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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO  
Greeley, Colorado  
The Graduate School

THE LABOR OF ART

An Action Research Project Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for Master of Arts

Antonio Ramirez

College of Performing & Visual Arts  
School of Art & Design  
Art & Design

August 2020

This Action Research Project by: Antonio Ramirez

Entitled: *The Labor of Art*

has been approved as meeting the requirement for the Degree of Master of Art in the College of Performing and Visual Arts in School of Art and Design, Program of Art and Design.

Accepted by the Action Research Committee:

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Donna Goodwin, Ph.D., Chair

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Connie Stewart, Ph.D., Co-Chair

## ABSTRACT

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This study examines artists who pursue labor-intensive art forms. Artisans were specifically chosen due to the laborious nature of their craft, whether it be the time dedicated to or the physical demand required to finish a work of art. Throughout this study I seek to find why they continue to practice their art in the midst of a society where like pieces can be mass produced and sold at bottom dollar. I conduct semiformal interviews with these artists to understand their stories and identify their “why.” This inquiry uncovered five commonalities among the artists: Teacher, Memory, Embodiment, Family, and Challenge. These themes are not just interconnections between the interviewed artists, but may also suggest connections between the crafts and fine art.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Background**

A young boy sits out on his front porch watching his grandpa intently. In the child's eyes, his grandpa is performing magic as he takes out his pocket knife and whittles a tiny face out of a peach pit then hands it over to his grandson. The only thing going through the boy's mind is, "Whoa, that is cool. How does he do it?" I was about five years old when my grandpa moved in with us because of his poor health and I only got to spend about two years with him before he passed away. I don't remember much about that time, but the moments where he was creating something out of seemingly nothing were the most memorable even to this day. I remember him hand sharpening his pocket knife almost daily so it was always ready. His hands were worn, cracked and scarred from cuts from the peach pits and his knife. I still have no idea how grandpa made these tiny carvings, but it intrigued me enough to learn about different art forms on my own. My foundation for art making formed for me at a young age along with an appreciation and fascination for the handmade.

In "The Handmade's Tale," Suzy Banks writes:

There are still people out there who are driven by the desire to make things more tangible than a stock-market killing-and make them to last. I used up my lifetime allotment of 'wow's' researching this article, reduced to monosyllabic outbursts not only by the artisans' flawless workmanship and the elegance of their designs



but, most of all, by their tenacity and perseverance in mastering their crafts.

(1998, p.1)

Though I didn't create many handmade crafts myself, like Banks, I had and still have a "wow" for an artisan's workmanship and perseverance in the mastery of their craft. With this admiration however, questions are present regarding why artisans do what they do. In a society of industry and mass production, why do artisans continue to work so hard? What drives them and what is their story?

Growing up in a low-income household in inner city San Antonio, Texas, opportunities to see or experience artwork being crafted by hand, like those I had with my grandpa, were nearly non-existent. My exposure to art was limited to what I could learn in art classes in school. It was not until I was 23 when I joined the Air Force that I was able to re-experience handmade art and rekindle the "wow" and passion I had for it in my early years. I was privileged enough to have my first assignment be in Charleston, South Carolina where I spent seven years immersed in its culture. As one of the first major cities and ports of the United States, Charleston has a rich history and culture that captivated me almost immediately. Charleston has a historic downtown and beaches which both tourist and locals gravitate towards. What captured my attention however were the old plantations and the local populace. It was in these areas and with these people that I was able to re-experience handmade crafts. In these communities I saw traditional blacksmiths still pounding away at metal, woodworkers making handmade rocking chairs, baskets being hand-woven, and more.

I met Jason Knight in Charleston through a mutual friend who told him I was an artist. Jason asked me to paint a portrait of his teacher and mentor, a master bladesmith

named Bill Moran. Through this transaction we formed a friendship which enabled me to learn more about his craft. I was able to visit his forge and see what it took to do what he does. Jason had rough hands from holding on to steel and pounding his hammer. His shirt had small holes from the embers, slag, and sparks that flew off the metal as he worked and formed it into a blade. The heat in the forge was intense, almost unbearable. The only thing running through my mind was, “why?” There has to be a reason to put yourself through extreme temperatures and joint wearying tasks. The hammering has to wear on the body, the heat has to keep the artist in a constant state of near dehydration. So, what is the reason for continuing to forge like this? In a recent video by Cumberland Marketing, Jason is interviewed about what he does, and his response is the same as he gave to me that day.

I want to do it because I want to keep it alive, and every one out of twenty or thirty people you show this to, they’re going to be that next generation that who’s gonna go, ‘I’m carrying this on, I’m part of this renaissance forever, I’m gonna share this just like it was shared to me. (Cumberland Marketing, 2019, 00:49)

I also visited multiple historic plantations where I saw what I considered to be one of the most beautiful pieces of art being made by hand, a sweetgrass basket. You can find sweetgrass baskets all around the Charleston area, but not all are made traditionally nor are they made by the Gullah Geechee people. “Gullah Geechee” is an identity now widely embraced by African descendants whose ancestors came to the low country region of the Carolinas in the late seventeenth century with the first waves of European colonists (Rosengarten, 2018). Originally used for harvesting rice crops, the Gullah Geechee made hand-woven baskets out of indigenous grasses and other plant material. It was later, when

commercial rice production in the low country ceased that the work basket fell out of use. The Gullah Geechee people then began to make decorative household forms of the baskets made from sweetgrass as a viable source of income for poor farm families (Rosengarten, 2018). I can recall walking by the women weaving these baskets and seeing huge smiles on their faces, but when looking closer you can see the wear these baskets had on their hands. Dry skin and small scars from the grass cuts riddled their palms and fingertips. The older ladies were teaching the younger to weave, and the younger were coming up with new designs. These traditions were to carry on in their families as a remembrance of their origins. Many of these people still use these baskets as a primary source of income and entire families are involved in the making process.

### **Rationale**

There are many more stories similar to that of Jason and the Gullah Geechee weavers and their handmade works. In this research I explore labor-intensive art forms and those artists and makers that take them on. Why these artists and craftsmen continue to put themselves through the hard, labor-intensive crafts differ, but they all have a story to tell. Cumberland Marketing, a company specializing in brand-centric marketing and creative advertising for local business owners in the southern states region, writes, “Storytelling is our passion. In a region full of individuals who inspire, create, and overcome, it’s not hard to find stories worth sharing” (Cumberland Marketing, 2019, “CM Stories,” para. 1). Industry began with everything being made with hard work, lots of time, and by hand. Artists and makers carry on these traditions, keeping handmade works alive. Though mass production factories may be prominent in our country, allowing consumers to purchase similar products as those handmade at a lower cost, the

quality of handmade is unmatched. Whether it is a hand carved face out of a peach pit like grandpa used to make, a hand forged knife, or a hand-woven sweetgrass basket, I want to tell the stories behind the objects.

### **Research Questions**

My research begins with a simple question: why? Why do artists choose to take on the laborious forms of art making? And secondly, is the making/crafting process art or is it simply the final product that is considered art?

As a painter myself, I understand the time taken to complete a project and the struggles with competing with digitally created artworks due to their mass availability. In spite of advancements in the mass production industries, there are still those makers that take on much more labor-intensive crafts such as blacksmithing, wood working, glass blowing, etc. Many of these artists spend much of their lives perfecting their craft. What is their purpose for continuing to be maker of such crafts?

In an article for *Social Psychology Quarterly*, Michael Schwalbe discusses the impulses we have as human beings to manipulate, experiment, and invent; our natural impulse to make things. Part of the experience of craftwork is a special kind of heightened awareness of how materials respond to our own efforts to make them comply with our desired designs (2010). Can this heightened awareness of how materials respond to our working them be an art form? I think of the performance arts and how their art is their actions, body movements and sounds they make. Can this same be said for the visual arts and specifically labor-intensive art making?

My life experiences have continued to add to the basic foundation established by my grandpa when I was a young boy. The “wow” and admiration for artisans who

continually pursue laborious forms of art has driven me to this research. Their stories and motivations for their work compel me to see beyond the surface of art, and search for interconnections between them, myself, and other artists throughout this study.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Craft:** In this research I define crafts not as a type of art, rather the skill an artist/maker practices and works to perfect.

**Handmade:** For the purpose of this research handmade is in reference to works of art which primary method of construction is through the physical use of hand or hand tools; works in which no or minimal mechanical methods are used to create the works.

**Maker/Artisan:** In this study I use these terms synonymously to refer to the artists that create handmade works.

**Labor-Intensive:** Labor-intensive refers to large amounts of time and effort to create the art works. This can also refer to the stress put on the body due to the amount of effort required manipulate a medium to create said works.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Research Summary**

The purpose of this research is to explore the stories of art makers who undertake labor-intensive forms of craft. This literature review will discuss the crafts of blacksmithing, blademithing, glass blowing, and sweetgrass basket making. I seek to identify what drives these makers to continue their pursuits and to share their stories. I also reflect on the possibility that the cognitive and physical making processes of these artists' works are considered arts in themselves, and further consider if it is simply the final product that can be defined as art. This survey of art makers is important to me because it was my grandfather's handmade carvings that first inspired my search for my own art as a young boy. These stories and motivations of these makers can have the potential to connection us all as artists.

#### **Exploring Motivations**

What drives makers of physically demanding art forms to continue? Two theories this research explores are: one being that these makers see these works as a necessity for income and survival; and secondly, that these makers of handmade artworks see themselves as a conduit for carrying on long tradition within their craft. I would venture to say that some of these makers see both these hypotheses as equally important.

Most of the trades in this study have evolved from history where they had a specific purpose and societal functions. Dame Rosengarten (2018) writes about the

history of the Gullah Geechee, more commonly known as the Gullah people. In the low country of South Carolina, the Gullah people are known best for their hand-woven sweetgrass baskets and decorative embellishments. Rosengarten reaches back to the Gullah's history in the low country's rice plantations and their need for baskets during crop harvesting. He continues to discuss the evolution of basket making and what it meant to the people throughout the years. What started as a necessity to accomplish a tasks evolved into a source of income for families. Interestingly, Rosengarten discusses how the baskets later became an avenue of cultural expression, bringing them into the art community (Rosengarten, 2018). Is

On Bornholm, a Danish island east of Denmark, the communities financially rely on tourism during the summer season. Solene Prince researches the necessity of crafts in the Danish community after the collapse of the fishing industry in the 1970s. She writes that the majority craft-artists rely heavily on the tourist season (Prince, 2017). Prince goes on to discuss artists who have pursued careers in craft-art in the rural country side of Bornholm, discussing the different struggles and successes of their ways of life and how global economy and cultural process effect these rural areas. I think further investigation is needed to determine if there are rural areas in the United States which also rely heavily on seasonal tourism and craft-art for income, whether it be in traditional art form or the nostalgic trinket or memorabilia, and if any of the makers I researched fall within this reasoning category.

In an article for *Journal of Historical Geography*, Merle Patchett explores the history of master and apprentice and their purposes. The responsibilities of masters were to impart their knowledge of their craft to their apprentices. This would ensure the craft

and technique of the master would carry on, even if the apprentice developed their own practices (2017). James Ayers further dives into apprenticeship and its communal characteristics in *Art, Artisans and Apprentices: Apprentice Painters & Sculptors in the Early Modern British Tradition*. Ayers writes, “Shared experience of an apprenticeship could result in a community of individuals with a background in common. Where two or more tradesmen spoke the language of a given craft these bonds were often significant” (2014, p. 455). Whether this passing on of trade knowledge occurs in workshops or in family homes, I question if today the importance for these traditions is about the continuation of master’s knowledge or the maintaining of the formed community dynamics.

### **Where is the Art?**

Whether the makers of these art forms rely on what they do for income or for carrying on tradition, the works have a starting point. As with traditional fine art, the artists in this study go through a creative process in which idea is formed and translated into a final work. Traditional fine art can be time consuming, but what makes the art forms in this study different is that by nature they are physically demanding. When I consider the physical act of blacksmithing, the pounding and manipulating of steel to make form, it drives the secondary question of this study: can the cognitive and/or physical making processes be considered art, or just the final product?

Authors C. Dominik Güss, Ma. Teresa Tuason, Noemi Göldenboth, and Anastasia Mironova explore the role of creativity in the societal advancements worldwide. They write, “In the arts (such as composing, painting, and literature/writing), creative expression has become synonymous to producing art” (2018, p. 262). During their



research of the cognitive process of creating they discovered that all the artists from Cuba, Russia, and Germany surveyed described creating as a fluid process and constantly changing. One Russian artist is cited as saying, “You know, for me its play. It’s not the final product, it’s the process. It’s allowing the process to happen and kind of opening up different environments, different connections, it’s having the ability to say ‘yes’ to whatever happens” (2018, p. 275).

In studying creativity in the performing arts, the authors of “Creativity and the Performing Artist: Behind the Mask” note that Aristotle claimed the production of art imitated life through melody and rhythm (Thomson & Jaque, 2017). Similarly, in the book, *Thinking Art*, Antoon Van den Braembussche discusses imitation theory in visual arts. This theory holds that art should represent nature faithfully. However, Braembussche writes that this theory should not be limited to the visual arts, but can also be applied to music, drama, literature, etc., and that all are imitations of a physically perceptible reality (Braembussche, 2009).

Are the cognitive and creative processes of making art an art within themselves? If the creative process is synonymous with the production of art, I would argue that art is formed at the beginning stages of conceptualization. Julia Marshall writes in “Image as Insight: Visual Images in Practice-Based Research”, referencing Rudolph Arnheim’s argument that mental images are, “...on a basic level of interior extensions and refinements of the images perceived by the eye”, and that the can be represented as abstract shapes (2007, p.28). Arnheim’s works apply principles of psychology to art in which he asserts that art is a product of the mind. In an *Art Journal* article reviewing Arnheim’s work, William Sener Rusk writes this, “The Impressionists, to Arnheim,

accepted the fact that pictorial image is a product of the mind rather than a deposit of the physical object” (1971, p. 326-334). I believe Marshall’s and Rusk’s analysis of Arnheim’s theory of visual images supports this idea that art take’s shape in our mind before it is realized as a final product, even if it is a basic representation of the piece, it can be considered art. Even more so, Braembussche’s assertion that not just the visual arts can be an imitation of perceived reality and that ideas formed into images representing our realities, whether through music, literature or another art form, are art in their basic form. I investigate blacksmiths, blademiths, glass blowers, and sweetgrass basket makers to see how the processes can be viewed and interpreted as art. I consider the makers’ thinking process from conception to final work, and examine the physical making processes in an effort to discover where art begins.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODS AND PROCEDURES

#### **Plan of Action**

My admiration for the handmade has inspired this research project. Rita L. Irwin writes in *A/r/tography: Rendering Self Through Arts- Based Living Inquiry*, “A/r/t not only recognizes the roles individuals must play, it also affords all of us an imaginative turn as we come to understand and appreciate that the processes and products involved in creating works of art” (Irwin & Cosson, 2004, p. 30). This research not only helps to build my understanding of the processes used by makers when creating their works, but also to understand their stories and why they do what they do.

My study is designed to focus on existing labor-intensive art practices and the makers of these practices. The practices researched within this project include glassblowing and sculpting, bladesmithing, blacksmithing working, and sweet grass basket weaving. These makers were selected specifically because of the intensive labor involved while creating their work. Additionally, these particular trades produce works which are in constant competition with similar mass, machine-produced products.

#### **Procedures**

Stephanie Springgay writes in *A/r/tography as Living Inquiry Through Art and Text*,

To be engaged in the practice of a/r/tography means to inquire in the world through a process of art making and writing. It is a process of double imaging that

includes the creation of art and words that are not separate or illustrative of each other but instead, are interconnected and woven through each other to create additional meaning. (2019, p. 899)

This notion is the inspiration for my research: to inquire the process of art making. This study is a qualitative study of existing makers to include glassblowing and sculpting, bladesmithing, blacksmithing, and sweet grass basket weaving. I incorporate the use of portraiture methodology. Portraiture honors unique perspectives of subjects researched and interprets the personal stories of said individuals through rich descriptive narratives (Buffington & McKay, 2013). This methodology allows me to highlight each maker's individuality while searching for connections between their inspirations and their work.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Through use of semi-structured interviews I collected and recorded all data. Prior to formal interviews, a pre-interview questionnaire was sent to the artisan to gather basic data about their work. The pre-interview questionnaire allowed me to conduct a more qualitative formal interview. I, as the interviewer and observer, documented what is not only heard, but what is seen and felt during the makers' interviews. If agreed upon by the maker being interviewed, the interviews were video or audio recorded and the interviews stored on a hard drive. The purpose of this is to reflect on and transcribe the recordings. The recordings are also used as a source for identifying inflections and emotions of the makers' as they speak about their craft and their "why". If a video recording was approved I attentively sought non-verbal cues to help further inform me of their reasons for continuing their work.

Artisan's work processes were observed. During this time, through use of drawing as research, I documented in a sketchbook through images and texts. Sketchbook entries capture in-the-moment nuances and experiences that may not have been captured in recordings. The intent of the sketchbook entries is to document and categorize the reasons each maker has for selecting the labor-intensive art form. The sketches will be used to capture their stories as they labor through their craft and used to interpret the "why" behind their work. During this observation and sketchbook period I try to determine where the artwork begins. Are the creating and making processes an art form, or is the final product the only thing to be considered art?

Analysis of the data collected was represented through final pieces of my own artwork. The pieces were informed through the collections from my visual and written sketchbook and the stored recordings. The compositions for each were created from a compilation of photos either I took, or that were provided from the makers. The works are representational of the artisans' making processes with less attention on the final pieces produced in their craft. I capture the makers' thinking processes through their facial expressions. The paintings visually represent not just their story, but reasons behind their continued pursuit of their labor-intensive art form, their "why."

The timeline for this research varied dependent on the maker and their availability for interviews. A generalized format was utilized to conduct my study of each of the makers in this research project. Figure 1 depicts the basic procedure followed from my initial contact with the artists to my final work.

<u>Identify &amp; Contact Maker</u>	<u>Interview &amp; Observation</u>	<u>Data Analysis</u>	<u>Final Artwork</u>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Internet search or word of mouth.</li> <li>2. Contact maker via phone call or email, whichever is convenient for the interviewee.</li> <li>3. Email consent form and pre-interview questionnaire.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Interview maker for approximately 30 minutes. If approved, interviews will be either audio or video recorded.</li> <li>2. Observe the artisan's making process.</li> <li>3. Record experiential data in sketchbook through both image creation and text.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Review pre-interview questionnaires, interviews and sketchbook entries.</li> <li>2. Identify and record the reasons (whys) for the makers' continual pursuit of their craft.</li> <li>3. Identify similarities and differences between the makers.</li> <li>4. Study all data to identify where the art begins.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Painting produced depicting the maker's process for their work. Painting should also be representational of their reason or passions behind their art.</li> </ol>

*Table 1. Initial Procedural Timeline*

### **Limitations**

There were limitations to this study that provided challenges to data collection. First, this project was highly dependent on the willingness of participants to be interviewed and their work observed. I found that some of the participants did not feel the need to complete the provided pre-interview questionnaire and wanted to go straight into the interview. Those that did complete the questionnaire provided varying levels of detail to their answers. Some provided in depth responses while other were quick, short responses. This variation of responses, though insightful, made it challenging when I tried to develop a substantial agenda for the interviews. Those providing in depth responses made interviews shorter and more about their personal connection to their work, while short responses required more basic questioning before digging into their connection to their work.

It was unfortunate that in the midst of this study the COVID-19 pandemic struck and our nation. Like the rest of the world, I and the participants were faced with a lockdown situation. This new reality severely limited my ability to conduct face-to-face interviews and observations of the research participants. This forced me to explore new methods for accomplishing the same tasks. Interviews were conducted via phone calls or

video conferences and did not allow for recordings of the interview, therefore everything spoken had to be transcribed in the moment or from memory after the discussions, which was not as thorough as I had hoped. The observation of the artists working were now conducted through use of social media video posts and artist posted YouTube videos.

Additionally, because of the COVID-19 lockdown, two of my participants dropped off and I was unable to contact them after my initial contact, limiting my pool of participants to four. The lockdown also prevented observation periods of the artists remained in this study, therefore my sketchbook journal was extremely limited. Any sketches or comments were derived from the video conferences or from photos given by the artist. Experiences previously anticipated were now assumptions based on conversations and images. My final artworks however, are of individual artists working on their craft and represent common themes extracted from my collected data.

Due to all of these changes a new timeline had to be considered. Table 2 shows adaptations made to my previous process to meet the new challenges. Fortunately, some if these steps could still be applied to my new process.

<u>Identify &amp; Contact Maker</u>	<u>Interview &amp; Observation</u>	<u>Data Analysis</u>	<u>Final Artwork</u>
1. Internet search or word of mouth. 2. Contact maker via phone call or email, whichever is convenient for the interviewee. 3. Email consent form and pre-interview questionnaire.	1. Interview maker for approximately 30 minutes. Through phone call or video conference. 2. Review videos and photos of the artisan's making process. All videos and photos must be sent by or recommended by the maker. 3. Record any available data in sketchbook provided from images or videos.	1. Review pre-interview questionnaires, interviews and sketchbook entries. 2. Identify and record the reasons (whys) for the makers' continual pursuit of their craft. 3. Identify similarities and differences between the makers. 4. Study all data to identify where the art begins.	1. Painting produced depicting the maker's process for their work. Painting should also be representational of their reason or passions behind their art.

*Table 2. Modified COVID-19 Timeline*

Regardless of changing circumstances in society, sufficient data collection was achieved. Interviews were fruitful and many carried on by the participant much longer

than the originally allotted time. Each had unique stories, yet similarities were found in all which helped to develop common themes discussed in the next chapter.



## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

When this study began I made some initial assumptions about why makers take on labor-intensive art forms. First was that their work their primary source of income whereby being necessary for survival. The second that these makers of handmade works saw themselves as a conduit for carrying traditions of their craft. To my surprise in the responses I received, there were minor elements of my preliminary assumptions, but not they were not focal purpose of makers' work.

Due to the limited access to direct contact with artists, I worked with a small pool of participants. I began with six participants in this study, but as mentioned in chapter three, that list was reduced to four. Of these four, some work in the same medium yet are very different in their technique and art form. For some of the participants I did some initial inquiry through internet searches and watching previously recorded online video documentaries, but each was interviewed individually.

#### **Pre-Interview Questionnaire**

Participants were provided a pre-interview questionnaire to complete at their leisure. The purpose of the questionnaire was to gather generalized information about the makers, their medium, and history on how they got into their craft. The questionnaire contained five questions that I would later build upon during the actual interviews.

Participants were instructed to complete the form with as much or as little detail as they saw fit and return it to me prior their interviews. As previously mentioned, some of the

artists felt it unnecessary to complete the pre-interview questionnaire and opted to go straight into the interview. This resulted in me starting from scratch and extended the interview past the allotted 30 minute timeframe. Even though these makers chose not to complete the questionnaire, their interviews were just as insightful as the others who did complete the questionnaire. In some cases the in person responses to the initial five questions from the questionnaire yielded more personal conversation than would have been yielded from written or typed answers.

### **Participants**

The art forms in this study were selected based on the level of effort required to complete a work; how labor-intensive the craft is. This could be time spent to complete a work or physical demands involved in creating a piece. An internet search was conducted to find the chosen participants. Some were local to me, while others were out of town. In either case the participants were willing to share their craft and their stories.

#### **Participant 1**

Adam Frus is a glass artist who produces both blown and sculpted glass works. He began working with glass in 1997 where he attended a continuing education program at Jacksonville University in Florida with his father and brother. He has taken other higher level courses in glass blowing, but much of his technique he discovered through trial and error. When asked why he choose glass as a medium his response was;

For the challenge, for the obscurity of the art form compared to something else like painting. The physical nature of the art form is very active with a lot of motion and the need for strength and finesse. There's also an awesomeness with

the experimental nature of glass techniques; there's always learning to be done.

(Personal communication, March 29, 2020)

In response to the pre-interview questionnaire, when asked if he has experience teaching others his craft, Adam simply responded with, "Yes and I love it." In his earlier years he had taught some classes on glass blowing, but in 2004 he began instructing full time.

Prior to COVID-19 lockdown restriction, I had the pleasure of observing one of his demonstrations and watched him work with both youth and adults. Ages in this particular session ranged from age 6 to late 40s. There were roughly ten to fifteen students and each had the opportunity to make a glass ornament. My initial reaction was to question how he would teach such a wide variation in age groups. He proceeded to give a demonstration of what they would be making, with some basic technique and safety tips. To my surprise as one by one of the learners worked with him, he was able to change voice inflections and descriptive language to match each of the age groups individually. Each participant was made at ease around the 2500 degree furnace and molten glass. His assistant, another artist that helped with safety and tinting the glass, was continuously smiling and stating that he was a born teacher. At the end of it all, this was his final note about why he does what he does.

My true driver is a love of the processes required to successfully complete a piece. During studio time, it is hard to think of anything else since so much activity and attention are needed. It's a slightly dangerous dance that we do, fraught with possibilities of failure all along the way. To pull it off, one needs to balance timings, temperatures, applied pressures, dexterity, direction of others and

artistic expression...And it is incredibly fun. (Personal communication, March 29, 2020)



*Figure 1. Blown Glass Art by Adam Frus*



*Figure 2. Sculpted Glass art by Adam Frus*

## **Participant 2**

Larry Domsy also works with glass but primarily glass blowing, however, he also creates metal sculptures and often incorporates them into his glasswork. He began his story by telling about his move to the Las Vegas area in 1979. For him school was never something he wanted to pursue, he just wanted to make things. He enjoyed working with his hands so for many years he worked as a stage hand in various casinos throughout Las Vegas. He not only set up stages, but also designed backdrops and props. In 1992 he and his wife, who I will discuss later, opened a glass studio. When asked why he chose glass he says, “I was fascinated and wanted to try it” (personal communication, March 8, 2020). He continued making glass blown art and many of his pieces ended up in hotels and casinos throughout Las Vegas. He can’t recall when, but at some point in his time working with glass he decided he wanted to work with metal. He now incorporates his

glass blown pieces with his metal sculptures. Teaching is also a passion of this artist, however it's on a smaller scale. He has apprentices under him, but does not hold multiple person classes. His teaching others comes from a willingness to help rather than a passion for teaching. The primary reason for his work is the need to create. He states that he is always thinking about what he is going to do next and, to quote him, "I just have to be making something" (personal communication, March 8, 2020).



*Figure 3. Metal Lampstand & Blown Glass Fixtures by Larry Domsky*

### **Participant 3**

Barbara Domsky, Larry's wife, works with glass differently. Rather than glass blowing, she does glass fusion, creating flat wall-mountable pieces. Her interview began

with these statements, “Art for me is like breathing” and “As far back as I can remember I saw in color” (personal communication, February 28, 2020). She remembers being around 7 years old when she started drawing. She stated that she was never really good at school, but she always wanted to create art, any art. When she reached her high school years she was fortunate enough to attend an art centric school and was able to excel. After high school she moved to South Africa, a place that inspires much of her work today. She recalls her admiration for handmade tribal blankets, where each tribe was represented by vibrant colors and patterns. She traveled and lived there for 10 years before returning to the states in 1984. Barbara struggled to find a job in art when she returned, but in 1990 she started working as a pattern designer for a Las Vegas stained glass company. This started the journey with glass. After opening her studio with her husband, she created one of her most nostalgic body of works, her “Blankets” series (see Figure 4). These 4’ X 4’ fused glass pieces paid tribute to her time in South Africa and drove the style of her future pieces like her “Pranas” series (see Figure 5). Like her husband, many of her works are displayed throughout hotels in the Las Vegas area. Though she has had success with her art since opening her studio, she gets her greatest joy with art by working with children with cancer. She says this about those efforts, “Art was always a way for me to escape whatever was going on so I want give these kids the same chance, and if it’s just for a short time that they can forget about their struggle then it’s worth it” (personal communication, February 28, 2020). She uses her art to tell her story and to make connections with the people around her. With an enormous authentic smile throughout the entire interview, I could feel the passion and joy she had for art; it

was part of her. When the interview was over her last words were, “I just can’t imagine life without art” (personal communication, February 28, 2020).



*Figure 4. “Blankets” Fused Glass Series by Barbara Domsky*



*Figure 5. “Pranas” Fused Glass Series, 1 of 4, by Barbara Domsky*

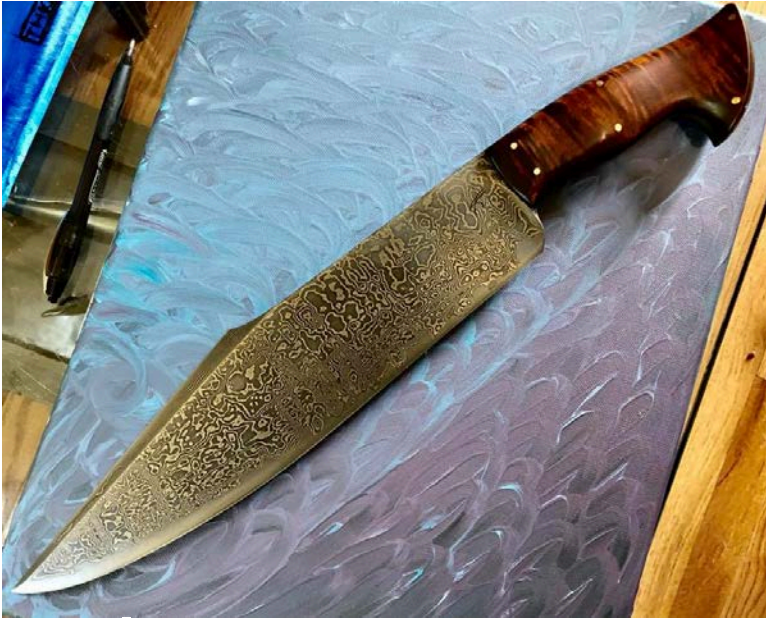
#### **Participant 4**

I decided to touch base again with my bladesmith friend Jason Knight, now based in Tennessee. It had been over ten years since I discussed his passion for his work with him, so I wanted to see if there was any change to his reason for his work. Jason began his journey in 2001 where he apprenticed at a bladesmith school in Arkansas. From there he perfected his own technique and style, which gained him popularity in the

bladesmithing world. Regardless of his success and popularity, he is still obsessed with the idea of taking a raw material and turning it into something new, virtually something from nothing. Jason chose to work with steel because of his fascination with the art and craft of forging and how steel moved similarly to clay when it reached certain temperatures. In his interview he states, “I always feel and need to create and this is my creative outlet. Life is too short to do stuff you don’t want to do” (personal communication, April 4, 2020). Jason’s creativity is evident in his Damascus patterned knives, which is when two different steels are forge welded and layered to create beautiful patterns (see Figure 6).

Like Adam Frus, Jason is a teacher. Being a master bladesmith himself, he holds both in person classes in his studio and has a series of online video classes for anyone interested in learning how to bladesmith. He teaches the properties of steel, his own techniques working with it, and lessons he learned from failures. Apprentices who practice under Jason, receive preparation for their own journeyman and master smith evaluations. Jason has three main reasons for teaching. First, he wants to share his age-old craft with others in an effort to keep it alive in this world of industry. Second, he wants to inspire others to be makers. No matter the art form, he urges people to create, to make things with their hands. Lastly, because bladesmithing is his creative outlet, he wants the world to see what he does as an art. Ultimately he doesn’t do this work for money, but to as a creative expression of who he is and encourage others to be makers along with him.





*Figure 6. San Mai Damascus Chopper by Jason Knight*

### **Participant 5 & 6**

I intended on these participants being a blacksmith and a sweetgrass basket maker from the Low Country area of the Carolinas. These artists are special to me because they are reminders of the seven years I lived in Charleston, SC. Though I was unable to interview them, I still reference them in my art work to bring emphasis to some of the common themes I found among the other participants in this study.

### **Common Themes**

Preliminary assumptions were made at the beginning of my research as to why these artists worked on labor-intensive art forms: the carrying on of traditions, and works were a primary source of income. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, I was surprised that these were not the primary reasons these artists continue to pursue their craft. In fact only Jason Knight mentioned income, but only that he was blessed to be able to make a living doing what he loves, but it was not his main purpose. Both Adam Frus

and Jason Knight mentioned a level of tradition, but neither had a long history of the crafts they chose, nor was it their primary driver.

Through this study, and derived from the interviews of the artisans, I discovered similarities which I divided into five common themes. The themes are broken down into single word descriptors which are in further detail in the upcoming paragraphs: Teacher, Memory, and Embodiment, Challenge, and Family.

### **Teacher**

With each of these makers there was a strong element of the desire to teach. As mentioned with Adam Frus, he instructs glass blowing full time with ten or more students, and Jason Knight has gone to the level of creating online classes as well as holding classes in his studio. For them teaching is more than just instructing how to lessons, but provided full demonstrations and hands-on training. Larry and Barbara Domskey teach on a smaller scale. Larry has apprentices under him that he teaches, who he teaches on a more on-on-one, personal level. He instills his own techniques and helps them find their own art and style. Barbara, though she doesn't have pupils, teaches her art when she hosts art days for children with cancer. She mentioned that for the younger children she teaches a simpler craft, but for children over 12 years of age she teaches glass fusing and they create their own glass artwork. With each of these makers there is a joy in their voice when they speak of their pupils. To be able to share what they know and see others progress and succeed in their own work brings them a sense of pride.



Figure 7. "Teacher"

In creating *Teacher*, I reference a shared experience in a glass blowing studio with my daughter. The image depicts Adam Frus teaching my daughter to work with glass.

Adam has an ability to create a comfortable environment while making the student feel

confident to mimic his work. The painting captures Adam's ability to share his knowledge of his art and pass on techniques to even some of the youngest of novices. He affords them the opportunity and space to control the process on their own all the while being in close enough proximity to teach and guide when needed. The idea behind *Teacher* is that these artist want to share their craft while experiencing their pupils' success.

### **Memory**

Within several of these makers there is an element of memory. Most notable is Barbara Domsy. She used her fused glass art to commemorate her time in South Africa in her "Blankets" series. She continues to use vibrant colors in patterns that resemble textiles as an homage to her memories and the tribal blankets. This commemoration is most evident in her "Pranas" pieces, for which she is most proud of because they not just harken to the blankets but speak the beginning of a new journey for her work. Her childhood memories of using art as an escape as have driven her passion to work with children with cancer.

On a different level, Jason uses his work and the training of others to remember the craft and his time as an apprentice. He wants to keep the craft alive so he teaches in person and through video lessons. He not only shares techniques he has learned on his own through trial and error, but he teaches his pupils methods the old master blacksmiths and bladesmiths practiced, not forgetting how the craft began.



Figure 8. "Memory"

I use an image of a blacksmith in my *Memory* painting. Though I could not interview the blacksmith participant, I found the story interconnected with the other artists. *Memory* portrays a blacksmith making wrought iron work by hand with an old style coal forge roaring hot. The heat from the forge reflects off of everything in the room including the blacksmith. Engraved into the anvil are the initials and years of life of the uncle who taught him everything. In the background is an idea coming to life, a portion of a wrought iron gate. These elements together symbolize the intensity and labor required to create the work, and the envisioning of future work while honoring the memory of his uncle and his traditional methods.

### **Embodiment**

I use the term embodiment because the art of these makers is the visible representation of their thinking, their essence within their work. Larry Domsy and Jason

Knight describe it in that they have to create, it's something inside them, and glass blowing and bladesmithing give them that creative outlet. Barbara Domsky best describes it as breathing for her; she cannot imagine life without art. Any way either of these artists describe art, there is an essence that art is part of them and even if it they were not doing their current art forms, they would still be creating something. Their being is expressed through their work and sharing their work with other is essentially sharing themselves with others because the art is who they are.



Figure 9. “Embodiment”

Painting *Embodiment* was a struggle for me for two reasons. First it forced me to ask myself if I am showing others who I am through my work. When speaking with these artists I felt as if there would be a sense of anxiety if they were not creating, but I was not sure that I was there. Second, how do you paint the idea of embodiment? I considered leaving it out of the list of themes, but it was too important so I fought with it and

ultimately ended up with this final piece. *Embodiment* expresses the idea that the artist is seeing themselves create even before starting. In the forefront the artist is already mentally creating. His expression is that of someone thinking through and becoming his artistic process, one to get to work creating because creativity is who he is.

### **Challenge**

With almost every participant I heard, in one form or another, that they loved the challenge of the art form. Adam specifically said, “I love the challenge it brings as opposed to another art like drawing or painting” (personal communication, March 8, 2020). All these artists work with extreme heat and must balance timing and temperatures. Other elements like weight when working large scale, or working with tools that could actually hurt them adds to the joy they have when the project finished.



*Figure 10.* “Challenge”

In *Challenge* I try to portray many of the elements these four artists face every time they work on their art. The furnace glows white hot while the glass bright reds and oranges. Though rolled up, the artist has on protective sleeves to shield him from the extreme heat. The weight of the molten glass is enough that he cannot hold it alone, thus requiring a pipe stand. Lastly his posture says two things. One, there is an immense concentration that is needed to balance the weight of while turning it to keep it from drooping and keep it centered. Second is that he is in a stance to help him move quickly when the glass reaches temperature so he can make timely adjustments before needing to reheat.

### **Family**

The final common theme among these artists was family. What I mean by this is not that they do their craft for their family, but that family members have part in living and carrying on their stories. For example, Adam Frus attended glass blowing classes after his older brother and father had. Adam's younger brother followed suit years later and all four of them continue with their glass blowing work. Jason Knight, though he didn't learn from his family to forge, his children have learned from him. He has two adult children that have watched and learned from him as they grew up. Given the basic skill learned from their father, both are now forging and defining their own style, his daughter as a bladesmith and his son as a blacksmith. Finally, in a different sense, the Domskeys work with glass as a husband and wife team. Though their work is significantly different, they went into the field as a family and run their business as a family.





*Figure 11. "Family"*

In trying to capture what it means to paint family in reference to art, I chose to use a sweetgrass basket maker and her granddaughter. Though I was unable to interview a basket maker like I intended, their history is not uncommon. The practice of making baskets is passed down through the generations. In "Family" I depict the grandmother and granddaughter sitting together making baskets. The less seen element is that though they are weaving together they are actually creating on their own. The grandmother has almost completed her work, but the granddaughter is in deep concentration trying to find her place in this world of art her family has created. This idea is common among the interviewed artists; making together but creating their own ideas and works.

## CHAPTER V

### IMPLICATIONS AND POTENTIAL FUTURE RESEARCH

#### **Reflecting Thoughts**

The purpose of this study was to examine and identify the reasons people pursue labor-intensive art forms. Though some of the makers in this project worked with the same media, they're works were very different. In the midst of an industrial society each artist found some challenges when competing with industries that mass produce similar products to their work. This did not dissuade them from continuing, it simply drove them to explore new ideas for their work. Many of the stories behind these makers have a similarity to my own experiences and experiences of fellow artists I have come across throughout my life.

#### **Where is The Art?**

In my search for discovering if the making process of these artists could be considered art, I found myself captivated by videos of them working. For some of these artists, I did some initial internet research where I found video series of them working. I watched in fascination as they worked through their processes. Can their process, their environment, their actions when making be considered art?

A major consideration for my tendency to assert that the making process is art, is the popularity of online videos platforms. Through platforms such as YouTube, these artists, and many others, share how they make their art. During my interview with Adam Frus, I asked him his thoughts on this idea. His response was,

I'm not sure, but there might be something to that. There is something about someone who has perfected their craft and watching them go through their process with finesse. After all, that is the reason we as artists use YouTube to share what we do. (Personal communication, March 29, 2020)

As previously referenced, Michael Schwalbe discusses the natural impulse we have to experiment and make things (2010), and with the availability of online video platforms and social media we can satisfy these impulses. Artists and makers can share step by step procedures for those that want to learn, and with the use of time lapse content viewers are enabled to enjoy the making of art works: the art behind the art.

Considering foundational elements and principles of art, such as light, color, rhythm, etc. I would have to say art is present within the artisan's making process. Though they are in constant movement, many of the artistic elements are easily identifiable; for many of these artists light and color are prominent elements during their working process. To restate Rita L. Irwin, "A/r/t not only recognizes the roles individuals must play, it also affords all of us an imaginative turn as we come to understand and appreciate that the processes and products involved in creating works of art" (Irwin & Cosson, 2004, p. 30). Though A/r/tography methods were not used in this research, I still developed an understanding and appreciation of the artisan's processes.

### **Connections**

At the beginning of this research, I pondered if connections could be made between myself, these makers, and all artists. All of us have a personal story and a focal point of where our art journeys all started. There is a sense in all of us as artists to create and tell stories through their work, whether a story of who they are or a story of an idea

they are passionate about. Interestingly, I spoke with a fellow painter about my research and though he was fascinated by the idea and had an appreciation for the makers' works in this study, he did not necessarily consider them artists. For him there was a distinct difference; they were craftsmen or artisans and he was an artist. I do not believe these distinctions are either necessary or 100% accurate. In either art form, there is a creative process that begins with conception and ends with a final product. Whether it is a painting or a wrought iron gate, the creative process is not null. After all, Leonardo da Vinci was an artists who was an engineer, and scientist and neither were separate entities to him.

### **Potential Future Research**

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, I was forced to explore other methods of research than my initial methodical plan. Our lives were all twisted and turned upside down. We all had to stay home and avoid contact with others, so how did we adjust? A couple of questions come to mind when considering the pandemic and the artists in this study as well as art's role during time such as these.

First, I wonder what effects did the pandemic have on these artists and how did they adapt? Many of these artists rely on word of mouth or face-to-face contact with people in arenas such as craft shows and competitions. With social media being a prominent part of our culture today, I question how heavily these artists, and other artists of all mediums, relied on these platforms for success and not just for advertising or sharing purposes.

Second, how did we as a community adapt during this adversity and did art play a role in countering psychological issues? What research has been done on the use of art to

counter depression, loneliness and other psychological challenges we all faced during the pandemic? Was art an anchor for which people could latch on during these difficult times and other periods such as these throughout history?

Lastly, based on my own social media searches of these makers, I think further exploration is needed to determine how social media has affected the arts. I specifically have two questions. First, has social media reduced the success of brick and mortar art galleries? Social media has given easy access to the public, almost eliminating the need to visit traditional galleries. Second, because of its ease of access, how has social media effected the livelihoods of artists? With more people trying their hand at multiple forms of art that they would not have considered before social media, does this hurt artists who once had a niche.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

I have seen many of the makers in person creating their work. Some of these pieces take hours to even days to finish. Some require physical strength, balance, and awareness of timing. In any case, they all take on the challenges of labor-intensive art forms. They all face challenges with competitive industry-made substitutions of their work, yet they all keep going. There is a feeling of perseverance we could all learn from. Many times I have considered throwing in the towel myself when competing against mass produced digital paintings, but these artists inspire me to keep going. Whatever the reason they continue to strive in their chosen medium, their stories connect us all. Their work is no less or no more art than my own.

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APPENDIX A  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL





*Institutional Review Board*

DATE: January 6, 2020  
TO: Antonio Ramirez  
FROM: University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB  
PROJECT TITLE: [1531184-2] The Labor of Art  
SUBMISSION TYPE: Amendment/Modification  
ACTION: APPROVAL/VERIFICATION OF EXEMPT STATUS  
DECISION DATE: January 6, 2020  
EXPIRATION DATE: January 6, 2024

Thank you for your submission of Amendment/Modification materials for this project. The University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB approves this project and verifies its status as EXEMPT according to federal IRB regulations.

We will retain a copy of this correspondence within our records for a duration of 4 years .

If you have any questions , please contact Nicole Morse at 970-351-1910 or [nicole.morse@unco.edu](mailto:nicole.morse@unco.edu). Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB's records.

APPENDIX B  
Pre-Interview Questionnaire



APPENDIX C

Teacher



## APPENDIX D

### Memory



APPENDIX E  
Embodiment





APPENDIX F

Challenge



APPENDIX G

Family

