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# Art League Houston Breaks Through Walls to Give Indebted Artists a Voice

SUSIE TOMMANEY | NOVEMBER 27, 2015 | 7:00AM

At the outset of Occupy Wall Street in 2011, a group of artists – seeing the connection between the corruption of high finance and “high culture” – began to occupy museums in New York City. The group, calling themselves Occupy Museums, called attention to the fact that members sat on the boards of both the Museum of Modern Art and Sotheby’s auction house, “where the value of art is synonymous with speculation.” As their ranks grew, they developed a concept for a “Debtfair” intervention in an art gallery – even creating small-scale models of how it would look – which would call attention to the hidden debt in the art market: unpaid labor, overleveraged galleries, working artists living in debt, and the extracted value from art on secondary markets. Only one art gallery in the country took them up on the proposal, Art League Houston, which embraced the “**Debtfair**” concept fully, even down to the suggestion of ripping out sheetrock to display artwork between the wall studs.

Artists were invited to submit works while also describing their indebtedness. Their works are on display according to four categories: works by 40 artists owing \$2,189,293.78 to banks and financial institutions are displayed in a long rectangle; pieces by eight artists owing \$333,455.11 who work multiple jobs to support their artistic careers are displayed in a circle; works by 10 artists who owe \$732,462.24 and feel “stress, fear or anxiety” are displayed in a rotated rectangle; pieces by six artists represented by galleries and who owe \$63,371.57 are displayed in a triangle; two other participating artists did not fit into any of these categories.

In the non-juried exhibit, some artists chose to illustrate their debt visually, while others offered work that was roughly equal in relative value to their monthly debt payment. The gallery has bundled these works together with an initial sale price equivalent to the totaled monthly debt payment of included artists in the subset; however, the price goes up daily as corresponding interest rates have been applied to the initial asking price. Revenue from sales will go directly to the artists’ lending institutions.



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The exhibit includes a witty, tongue-in-cheek piece by Lina Dib, which features an old-fashioned

punch-card time clock with cards identifying how she spends her day: “Calling My Programmer, Thinking I Should Have Been a Doctor, Making A R T, Fucking Off,” and “Explaining to my Family What It Is I Actually Do.” Lib is in the largest category, along with Cameron Coffman who produced a splintered knee painting, Patricia Aya with a fatigued angel, and Kurt A. Hill, Jr. with an abstract pig.

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Two small-scale mock-ups of Occupy Museums’ original concept also are included in the exhibit. They show multi-room museum or gallery spaces with an auxiliary wall attachment featuring the work of indebted artists.

Ironically, those artists participating in the exhibit will not be compensated; however, this is due to the scale of the exhibition. They will receive a one-year membership to Art League Houston, will be invited to a special dinner with other artists to discuss the project and, if a piece as part of a bundle is sold, will be relieved of one month’s debt payment. The artists who organized “Debtfair” received honorariums for their project.

*“Debtfair” continues through January 11, at Art League Houston, 1953 Montrose, open Tuesdays to Fridays, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Saturdays noon to 5 p.m., 713-523-9530, [artleaguehouston.org](http://artleaguehouston.org). Free.*

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