

The Whole Package: Looking at the Art Matchmaking of “Not Just Another Pretty Face” at the Hyde Park Art Center

SEPTEMBER 11, 2023 AT 7:00 AM BY [NICKY NI](#)



Industry of the Ordinary, "Ice House," 2021, commissioned by Sundeep Mullangi and Trissa Babrowski/Photo: courtesy of the Hyde Park Art Center

Expect an especially exciting moment when the bell rings on the evening of September 14. White cloth that covers all the artworks will be pulled from the gallery walls inside the Hyde Park Art Center, unveiling some eighty commissioned works culminating from the most recent iterations—2021 and 2023—of the long-running Chicago art matchmaker program “Not Just Another Pretty Face.”

In the mid-nineties, the first iteration of “Not Just Another Pretty Face” was conceived by then-board-members and artists Tim Brown, Tom Denlinger, Mike Lash and Charles Thurow—and a couple of them continue to support the Art Center. “Not Just Another Pretty Face” began as an unconventional portrait commission project that paired local artists with local patrons to produce original artworks that would highlight and tighten the collaborations between the two parties. Celebrating its ninth iteration, “Not Just Another Pretty Face” has raised, to date, over a million dollars, which is divided evenly between the artists and the Art Center. Over the years, commissions have grown far beyond the genre of portraiture, ranging from abstraction and conceptual experimentation to endeavors that further social justice. But one thing remains the same: not only does this project continue to create a win-win scenario that supports Chicago artists while benefiting the Art Center, it also bridges nonprofit institutions to the art market by fostering contemporary art patronage rooted in philanthropy.

At the beginning of 2022, the Art Center’s staff members nominated and selected Chicago artists to participate. From last fall to this spring, the Art Center organized thirteen salons—events that presented select artists’ works to curious patrons, hosted at the private homes of the Art Center’s supporters and board members, or through partnerships with other organizations such as Diasporal Rhythms, an art collectors collective that actively acquires contemporary African American art and hosts educational programs that promote art appreciation. Members of Diasporal Rhythms, such as co-founder and artist Patric McCoy, are enthusiastic art collectors and long-term supporters of the Art Center. Talmadge Mason, who joined Diasporal Rhythms in 2007 and remains active within the Chicago arts community, is commissioning five artists to make works that commemorate

his family members, celebrate female empowerment, or transcend personal memories.



Louise Pappageorge, "The Close of Day," 2023, commissioned by Janis Kanter and Tom McCormick/Photo: courtesy of the Hyde Park Art Center

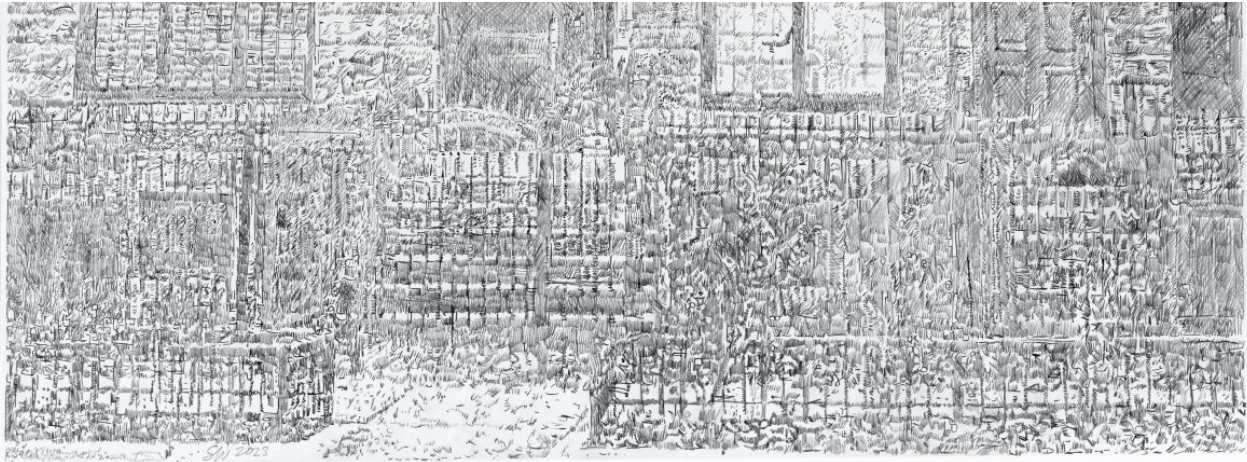
Abstraction prevails as an aesthetic trend among this year's commissions, according to Marina Vulinovic, individual giving manager at the Hyde Park Art Center and Sofía Gabriel Del Callejo, marketing and communications manager. "Some of them are not paintings, but pieces that incorporate elements of collage or emphasize materiality that has personal significance." An example is the artist-patron pair of Yoonshin Park and Peter Lane, who struck sparks with each other over their shared interest in the acts of reading and writing. Park, who comes from a background in literature, has created for Lane a variation from her "Tied" series, which crystallizes her intimate experience with books and journaling. Park dyes strips of Korean Hanji paper in shades of blue with calligraphy ink and tightly sews them to a sheet of starched muslin—a bookbinding fabric, conjuring from simple materials a densely ruffled three-dimensional surface that resembles the ripping tides of pages.

Abstract artworks can also have functional value, and such is the case for quilt designer Sarah Nishiura, who worked on a commission for art collector and philanthropist Joan Pantsios. "Joan visited my studio with a duffle bag full of Japanese fabrics from her collection. It was clear that she is a lover of these materials not just as garments, such as Haoris and Obis, but also for their design and patterns," Nishiura says. "She was hoping to commission something useful made from the materials she provided. And beyond that, I had complete freedom over the design." Nishiura ended up transforming four kimonos and one obi belt—all were what she believed to be from the 1950s and sixties—into a lap quilt that would live comfortably on a couch, maintaining the contrast between the kimonos' exterior fabrics and interior lining while referring to Japanese textile design from the 1920s, a source of inspiration in all her quilts.

For photographer Jonathan Castillo, who teaches at Columbia College, the commission process became a fundraiser to cover one of his former pupil's student debts. Sandra de la Torre, who had just under \$9,000 in student debts, had her portrait printed as cyanotype on pieces of paper made from

shredded twenty-dollar bills, the total face value of which equates to her debts. “Each bag that has \$10,000 in shredded twenties yields ten sheets of paper,” says Castillo. The artist, who would buy decommissioned and shredded money from Craigslist and eBay or score the “Fed Shreds” souvenir bags at the Chicago Fed Money Museum, wanted to visualize the enormous burden that student debts can amass for individuals who are in their most flexible and productive phase of life. “I want people to see what \$20,000, \$50,000, or \$100,000 in debt looks like. I want them to feel it when they see my work.” Heather Kendrick, the patron of the project, has committed to purchasing one of de la Torre’s portraits. “The goal now is to find eight other buyers at \$2,000 for each piece,” Castillo says. “Sandra gets half of each sold piece (\$1,000), the Hyde Park Art Center gets \$500 and I get \$500 to help keep the project going.”





Scott Wolniak, "Tully Home," 2023, commissioned by Erica and Thomas Tully/Photo: courtesy of the Hyde Park Art Center

Commissioning a piece of art is a form of marking a milestone of lived experience, a time-stamped slice of livelihood—or the lack thereof. For the previous “Not Just Another Pretty Face” in 2021, artists Adam Brooks and Mathew Wilson, who have been making art collaboratively as Industry of the Ordinary for over thirty years, were invited to meet at the house where Trissa Babrowski and Sundeep Mullangi reside—a historic building built in the Hyde Park neighborhood in 1873. The pandemic still loomed, and their masked conversations revolved around COVID isolation they shared during the global slowdown. Brooks and Wilson decided to sculpt Babrowski and Mullangi’s residence in ice and photographically “‘arrest’ its disappearance.” Against the pitch-dark background, a translucent house is seen levitating like a specter, casting a lone reflection. The only loose resemblance of the sculpture to the original home—a fitting visual metaphor for the eerily deformed memory salvaged from a depressing period—turns out to be a sweet redemption of its time: Brooks and Wilson’s plan to commission a laser ice-cutting company to replicate the building in great precision fell short after the company itself closed its doors due to the pandemic. Nate Johnson took over the task and created a handmade ice sculpture. And it turned out beautifully. “We preserved the object/memory and, in so doing, created a monument to personal history.” Brooks and Wilson remark. When asked if they would participate in “Not Just Another Pretty Face” again, they reply with a razor-sharp “Definitely.”

“Not Just Another Pretty Face” 2023 at Hyde Park Art Center, 5020 South Cornell, on view from September 14 to November 5.