collar jobs, if they hold any kind of job at all," he points out. Stone has found that some collectors immediately dismiss his work when they find out what he does for a living. But his choice is increasingly typical of artists today who must struggle to keep up with the cost of living in expensive art capitals like New York and Los Angeles. "From the moment I came to New York in 1990, I couldn't afford to eat; I couldn't afford art materials; I needed a way to keep a studio over my head—to keep the art going in the most expensive city in the world," he explains.

Certainly, by the mid-1980s, the romantic notion of the blue-collar-worker/artist was already evolving. Barbara Kruger got her start working in the paste-up department at Condé Nast Publications, and Jeff Koons famously did an apprenticeship as a trader on Wall Street. By the 1990s, with the Internet boom, scores of young artists, trained in computer graphics, were finding day jobs at Web start-ups. The starving artist—living in a garret and eschewing middle-class privilege—was rapidly disappearing (never mind that garrets in SoHo or even Williamsburg were increasingly out of their price range).

One problem, however, with maintaining two careers is managing dual identities. Some employers, such



Paul Clay: Video artist Clay provides streaming-video shows for dance clubs when he's not making his own art videos. At a dance party at SOB's, New York.

JOHN ENGSTROM

as financial and real-estate firms, maintain “anti-moonlighting clauses” that bar employees from outside economic pursuits. But even when it is not spelled out in their employment contracts, artists sense that it is better to keep their art careers off the radar. “I would never tell the photographers that I work with, like Steven Klein, that I am an artist, even though I have worked for many of them for years,” says sculptor Diana Puntar, who has been a set designer on television and fashion shoots while actively exhibiting her art. “They need to think that you are there to make their work better,” she explains. “They don’t want you to come in and say, ‘Hey, I’m an artist, too.’”

“The main downside is finding the time to do your own work,” says Patrick Jacobs, 33, who has a decidedly full-time schedule as a vice president at the real-estate firm W. P. Carey and Company. He still managed to receive a \$7,500 grant from the New York Foundation for the Arts in 2003 and assemble a show of his photo-based dioramas at Pierogi in 2004. “I try to strategically time sick days and PTOs (personal time-off days) to extend vacations and long weekends, to give me a good solid time to work continuously.”

While day jobs do cut into work time, they also cut into the time spent dwelling on fears and nurturing neuroses. “I can get kind of neurotic alone in my studio,” Jacobs admits, “and it’s very helpful to walk away from the art world, from galleries and collectors, and spend time in the real world.”

Cary Leibowitz, an artist who shows under the pseudonym Candy Ass at New York’s Andrew Kreps Gallery and also works as a print specialist in Christie’s print department, concurs: “I am glad that I don’t have to focus on myself all day long.” His work often involves humorous send-ups of his own fragile ego—*I Am Sick of Making Art* and *Get Up You Lazy Bum* are two text-based paintings he showed recently—making his choice to focus on collectors’ needs at his day job almost an ironic art statement in itself.

Scores of other artists have been making their living off the art world, working as curators and arts administrators to support their careers, including Fred Wilson, U.S. representative to the 2003 Venice Biennale, who was the director of the Longwood Arts Center in the Bronx. Leibowitz says that working in the auction rooms gives him a broader perspective on his own career. “Right now, the market is such an aggressive one, but for years, there had been so much great art that had been undervalued,” he says. He finds comfort in the slew of material—prints by Jonathan Borofsky, Peter Saul, Richard Artschwager, and others whom he admires—that has yet to reach record prices.

Like Katz and Rosenquist, many younger artists find that their day-job experiences and training have benefited their art skills. Sharon Core was trained as a pastry chef and food stylist before gaining overnight success with her photographic re-creations of Wayne Thiebaud’s well-known pastry paintings, which she exhibited at Bellwether Gallery. (Ironically, Thiebaud himself learned to paint as a copyist in commercial-art departments.) Simone Shubuck, an artist represented by Zach Feuer Gallery whose botanical drawings were recently acquired by the Museum of Modern Art, has no plans to quit her job as floral designer for restaurateur Mario Batali. “Just getting to choose textures and making arrangements is so much like doing a still life,” she says. “I think it’s kind of an outdated myth that artists must concentrate solely on one path. Not too many people can find creative employment—that’s the hard part. But the great thing about art is that it can incorporate so many other aspects of life that the sidelines only inform the art.”

It is not surprising then that the hottest day job of the moment is actually a night job. Young artists are flooding the club scene, working as DJs, video mixers, and party organizers. Paul Clay, a video artist who recently showed at the Hudson Valley Contemporary Art Center, provides streaming-video shows for dance clubs every week. “I might be video mixing for four to eight hours at a stretch,” says Clay, “because it’s live and informal. I can test a lot of different ideas, which I store away in my memory for later work in the studio.” A full-scale example of today’s multitasking artist, Clay also works as gallery director for Cuchifrito, a nonprofit space on the Lower East Side. “For me, all of the work that I do, as diverse as it seems, contributes to a single goal,” he explains, “which is obviously to make enough money to be able to make the next work, plus living expenses. That’s the ideal.”

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