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CARE / WORK:

TABITHA ARNOLD'S
 ART AND LABOUR

MICHELLE MILLAR FISHER



At the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston where I work as a curator, a tapestry by Tabitha Arnold currently hangs in the galleries alongside works across media by ninety-nine other contemporary artists. Hand-tufted with naturally dyed wool yarn, the six registers of this work, *Time Off Task* (2022), appear like scenes on an ancient stele. Their subject matter—endless labour in service of capital—is both timeless and entirely tied to our own moment.

At the bottom of the textile runs a line of nine beige-clad delivery workers who handcart packages from left to right like robots caught mid-movement. Above them, fatigued workers sit enthroned atop toilets for a temporary reprieve, their heads encircled by haloes as they bend forward. Their only snatched moment of rest is while they relieve themselves—and the repurposed iconography confirms them as modern martyrs to the capitalist cause. Vans with the recognizable Amazon logo fly past overhead. Striking workers prop up the apotheosis of the scene whose iconography reads in the Quattrocento tradition of a Last Judgment. The artist describes these figures trapped in a “moral climb” as they “dutifully act out a Protestant fetishization of labour that equates work ethic with redemption and godliness—but only for those whose class condition requires them to work in the first place.”[1] Crowning the composition, an ouroboros snake consumes itself in acknowledgement of the relentlessness of the capitalist system captured below.

[1] Interview with the artist by the author, fall 2022

It might seem aberrant to include such a work in an exhibition called *Tender Loving Care*, as we have done at the MFA—but, to me, the way in which Tabitha's artistic practice is deeply committed to depicting and challenging the politics of labour, past and present, *is* an act of care. This word is often used today to connote a tending to self that can feel inward-facing, an indulgence that only those with the choice to stop can embrace—or a call to rest that is, in reality, just a call to consume more. However, now-obsolete but etymologically critical definitions of care include care as an act of active mourning or lamentation. It is this inflection that feels appropriate to Tabitha's insistence on interrogating individual and collective relationships with labour through her work. It is a form of solidarity to decry, to reveal, and to participate in organized struggle against inhumane attitudes that shape our working lives.

At the Workers Arts and Heritage Centre, Tabitha's solo exhibition gathers ten fibre works and five works on paper that continue this line of exploration. Trained as a painter at the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Art, Tabitha eventually gravitated to the communal and, in her estimation, kinder and more collaborative ethos of textile and fiber art. She began tufting and weaving large-scale textile works, often teaching herself techniques through YouTube and by asking people outside of her academic community for advice.

Three works created during a 2021 residency at Glen Foerd Museum in Philadelphia depict, variously, the arduous processes involved in refining leather at industrial scale and keeping the domestic landscape of a factory owner running. Two of these works form a diptych based on Auguste Rodin's sculpture, *The Gates of Hell*.

Servants sweat "below stairs" while industrialists take their leisure above. A clock looms large in the composition as a reminder of the regimented application of time to labour ushered in by the Industrial Revolution. (This sentiment was nuanced by unions who stated that if our time were to be so segmented, then there should be "eight hours for work, eight hours for rest and eight hours for what you will." [2])

[2] "On August 20, 1866, the newly organized National Labor Union called on Congress to mandate an eight-hour workday. A coalition of skilled and unskilled workers, farmers, and reformers, the National Labor Union was created to pressure Congress to enact labor reforms ... Although the National Labor Union failed to persuade Congress to shorten the workday, its efforts heightened public awareness of labor issues and increased public support for labor reform in the 1870s and 1880s ... Progress toward an eight-hour day was minimal until June 1933 when Congress enacted the National Industrial Recovery Act, an emergency measure taken by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in response to the economic devastation of the Great Depression. The Act provided for the establishment of maximum hours, minimum wages, and the right to collective bargaining. Struck down by the Supreme Court in May 1935, the Recovery Act was soon replaced by the Wagner Act, which assured workers the right to unionize." "Today in History – August 20," Library of Congress online. www.loc.gov/item/today-in-history/august-20

In other works – including *October* (2018) and *Night on the Subway* (2022) – figures break out of the woven grid to reclaim streets, subways, and other public places.

The works on display here span a period of five years and articulate the efforts of an artist who has both grown and changed in her approach and skill as a fibre artist, and has also remained resolutely committed to interrogating labour in the modern moment. The subject of labour rights and norms is always timely and prescient as long as they may still be abused – and yet, given the churn and chaos of the recent pandemic and its impact on almost every working life, it is hard not to see these works as newly urgent in their calls to action. In this respect, they are in the same lineage as the work of the Mexican Muralists of the 1920s and 30s, and harken even further back to the photography of Jacob Riis in the turn-of-the-century slums of New York’s Lower East Side and Gustave Courbet’s nineteenth-century paintings of farm labourers.

Just like the legacies of these artistic predecessors, the works gathered in this exhibition represent, critique, and actively work to confront labour inequity. They do so by pointing out that systems of belief, whether political, religious, or otherwise, have the capacity to control us or to set us free – and that this depends

on how closely and carefully we analyze their modes of operation and hold them to account. Tabitha’s subject matter emerges – as it does for most artists – through one’s own lived experiences meeting the wider world. Raised in a conservative religious environment that inculcated a terror of being viewed as lazy, she notes a correlation between spiritual morality and work ethic in American culture. It is this interrelationship – endemic in a country where worker protections are never a given, and where access to healthcare is tied to jobs from which people can be fired “at will”[3] – that her work helps us as viewers unpack in our own lives. As she asks, “If you suffer for 40 hours a week so that another person can lounge in excess, doesn’t that make you a martyr? Who deserves to go down in [capitalist]

[3] “The U.S. is one of a handful of countries where employment is predominantly at-will. Most countries throughout the world allow employers to dismiss employees only for cause. At-will means that an employer can terminate an employee at any time for any reason, except an illegal one, or for no reason without incurring legal liability. Likewise, an employee is free to leave a job at any time for any or no reason with no adverse legal consequences. At-will also means that an employer can change the terms of the employment relationship with no notice and no consequences. For example, an employer can alter wages, terminate benefits, or reduce paid time off. In its unadulterated form, the U.S. at-will rule leaves employees vulnerable to arbitrary and sudden dismissal, a limited or on-call work schedule depending on the employer’s needs, and unannounced cuts in pay and benefits.” “At Will Employment Overview,” National Conference of State Legislatures. <https://www.ncsl.org/labor-and-employment/at-will-employment-overview>

history as a Saint? Who should we remember as a sinner?”[4]

These works have particular resonance for me not only as an art historian but as a worker who has labored across many different fields in the past three decades. The first time I considered my rights as a waged worker, I was 16 years old and a waitress in a small restaurant in the Scottish Borders, putting together enough money to buy the things I needed for school and for our single parent family. I was good at my job: thoughtful, precise, polite. I worked three or four evening shifts a week, and although the custom of tipping was not—and still is not—as customary back home as it is here in the United States, I attracted a fairly regular 10% gratuity from our dining patrons. Those precious pounds would get put in a whiskey glass above the register, and at the end of every evening the proprietor, who also happened to be the chef, would dump the contents into his hand, give us each a coin or two, and put the rest into his pocket. There was no equal share to the spoils.

This sat badly with me. At that age, I didn’t have the language to articulate exactly why it didn’t feel right that a male boss relied on an all-female staff to

[4] Interview with the artist by the author, Fall 2022. “I’m a Marxist now, but I’ve always been terrified of being “lazy.” If I follow the deepest thread of that fear, I imagine going to a fire-and-brimstone Hell ... Spirituality is so deeply entwined in both ends of the capitalist system ... Can you work so hard that you escape the fire and brimstone of God’s judgment?”

perform our jobs with care, but didn’t respond in kind. I needed that job, and it took me significant courage at the end of service one evening to ask for an equal split for me and my colleagues. The response was immediate and angry. I left thinking that I’d been fired until the next day, when the landline rang with a sheepish apology. My request was granted. I smiled down on the phone. It was my first win, and it made a significant and measurable difference to our paychecks.

Twenty years later and now a museum curator in Philadelphia—the city where I first saw Tabitha’s works—I organized in tandem with a group of friends to share information about our salaries as one of us negotiated a job offer. In our museum and arts workplaces, salary sharing was a completely taboo practice; like that teenage waitress, we were nervous enough that we checked online to figure out whether we were doing anything illegal by talking about what we were paid. We weren’t. Neither were the thousands of people in our field who, after that informal conversation became an editable spreadsheet on Google Docs, shared out their details in the days and weeks after that.

Six weeks later, we followed up with a spreadsheet crowdsourcing data on internships in arts and museum organizations, pointing to one of the largest sources of inequities in our system: unpaid labour. Working for free to get a foot in the door precludes so many people from the arts and museums in the first place.

And later that year, in 2019, inspired by the unionization campaign at New York's New Museum, we began a union campaign in earnest at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. When I joined the MFA in Boston a few months later, I joined unionization efforts that were underway. Our first contract was ratified in August 2022 and I now serve as a union delegate.

This history, both recent and further in the past, is something I think about every time I pass Tabitha's tapestry at work. Hopefully visitors to her exhibition in Hamilton will be inspired to reflect similarly from their own vantage points. The labour that goes into art making and into the processes of cultural work are so often unseen, elided by the calm completeness of a well-hung gallery. The art world's insistence on so often removing the sweat, blood, and tears of art's manifestation and market from its presentation is a function of capital. But as scholar Gregory Sholette reminds us, "before an artwork can be exhibited, before it represents or refuses to represent anything, before it can be dealt, sold or collected, there comes research in planning, gathering tools, purchasing materials, and even alerting networks. Whether the outcome is an object, document, gesture, or performance, it is, obviously, the result of labor." [5]

[5] Gregory Sholette, "Artistic Labor," Artforum, April 2008.
<https://www.artforum.com/print/200804/artistic-labor-19744>

In the cathedral of the people that Tabitha's work memorializes, this reality is writ large. Labour is both implied by the presence of the material object, explicitly depicted within it, and then skewered as a system of belief sold to us as religion to revere – but from which we should run with abandon, as if finally escaping a cult.

—Michelle Millar Fisher

Michelle Millar Fisher is currently the Ronald C. and Anita L. Wornick Curator of Contemporary Decorative Arts at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Her work focuses on the intersections of people, power, and the material world. She has written widely on care work, mothering, and reproductive labour, including parenting in museums, being childfree, grief and mothers, and the architecture of maternity. Fisher is currently completing her doctorate in art history at The Graduate Center at the City University of New York (CUNY). She is part of the 2022 fellow cohort at the Center for Curatorial Leadership. In 2019, she co-founded Art + Museum Transparency, dedicated to supporting critical conversations on the intersections of art and labour, and home to the Salary Transparency Spreadsheet.



Join us for a series of ancillary programs presented in support of Tabitha Arnold: *The People's Cathedral*. (Scan QR code for info)