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On guard for art: Museum security guards are artists themselves



Photo:Cherlynn Low

Emilie Lemakis points at a photo of herself, her doppelganger clad in her security guard uniform, and her doppelganger's "baby."

By Cherlynn Low

May 01, 2013

Emilie Lemakis is an artist, and like most artists everywhere, she struggled to make a living while pursuing her craft. So she got a job as a security guard at The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Lemakis and other aspiring artists, drawn to New York City's art museums, often become security guards to support themselves. They spend hours watching over some of the greatest works ever created. Inspired by what they see, the artist-guards make art of their own that in turn gets displayed at the very museum where they work.

Sometimes, they even end up guarding their own art.

"Being a guard might sound boring or unglamorous, but I've learned a lot, especially from just being around art," said Peter Hoffmeister, who has been a security guard at the Met for close to five years. He works the night shift, guarding and patrolling the building when all is quiet and peaceful.

Hoffmeister's creations include paintings of conceptual global flags made up of fragments of current flags, and blueprints reassembled to look like world maps. He has also created installations, and was formerly an editor for *Swipe* magazine – a collection of artwork, literature and music by guards from the city's museums and cultural institutions.

"There's certain things you just don't get when you're a visitor as opposed to someone that spends 40 hours a week around it," he said.

It is not only the time spent in an art environment that helps these artists in their work. They work four-day weeks in shifts that allow them some time to work on their own creations. "It's a job that you don't take home with you," said Hoffmeister, 27. "You do your job at the Met and that's it."

Lemakis, 47, agrees. She has worked at the Met for 18 years and does not want to leave. Lemakis has displayed her work at many of the Met's Employee Art Shows, which take place once every two years, depending on gallery availability.

Her work ranges from photographs and drawings to installations and sculptures. One of her artworks shown at the employee art event was inspired by fertility dolls she sees on display every day at the Met. It is a giant, peach-colored female doll with hands cupping pointy breasts and black beads forming a downward triangle just above its legs.

The Met has been notoriously secretive about the Employee Art Show. The New York Times reported in August 2012 that all the nearly 20 guards approached for the Times story were forbidden to speak to reporters about the show. Access to the event is granted only to employees, who must present identification, and their guests must be accompanied. The Met did not immediately return calls or answer emails for comment on this story.

Despite the secrecy, many of the guards appreciate the Employee Art Show for the opportunity it gives them to display their work and learn from their peers. Hoffmeister estimates that about 60 percent to 70 percent of the 600 security guards employed at the Met are artists. And the Met requires their applicants to have a four-year degree to qualify as a guard.

“So you’re inherently overqualified,” said Hoffmeister. But artists such as Hoffmeister see the job as a means to support themselves until they find something more lucrative in art.

“It’s a stepping stone, not a destination,” said Hoffmeister, sitting in his studio in the apartment he shares with his girlfriend. He wants to go back to school to get a Master of Fine Arts while working part-time as a studio assistant.

Whether it is a job for the long-term or not, Hoffmeister and Lemakis both agree that the community of artists is one of the biggest perks of working at the museum.

“It kind of for me has functioned as an informal artists’ community,” said Hoffmeister.

“If you need advice, there’s always someone you can ask,” Lemakis said.

And best of all, the exclusive access to the museum’s artworks has one great benefit.

“It’s almost as if you become friends with these things,” said Hoffmeister, smiling.

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