

**Postscript 60:
The Specter of Artistic Labour**

**TARAH HOGUE
on “Seurat and Friends”**

“Find something to do that you love, or at least something that you can do that you can tolerate so that you can then have time to do what you love after work. ... Work is a privilege, you just have to find the right work.” (Nick Offerman, *American Ham*¹)

This is comedian Nick Offerman’s (best known for his role as Ron Swanson on the sitcom *Parks and Recreation*) fifth “tip for a prosperous life:” get a hobby (though he prefers the term *discipline*). I am reminded of Offerman when viewing *Seurat and Friends*, Artspeak’s group exhibition with Matt Browning, Jordy Hamilton and Gyun Hur. The artworks in the exhibition speak to tensions between definitions of art and craft, between artistic labour and its subsumption by capital, between work and leisure, repetition and aura, shame and pleasure, complicity and antagonism.

In particular, Browning’s whittled cedar grids call up associations to Offerman, who is also a woodworker. At first glance, the grids resemble canvas stretchers and in their mundane-ness might easily be passed by. The “craft” of the works is more greatly appreciated upon learning that each work is whittled from a single block of wood, each bar carved in a loop so that the grid can awkwardly collapse on itself. Offerman characterizes woodworking as a noble form of labour, along with working outside and getting your hands dirty. Browning’s whittling sits uneasily with this assertion when considering the activity’s relation to boyhood camp activities, often resulting in kitschy

objects that are given as gifts or discarded. Browning’s application of such a pedestrian method to the modernist grid further unsettles the notion of noble labour, as does the tedious and time-consuming nature of creating multiple grids from single blocks of wood.

This form of repetitious labour is central to each of the works in the exhibition. The choice to name Georges Seurat in the exhibition’s title stems from this, and the painter of *Sunday on La Grande Jatte* (1884) floats through the exhibition as a specter. Seurat’s precisely painted daubs of colour recorded the artist’s labour over time on the surface of the canvas (the matrix of the grid), not unlike the knife marks left by Browning, Hamilton’s repetition of the same design across multiple canvases, or Hur’s shredded silk flowers. Seurat charged for his time by the hour in solidarity with the labour of the models that he painted. The mark is therefore representative of the fundamentally abstracting nature of capital and its organization of the world,² which in the case of Seurat, reflected the advancement of increasingly mechanized labour forms in the 19th century.

“Glimpses of alternative systems of representation are only thrown up by the most intense and recalcitrant effort to make the ones we have finally deliver the goods.” (T.J. Clark, “Freud’s Cezanne”³)

Hamilton’s *Old Hat* series began when the artist exhibited an appropriated wood construction made by his

grandfather, who followed a pattern found in a popular woodworking magazine. A carafe and wine glass sit on a table made of wood planks, all of which would be demarcated by different types of wood, with the still life scene framed by yet another type of wood, ostensibly. The design is notable in its flatness and patterning, with the line of the carafe's side bisecting the translucent wine glass. Hamilton accentuates or downplays this aspect in his use of blocks of colour, patterning that overlays the image, or by either eliminating or repeating the outlines of the image so that it multiplies, dissolves and distorts. The grid is certainly a consideration here (particularly when Hamilton removes the "frame" from the design, eliminating any remaining illusion of pictorial depth), but I will instead focus on the aspects of repetition in the work, which are more pronounced than in Browning's work—not only because of the sheer number of paintings included in the exhibition (there are eighteen) but because of the potentially limitless iterations of the design itself.

In the repetition of the design, Hamilton's paintings become explorations of paint as both material and language because of their structured (or limited) form. Repetition also allows for a certain amount of distance, compartmentalizing artistic production away from the subsumption of self into the work. In this material exploration, the conditions of making are (perhaps somewhat counter-intuitively) foregrounded and we are suspended, or even pulled, between alternate systems of labour, leisure, craft and commodity. Similarly, the process of abstraction (both

monetary and material) is made visible in Hamilton's work, allowing for a kind of means without end, the experience of communicability itself, despite its complicity within larger systems of circulation.

"Every visit is an occasion to revisit ... the past is always with us regardless of whether we choose to see it or not." (Ken Lum, "Past and Present"⁴)

The labour of Gyun Hur is far less evident in the final artwork than in the other works in the exhibition. The onerous task of hand-shredding silk funerary flowers is an almost invisible labour as the end product is so transformed, becoming an abstract composition on the floor made up of swathes of intense colour that are variously gradated or butting up against one another. The colour and ephemerality of the work are its most striking features and it would be very difficult to identify the material without some background knowledge of the process.

At one point, Hur employed her immediate family in the creation of her work—they were the unseen (and I wonder if unpaid) labour that her artistic practice relied on. This form of pseudo-cottage-industry labour is distinct from the practices of Browning and Hamilton, with their associations to craft and leisure, because of its reliance on the family unit (rather than the individual) and the home (rather than the studio) as a site of production. In cottage-industry labour there would also be a greater emphasis on the profit potential versus the experience of

enjoyment found in whittling and popular woodworking activities—though Browning and Hamilton are certainly troubling the notion of enjoyment in their work as well.

Hur's artistic labour is now undertaken largely as a solo activity. In either case, it is tied to death through the original or intended use of the silk flowers for funeral arrangements. Their transubstantiation from symbols of remembrance and memorialization into potential monetary value (whether through sales or artist fees) makes Hur's work both highly complicitous with and antagonistic to the abstracting forces of capital. The silk dust is transformed into artwork as the labour of the body is transformed into monetary value, becoming a sort of melancholic remembrance of the body despite the work's saturated vibrance.⁵ The ephemeral quality of the work serves to heighten this sense of fragility and loss, though all of this is much less evident than in the other works in the exhibition, which struggle more overtly with the contradictions of artistic labour than Hur, who seems to eulogize it.

While I am wary of essentializing Hur's work along gendered lines, when placed alongside Browning's highly (and arguably, self consciously) masculinized process of whittling wood as well as the history of painting as it is so heavily dominated by male artists, it is difficult to not read the work in terms of gender precisely because of its specific relation to (invisible) labour. The sumptuous colour of the material and its arrangement into a highly aestheticized—dare I say beautiful—form is deeply troubled by the

utter failure to grasp it as an object. Like so much dust, it slips through our fingers, evading us, unsettling notions of value in relation to (gendered) labour and the artwork as commodity.

The artworks in *Seurat and Friends* each admit a certain complicity with this relation of labour and capital—like the matrix of the modernist grid, its logic is pervasive and encompassing. This complicity is somewhat duplicitous, however, as the artworks push the self-alienating tendencies of (artistic) labour to its extreme in order to offer up other possibilities, even if they exist as spectres, haunting us.

NOTES

1 Nick Offerman, *American Ham*. Directed by Jordan Vogt-Roberts (Los Angeles: 6-8-10 Productions, 2014)

2 Jaleh Mansoor, "Make Up, Ointment, Pollen, Labor," (paper presented at The Future of the Contemporary symposium, University of British Columbia, September 29-30, 2011).

3 TJ Clark, "Freud's Cezanne," *Farewell to an Idea* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 165

4 Ken Lum, "Past & Present, Art & Labour Meet in Ken Lum's Latest Travels," *Canadian Art*, December 4, 2012, <http://canadianart.ca/features/2012/12/04/ken-lum-art-labour/>, accessed December 15, 2014. I am reminded here of Catherine Gallagher's discussion of dust, death and the abstracting forces of capital in "The Bio-Economics of *Our Mutual Friend*" in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, vol. 3, ed. Michel Feher (New York: Zone, 1989), pp. 345-365.

TARAH HOGUE is a writer and curator of mixed Dutch and Métis ancestry. She holds a BA(H) in Art History from Queen's University and an MA in Critical and Curatorial Studies from the University of British Columbia. She has curated exhibitions at the Satellite Gallery, Or Gallery and co-curated two exhibitions about the history and legacy of Indian Residential Schools in Canada, *Witnesses: Art and Canada's Indian Residential Schools* at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery and *NET-ETH: Going Out of the Darkness* at Malaspina Printmakers, Emily Carr University of Art and Design and the Urban Aboriginal Fair Trade Gallery (2013). In 2009 she co-founded the Gam Gallery, an exhibition space and artist studio located in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Hogue is also the current Curatorial Resident at grunt gallery, where she is working on exhibitions, programming and researching the topic of Indigenous feminisms. Her writing has also recently appeared in Decoy Magazine.