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Andrea Bowers: "What Does It Take to Succeed as a Young Artist Today? A New Documentary Asks Industry Players - and Finds the Answer is Bleak"

By Taylor Dafoe

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Artist Gisela McDaniel as seen in Kelcey Edwards' documentary *The Art of Making It* (2021). Courtesy of Wischful Thinking Productions.

The film, which premieres next month, follows a group of up-and-comers as they "struggle to balance making art with making ends meet."

"We now have more people in the world who call themselves artists than we ever have had before in the history of human time," says curator Helen Molesworth midway through [The Art of Making It](#), a new documentary about what it means to be an emerging artist today.

Like Molesworth's fun fact, the film, which premieres next month, paints a bleak picture for up-and-coming artists: competition appears to be at an all-time high while opportunities for showing are few and far between; the market is ravenous, but calibrated toward salability; collectors are finicky, dealers wield an inordinate amount of power, and MFA programs debilitate students with mountains of debt.

"It's not logical, it's not fair," sums up Brooklyn Museum director Anne Pasternak in another section. "You may be one of the greatest living artists in the world and nobody knows it."

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Chris Watts in *The Art of Making It* (2021). Courtesy of Wischful Thinking Productions.

Directed by Kelcey Edwards and produced by Debi Wisch (who was also behind the 2018 film [The Price of Everything](#)), *The Art of Making It* follows a handful of young artists, including Jenna Gribbon, Gisela McDaniel, and Chris Watts, among others. Each is well established in their practice but still chasing “success”—however you may define that term.

In this case at least, money is the metric by which most of the film’s characters define it—not so much about accumulating wealth, but simply paying the bills.

“The talented young artists in our film struggle to balance making art with making ends meet,” Edwards, herself an M.F.A. grad, said in a statement. “They reflect on the challenges of navigating an art world ecosystem in which they are almost entirely dependent on a combination of their own fortitude, the whims of an unregulated market, and support from institutions with a history of barriers to entry based on race, gender, and socioeconomic class.”

And yet, as much as the documentary purports to be about the precarity of young artists, its ambitions are even bigger. Like *The Price of Everything*, the goal here, it seems, is to hold a mirror up to the art world as it confronts its own relevance in a time of profound cultural change.

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Jenna Gribbon in *The Art of Making it* (2021). Courtesy of Wischful Thinking Productions.

That's made clearest in interviews with a stacked cast of talking art world heads, including artist Andrea Bowers, curator Valerie Cassel-Oliver, writer Dave Hickey, and museum director Michael Govan. (There are a number of fun cameos, too: artist Julie Curtiss, dealer Anton Kern, philanthropist Mackenzie Scott.)

Perhaps because the feature was filmed between 2019 and this year, a period of great instability, the camera catches many of them speaking in an uncharacteristically candid way about the industry's imperative to evolve.

"There is extraordinary opportunity for reinvention at this moment," says Pasternak. "It's a moment of revolution," adds Pace director Marc Glimcher. "We need to adapt. We're going to lose some of the old models as we build new ones."

The Art of Making It premieres [November 13 in New York](#), and will be available to stream online thereafter.

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