

A response to “Two New York City transit workers killed in less than a week”

Artist Marvin Franklin dead in accident

12 May 2007

Below we post a letter from a reader on our February 6 article, “Two New York City transit workers killed in less than a week”

Dear WSWs,

The deaths of these NYC transit workers expose the chronically poor safety regulations of the MTA, and are a tragic loss for their families, friends and co-workers. In the case of Marvin Franklin, the worker killed in the Hoyt-Schermerhorn station in Brooklyn, his death is also a loss for his fellow artists and the arts. Your article mentions that in addition to being a veteran transit worker of 22 years, and only 3 years short of retirement, Franklin was a painter. In fact, Marvin Franklin’s life exemplifies the difficulties and determination of many working class artists who eke out time for their art while working full-time, demanding, and in Franklin’s case, dangerous jobs.

Franklin was a highly gifted watercolorist and draughtsman whose paintings and drawings captured the figures and faces of New York City subway riders he knew so well with vividness and compassion. He was a student at the Arts Student’s League, one of the only art schools in New York with a tradition of fostering artists from working class backgrounds by offering classes at low tuition on flexible schedules. The League’s faculty has included artists Robert Henri, John Sloan, and German émigré George Grosz; a list of its alumni reads like a Who’s Who of American art, including Winslow Homer, abstract Expressionist painters Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden and many others. Had he lived, Franklin would no doubt have taken his place among these notable artists and instructors.

However, Franklin’s tragic death also highlights the polarization and inequality that has intensified over the

past several decades in the art world no less than American society as a whole. Unlike a small coterie of artists whose means and other resources allow them to attend the most prestigious art schools, and thereby establish connections with commercial galleries and dealers from an early age, Franklin, a man in his mid-fifties, attended morning classes at the League from 9 a.m. to noon after working his night shift maintaining subway tracks from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. He also commuted over an hour each day from St. Albans, Queens. Occasionally he would admit to his instructors that he was incredibly tired; indeed such a schedule would allow precious little time for sleep, not to mention meeting the demands of an “art career.”

In today’s highly competitive commercial art market, in addition to the time and concentration required to develop one’s craft and artistic vision, artists must invest considerable resources in promoting their work. If they are lucky enough to get an exhibit, they are often asked to pay all expenses related to advertising, delivery and installation of their artwork, which can run into hundreds, even thousands of dollars. Salaried positions for artists are rare; according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the median annual wage in 2004 was only \$37,000. Sixty-three percent of artists list themselves as self-employed and their income is even more precarious. An artist lucky enough to find gallery representation must give 50 percent of the proceeds to the gallery, and so even an artist who does reasonably well, and sells \$50,000 worth of work per year makes only \$25,000, and that is before taxes.

With these prospects, many artists like Marvin Franklin are faced with the difficult choice between bare subsistence - Franklin himself was homeless for a time - or full-time employment at a non-art related

“day,” or in Franklin’s case night, job.

On the other hand, not all artists are living such meager existences. Fueled by the high profits on Wall Street, the art market is booming with a frenzy of international art fairs and astronomically high prices paid for the works of living artists, many of whom have the status (and often the demeanor) of rock stars. According to a recent ARTnews article, “auctions at Christie’s, Sotheby’s, and Phillips de Pury & Company hit more than \$1 billion in a two-week period last fall.”

The handful of successful artists’ works are rated by services like Artnet and traded no differently than any other commodity on the stock market. For instance, painter David Salle, who first became an art world darling in the 1980s, had an average sale price of \$109K in 2006, up from \$93.5K in 2005. A small painting by veteran British painter Lucien Freud easily fetches close to \$1 million.

The distortion that such pressures exert on the type of art produced, as well as the experiences and outlook that find expression in today’s artwork is extreme, and mostly deleterious. Very few artists like Marvin Franklin are able to develop to the fullest of their abilities or even, literally, survive under such conditions. The result is an alienation from art by broad masses of people and a general cultural impoverishment.

I was fortunate to have the opportunity to see Marvin Franklin’s work last July in the City Workers’ Show organized by the Salmagundi Club in New York City, in which I also had a painting exhibited. Franklin’s sensitive watercolor of a homeless man on the subway stood out from all the rest, and deservedly won first prize. Although I did not meet him, it was with great sadness that I learned of his death under the wheels of a subway train.

Sincerely,

A painter, New York City

To learn more about Marvin Franklin and to view his artwork:

<http://www.villagevoice.com/nyclife/0719,jurich,76570,15.html>

<http://www.villagevoice.com/gallery/0719,19artist,76564,30.html>



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