

Working Artist

Featuring Catherine Fairbanks,
Paul Pesador, and Rachel Mason

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Lindsay Preston Zappas
Photos by Jeff McLane

When I tell people that I am a writer and artist in addition to the publisher and editor of this magazine, I often get confused looks or concerned questions. “Doesn’t the magazine pull you away from the studio?” people ask in horror. Of course it does, I tell them.

An artist’s life can take on many forms, and artists often blend modes of working, making, and thinking into hybrid careers that span communities and genres. The myth that an artist must commit wholly to the solitary practice of producing their own artwork day in and day out in order to be successful still persists, but is slowly shattering. Refreshingly, the genres that creative producers work within are becoming less stringent and more playful.

Across two issues of *Carla*, we’ve featured portraits and words by L.A.-based artists who are also highly invested in endeavors outside of the traditional art world. These artists build things, practice law, gather communities, create platforms, and push up against value, context, and utility. Their insights reveal that switching between modes of working brings rigor and variation to their creative output. As Ragen Moss put it in our last issue, “The motion of switching across disciplines is actually a fine way to get oneself to appreciate everything.”

Catherine Fairbanks

I split my time between being a critical care nurse and making art. I have often spoken of this as rowing two boats at once. In my mind, there is this image: it is early in the morning in a foggy river basin, I am rowing one canoe, and suddenly I dive overboard and swim to another canoe. I struggle from the water into the second canoe and begin rowing. I row until again I suddenly dive overboard and swim back to the first canoe.

This sounds rather solitary, though I don't feel solitary in either practice. Concentrating on two diverse but equal forms of commitment does feel like something one has to be really deliberate about. I've been a nurse for almost 14 years, and an artist for longer. Nursing is social justice work, and though my art making is political inasmuch as it's bound by its time and its culture, I actually don't often make art work that attempts social justice.

My husband, artist David Zuttermeister, once said that when it comes to art, life and death ain't a bad place to start. I feel like the hospital is a kind of father figure for me—it offers me a kind of support that art making has not offered me. It is a rather non-judgemental environment. In general, I think I have some mottos that I travel around with in my mind; “radical empathy” is one, and “lack of empathy is a public health crisis” is another. Nursing is incredibly physical, incredibly emotional, and impossible to distill into a simplified definition of the total tasks at hand on any one day. It is

subjective and it is relational, and it is a contemporary construct for the ageless act of caring for the sick and wounded among us. The idea that we are acting along trajectories shaped by humans of another era is certainly at the core of my work as both an artist and a nurse.

I am never totally comfortable with the word community. I would rather use the word *collective* to get at a similar idea. I think somehow community erases the idea of the differences between us that give us each directions to pursue. In the studio, I find that I do a lot of slogging and inefficient shaping of ideas, and that it takes a while to arrive at something for my collective artist-mates to experience. I do a lot of studio visits, and that is one of the ways I find my sense of collectivity.

I feel attached to society as a whole in ways that I know are co-created by the simultaneous acts of caregiving (in a critical care unit in a huge urban medical center) and being a contemporary artist. I also know that as an artist I see the world of objects even within the walls of the medical center in a very different way. We serve our coffee in wide bottom industrial plastic mugs, while I long for ceramic! I see Roger Herman's 1982 work, titled *TV*, on the 8th floor of the UCLA med center on a near-daily basis. I think about not just the perfect boredom depicted in the work, but the sense of boredom that patients often have while in a hospital. Boredom in some situations is a luxury: sometimes we talk about what a pleasure it is to see boredom on the face of a patient, because it means they're not in the throes of the terror of their disease. One thing I learned when I met another nurse/artist in graduate school is that art often responds poetically when it's up against something real, like liver failure, or HIV. And that is ok. That is actually the crucial function of art—to not do the same thing as nursing, which looks for the quickest resolution.



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Paul Pescador

I am an artist, filmmaker, performer, and writer. My practice discusses social interactions and intimacy as it pertains to my own personal experience and history. But I also work for the Department of Cultural Affairs for the City of Los Angeles in the Public Art Division. In this position, I work with artists and curators from concept to installation of temporary and permanent public projects that are installed at fire stations, libraries, parks, and police stations throughout the city.

Working at the DCA has really allowed me to think about an artist practice on a more macro level. How does artwork get situated within public space? What are the expectations from an artist a citizen of their surrounding neighborhood and community? The job has allowed me to spend a lot of time thinking about my own understanding of the city of Los Angeles. Though I have lived here for 17 years, I learn more and more about L.A. each day.

In Los Angeles, I am always struck by the manner in which people exist in various roles as part of their art practice, whether they consider it part of their artwork or not. I have found that when I talk to artists as part of my job, they appreciate that they

work with someone who is an artist and can understand the challenges they face in their artistic production. The red tape and bureaucracy of moving a public project forward can be quite daunting, and I do my best to not undermine these obstacles. I always try to remind myself of the perspective of others, whether I am project managing a public artwork or working with an institution for my own projects.

After working the past six years in my position at the DCA, I have come across a wide range of audiences' experience when it comes to contemporary art. I have found that if people are given the time and a way to understand a project, they truly want to understand that project. What that requires from both the artist and the institution presenting the project is to make sure that the work has accessible entry points. In any project, I try to remind myself what I want my audience to understand and ask myself, how do I make sure this occurs? What strategies can I use so that, regardless of the viewers' background, they can walk away with an understanding of their experience?

The balancing act is hard! Aside from DCA and my own studio, I am currently adjunct teaching at Art Center in Pasadena, co-directing a project space called QUEENS in Lincoln Heights (along with artists Rochele Gomez and Daniel Ingroff), hosting a radio show on KCHUNG, and co-directing the non-profit Queer Artist Dinner. The balancing act can be quite exhausting, as much as it is fruitful. I do feel like I learn a lot from each of these different parts of my life, and they help me strengthen my own artistic output. I am not good at sitting still during lunch—at least being busy keeps me out of trouble.



Rachel Mason

I don't really see a difference between art-life and non-art-life. Everything I do related to art (whether film, music, sculpture) serves my mission to create something inspiring. It doesn't matter what the medium is, be it a film or a song, as long as the piece is executed in a way that works.

My most recent project is the documentary *Circus of Books*. I see this film as an extension of my prior work, and it has managed to reach a wider mainstream audience than anything I've ever done. The documentary also includes one of my songs, "Give You Everything." The film at its core is about examining history, which is something I've always done. In *Circus of Books*, I look back on a time when so many of the men around my family were dying of AIDS. I was right there as a child during it all, but I only became aware of that trauma in my community when I grew up and learned about the history.

When I lived in New York, I worked in a nursing home and as an assistant to Joan Jonas. I was never without a side-line job, and often that sideline is the more interesting work. After art school, I tried every imaginable way to earn a living from my art, but when the "art" side of my profession was not

sustaining me, my passion shifted to performing—something that is so much more immediate and visceral. When my focus was on making art within a gallery and museum context, I didn't like socializing in the gallery/museum environment. I also didn't like the feeling of waiting for someone with a lot of money to buy my work. I would rather have more people access my work, and be able to afford it. Making movies is by no means an easier path—it has just afforded me an income and I am able to still make work that matters to me.

Once I stopped expecting to earn a living from art, I was able to approach it with a lot more freedom. After switching over to film as the place where money would come in, I realized that I actually love the business side of the creative world. I find some aspects of financing large projects to be really creative. I'll never give up performing, creating music, or making art. I see them all as branches off the same tree.

I don't like art spaces being separate from mainstream culture. Even though I've ended up in many elite spaces, I feel much more comfortable within the world of everyday people, performing in a nightclub at 2 a.m. with a handful of stragglers.

I think MFAs give the false hope that students will emerge with complete access to the art world, and be able to suddenly "be" an artist with no other profession. I look at my MFA education now as if I were someone who was formerly in a cult, and found my way out. I was misinformed, and thankfully wasn't injured, but I absorbed some very academic thinking and values that I now have completely out of my system. Now that I've embraced all the things that I am—a musician, an artist, a filmmaker—things feel like they've come together in the way they are supposed to.

Now that I'm not "trying" anymore and my life feels much more interconnected.

CIRCUS
of
BOOKS

