

## Art Attribution (Part I): Artists & Assistants

*From ancient times to today, the silent contributions of artist assistants have helped to produce coveted works of art. They can also give rise to challenging questions around authenticity*

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It is common for works of contemporary art attributed to a single artist to be produced with the assistance of an entire studio, and the collective labor that often goes into art raises fundamental questions about the meaning and function of attribution. This article is the first in a series about attribution in the art world and it explores how artist studios bring to light intriguing facets of the artist-assistant relationship such as financial compensation, cultural anxieties around the identity of the artist, and the role of apprenticeship in the career of emerging artists.

While the romantic vision of a lone artist tirelessly crafting masterpieces circulates in the cultural imaginary, the reality of collaborative artistry dates back to the beginnings of art. In fact, many of the most heralded artists of the Classical and Renaissance periods had large studios populated with assistants and apprentices. Phidias was a renowned Greek sculptor who created some of the most iconic sculptures of ancient Greece, such as the statue of Zeus at Olympia and the statue of Athena Parthenos in the Parthenon. He had a large studio in Athens where he worked with many assistants, such as Alcamenes, Agoracritus, and Colotes. Renaissance masters like Leonardo da Vinci and Raphael continued on in the studio tradition, and Michelangelo was supported by assistants for background work on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

In the mid-20th century, it was



Jeff Koons, *Cracked Egg* (1994-2006), mirror-polished stainless steel with transparent color coating. Courtesy of Christie's London

Andy Warhol's "factory" concept that shifted the contemporary art world towards large-scale studio production. Today, artists like [Jeff Koons](#), [Yaritji Young](#), and [Takashi Murakami](#), among others, have transformed their studios into dynamic centers of production that make heavy use of artist assistants. Jeff Koons, at times leading a cadre of over 70 assistants, has multiplied the factory model to reach the heights of the art market. "If I had to be doing this myself," Koons once admitted, "I wouldn't even be able to finish one painting a year."

### Cracked Egg, Unseen Hands

The prolific Koons studio is not without its critics. In a 2012 New York Times article, John Powers offers a candid window into his personal journey as an artist assistant. Joining Koons' studio in 1995 as a 21-year-old art student, Powers was entrusted with a monumental task: painting *Cracked Egg*, a prominent piece within Koons' whimsical *Celebration* series, inspired by the jubilation of a child's birthday party. Koons remained removed from the physical production, sharing solely his vision

and meticulous directives, expecting an impeccable execution. Powers painstakingly labored for five months, employing intricate brushes and bespoke paints to impeccably produce a metallic-looking colored eggshell.

Tragedy struck when the artwork plummeted from the wall, shattering months of dedication as the remains of the work were considered unsalvageable. Though not faulted for the incident, Powers was handed the Sisyphian task of recreating *Cracked Egg* from the ground up. This heart-rending setback, combined with his evolving sentiments of betrayal and disillusionment towards the world of high art, culminated in Powers' decision to abandon the project. When reflecting upon his endeavors, Powers self-identified as a Koons' "serf," and



Yaritji Young, *Honey Ant Story*, 2020, synthetic polymer paint on Belgian linen. Courtesy of Cooe Art Marketplace - Paddington

his sense of loathing was amplified by his discovery that the rendition of Cracked Egg eventually fetched \$501,933 at a Christie's auction in London in 2003.

### Ngura Pulka – Epic Country: An Exhibition in Limbo

In addition to issues around the division of labor and financial compensation, artist studios can also attract attention for the way they navigate cultural authenticity. This facet of artist attribution came to the fore in a particularly acute way earlier this year in Australia, when Aboriginal artists were accused of compromising the integrity of their works through the use of non-Aboriginal studio assistants.

One of the artists implicated in the story is Yaritji Young, who won the Wynne Prize together with her sisters Tjungkara Ken, Freda Brady, Maringka Tunkin and Sandra Ken in 2016. It is Australia's oldest art prize and is awarded annually to "the best landscape painting of Australian scenery in oils or watercolors or for the best example of figure sculpture by Australian artists."

As a result of the controversy, the Australian government has even announced an investigation into allegations concerning non-Aboriginal involvement in the production of Aboriginal artwork. This comes after an Australian newspaper reported claims that white employees at Tjala Arts, part of the APY Art Centre Collective, had contributed to pieces crafted for a major upcoming exhibition at the National Gallery of Australia titled Ngura Pulka – Epic Country.

The APY Art Centre Collective denies any wrongdoing, emphasizing that these workers were professional art assistants, operating under the guidance of the original artists. However, the debut of Ngura Pulka – Epic Country, initially scheduled for June 3,

has been indefinitely deferred by the National Gallery.

The allegations have generated a flurry of reactions from the wider art community. On one side, the governing board of Desart, which serves as the umbrella organization for over 30 Aboriginal Art centers in Central Australia, has reaffirmed that the right to depict Tjukurpa – ancient cultural narratives passed down through generations – is solely within the purview of Aboriginal communities, cautioning against outside interference. On the other, Alcaston Gallery, which represents Young, defends the artist's right to employ assistants as she deems fit and points to the global norm of artists utilizing assistants under their supervision and direction.

### Joyful Commitment

Artist studios aren't always places of resentment and contestation. In the leadup to Takashi Murakami's exhibition Under the Radiation Falls at the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow in 2017, a number of his assistants were interviewed about their experiences and had only positive things to say.

Fumito Kobayashi's journey with Murakami, from his precise print mounting in Tokyo to global exhibitions from Versailles to Chicago,

exemplifies the pride and satisfaction many assistants derive from their work. At Under the Radiation Falls, Kobayashi's team printed Murakami sketches onto all kinds of specialty materials, including sheets with a texture reminiscent of Japanese gold leaf (kinpaku).

Tomoko Sugimoto heads the painting division at Murakami's Kai Kai Kiki studio half a world away in New York, which was recreated at Garage Museum in preparation for the exhibit. From her days as a student when she met Murakami, to her senior role now, she emphasizes the rewarding experience of collaboratively bringing Murakami's visions to life. Beyond creation, Sugimoto also ensures the legacy of Murakami's artworks by expertly handling their conservation and restoration. The working relationship with Murakami has allowed Sugimoto to pursue her career as an artist in her own right with past exhibitions at the now-defunct Art Stage Singapore and the now-closed Joshua Liner Gallery in New York.

These three flashpoints bisecting artist studios show that regardless of how an artwork may be attributed, its mode of production can give rise to struggles, opportunities, and serious discussions about how to make art that authentically matters.



Takashi Murakami, *Wow, Kaikai Kiki* (2011), acrylic and platinum leaf on canvas mounted on aluminum frame. Courtesy of Christie's Hong Kong



## Did You Know ?

*The PAA has a distinguished roster of women in the art world. One of the early and better-known members was Melinda Wortz, an art historian, art critic, gallery director, and art collector of works in the 70's. According to commentary at the recent LACMA show, *Light, Space, Surface: Works from the Los Angeles County Art Museum*, curator Melinda Wortz devised the term "Light and Space" for L.A. artists trading in perceptual effects. She and her husband Ed were good friends of the recently deceased Bob Irwin, who is one of the artists who is best known for light and space.*

*Melinda was very serious about contemporary art, but she had a zany streak which is reflected in this photo of her in the "Grass Suit" by Bill Harding. She wore it to Kathy Gillespie's Christmas party and was the hit of the evening, albeit a bit damp and itchy.*

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## Amy Lamb

From Saratoga Springs, NY, Amy is a graduate of Cornell University and the George Washington School of Law and worked as an attorney for O'Melveny & Myers. She is married to David Lamb and has three young adult children. The Lambs are building a house on the Lamb Family Ranch in Camarillo where they grow avocados.

Amy is an extraordinary volunteer. She has been Chair of the Descanso Gardens Guild Board of Trustees and has been President of the Pasadena Garden Club, the Junior League of Pasadena; Kidspace Circle of Friends; Oak Knoll Neighborhood Association;

and the Valley Hunt Club. Amy previously sat on the boards of the National Charity League of Pasadena, Las Madrinas and Polytechnic School.

Amy has developed a strong interest in contemporary art in the last five years. She is currently the President of the Art Center 100 which raises funds for scholarships at Art Center. The Lambs have started to collect contemporary art with a special interest in photography. Amy is a very talented nature photographer herself. She also loves to garden. Ask Amy about her adventures making garlands out of dried lemon slices, churning butter and raising chickens.





## Ed Inside LA Visits *Made in LA* at the Hammer!

On November 9, 2023, PAA members were treated to a curator tour of the Hammer Museum's biennial exhibition, *Made in LA*. Thirty-two members carpoiled to the Westside to view works by 39 Los Angeles region contemporary artists. Entitled "Acts of Living," the exhibit includes painting, ceramics, textiles and sculpture, and multi-media work addressing myriad aspects of everyday life and culture. The exhibit has received national attention, with enthusiastic critical reviews in the Los Angeles Times, New York Times, and Wall Street Journal in addition to arts publications.

Curator Ashton Cooper profiled each artist and focused on the characteristics of their art that drew the curatorial team to their work. Cooper also joined the group for a special lunch at Alice Water's *LuLu*



Restaurant in the Hammer's courtyard. Chef David Tanis provided a delicious farm-to-table three-course meal to our group.



There's still time to get your bedazzle on and attend the marvelous PAA Holiday Party! The theme "Merry and Bright" sets the stage for sparkly lights, sequins, twinkle and shimmer, accompanied by fabulous food, the company of friends old and new, and plenty of holiday libations. Party Central will be happening at the amazing home of Neil and Sonia Singla. Tickets are \$125 per person, and reservations close on Thursday, December 7. Don't miss this fun event—contact Diane Wittenberg [dwittenberg2@gmail.com](mailto:dwittenberg2@gmail.com) or Tamara Tolkin [ttolkin@yahoo.com](mailto:ttolkin@yahoo.com) with questions or to reserve.

Have a safe  
and happy  
holiday  
season—  
See you in  
January!



## From the Archives

The Treasure Sale is not the only PAA fundraiser, but it is the oldest. In 1955, the then "Art Alliance" took over the "Treasure Chest" sale in support of the Pasadena Art Museum, known as PAM. \$1,700 worth of goodies were sold.

By 1960, the Treasure Sale proceeds were covering HALF of the monies spent by PAM on exhibitions. This sale also saw the introduction of "gay, bright aprons with large pockets".

In 1968, the Treasure Sale hit a high point, earning nearly \$107,000! Locations varied and were the result of a scramble all over Pasadena. At first vacant houses, the top of the ARCO building. In contrast to other rummage sales, the talented ladies of the PAA organized everything by elegant rooms and to be a Room Mother was a prestigious honor.

Room mothers fiercely guarded their treasures, with good reason, since they were apt to be pilfered and reappear in another room if left unattended. The highlight of the day was the tasty lunch prepared by Gretl Mulder and her crew- \$5.00 a head. Later Peggy Dark catered and drew everyone in.

New members were assigned in the Garage, often an actual garage, where all cast offs were dumped and occasional treasures appeared. Working in the garage could be dramatic and the year Kathy Gillespie and Betty Duker were there, their nemesis was a member, who shall remain nameless, who never wanted to throw anything away. Every morning, we would find our rejects proudly redisplayed after she had fished them out of the trash after we went home. But nothing topped the story of the large, abstract painting we hung in the back of the room. Completely uninteresting, someone suggested we flip it to add interest. We did and there to our great surprise was the image of two men engaged in fellatio!



COLLECTION of items for the Art Alliance's Treasure Chest Sale Saturday are unloaded at the Pasadena Art Museum by Russ, Jack Ferris, Joseph P. Melita and Gene Barton, from the left. Proceeds from this annual event will enrich museum's operating funds. Photo taken by an unknown person.



—1961 Photo by Ed DeLoach. See DeLoach at 1870-50000000  
**WORK FOR YOUR SUPPER**—There's no dining for your supper for Art Alliance members' husbands. They're cooking tonight's meal with the sweat of their brows, looking for one to Pasadena Art Museum today to start it can be sold or used someone's. "Oh, usual Treasure Chest sale, their reward will be a tasty new supper party tonight is one of the collectors for which Mr. and Mrs. Richard Gatta, shown here, are bringing some of the ingredients. She is the supper champion.

Pasadena, California, Sunday, March 8, 1954

In the days before eBay and Facebook market place, dealers were avid customers and would line up an hour early to get into the party. There were often great bargains which we had overlooked. One such was a painting by Edvard Munch someone had found in their basement, and donated, declaring their hatred of his works. It sold for \$7,000.

Not surprisingly, some of our best customers were husbands, who after a few drinks, started casing the merchandise and to their consternation, discovered and were forced to buy back some of their favorite items which their wives had snuck out of the house. More than a few confrontations occurred.

Certain members have attained eminent status and lasting gratitude as a result of their dedication and hard work.. First and foremost, Marsha Bohr who headed the sale an amazing 4 times ! Carol Bramhall and Judy Whiting manned the exotic travel booth which was often the most popular spot. Patsy Ketchum and Nancy Burrows lovingly arranged the silver and china, once the most popular room and now of little interest to the new generation who doesn't polish.

Hundreds of items have passed through the Treasure Sale to the benefit of the PAA. How about a show of hands of those who still have an item from one of our sales?

*Delivered November 2nd by Kris Pilon and Kathy Gillespie*

## Ed Outside LA at the Venice Biennale

Education Outside LA is off to the 60th Venice Biennale in 2024! Mark your calendars for May 19 to 24, 2024. The Biennale will be curated by Brazilian Adriano Pedrosa, who is the artistic director of the São Paulo Museum of Art, and the first Biennale curator from a Latin American country. The theme of the Biennale is “Foreigners Everywhere,” and will focus on artists who are themselves “foreigners”: expats, immigrants, and refugees, as well as queer, outsider, and indigenous artists who traditionally have operated at the fringes of the art world. Native American artist Jeffrey Gibson, in a historic first, will represent the United States with a solo exhibition in the American Pavilion. Gibson is known for vibrantly colored multimedia works which merge Western modernism and Native American craft.

A personal check for \$1,000 will hold your place. Checks will be accepted by Elsa and Clare at the



general meeting on January 4, 2024, or between 10 a.m. and noon on January 5, 2024 at Clare’s home at 1877 McFarlane Street, San Marino. We can accommodate a maximum of 20 attendees; if we receive more than 20 checks, we will randomly draw checks to determine who will attend. The trip itinerary and full description is being sent out soon by co-chairs Elsa Behney and Clare Tayback.

## October Meeting

The October meeting of the 2023 PAA season was held at the Research Library of the Vincent Price Museum in East Los Angeles City College. *Teddy Sandoval and the Butch Gardens School of Art* is the first museum retrospective dedicated to the inventive though overlooked artist Teddy Sandoval (1949–1995). A central figure in Los Angeles’ queer and Chicana artistic circles, Sandoval was an active participant in both US and international avant-garde movements. The show provided touching insights into the challenges faced by queer artists in the last decades of the twentieth century, and the persistence and sense of humor with which they faced these challenges. PAA contributed to the funding for the show which runs October 21, 2023 – March 2, 2024. It will then travel to Williams College and an make an extended tour of the US and Europe.

The meeting was followed by generous servings of Dim Sum at NBC Restaurant down the street, as attendees chatted happily. Members went home with doggy bags filled with tasty dumplings and other goodies.



## December Meeting

The PAA assembled at the ICA LA (Institute for Contemporary Art LA) to view first major museum survey of artist Barbara T Smith. The exhibition included many forms her work has taken over the past fifty years – performance work as well as drawings, collage, prints, photographs, video, artists' books, and sculpture.



Barbara Turner Smith was born in Pasadena, California in 1931. She studied painting, art history and religion as an undergraduate at Pomona College, graduating in 1953. In 1965, after raising three children, she returned to study at Chouinard Art Institute, making *The Black Glass Paintings*, a series of primarily black surfaces under glass. She received her MFA from University of California, Irvine in 1971. During her time at UC Irvine, Smith and other artists such as Nancy Buchanan and Chris Burden founded F-Space, the experimental art gallery where she launched her career as a performance artist (this is also where Burden's notorious *Shoot* (1971) was staged).

Tracking her transition from housewife to artist, Smith's early work focused on collaged photographs of herself and her three children, impressions of portions of her body, and articles of clothing into her self-published photocopied artist books, made on a Xerox 914 that she leased and kept in her living room.

To the great delight of PAA members, Barbara herself was at the site and added her comments and reminiscences of what was being displayed.

A wonderful lunch was enjoyed afterwards at the Bike Shed Moto Co, located just behind ICA LA at 1580 Industrial St, Los Angeles, CA 90021.

