



Gustave Courbet's 'L'Atelier du Peintre' (1854-55). © Musée d'Orsay, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/Patrice Schmidt

How to Be an Artist

Four major artists talk to us about where their obsessions came from — and what they did about the obstacles thrown in their way.

By [M.H. Miller](#) June 9, 2025

It's never been especially easy to have a career as an artist (or almost anyone for that matter), but it's possible that it's becoming harder. Certain difficulties are evergreen — increasing expenses, the rising cost of housing — and some are more recent. As evidenced by the sluggish auction season in New York last month, even a blue-chip art market that for most of the 21st century was considered recession proof is no longer a sure thing.

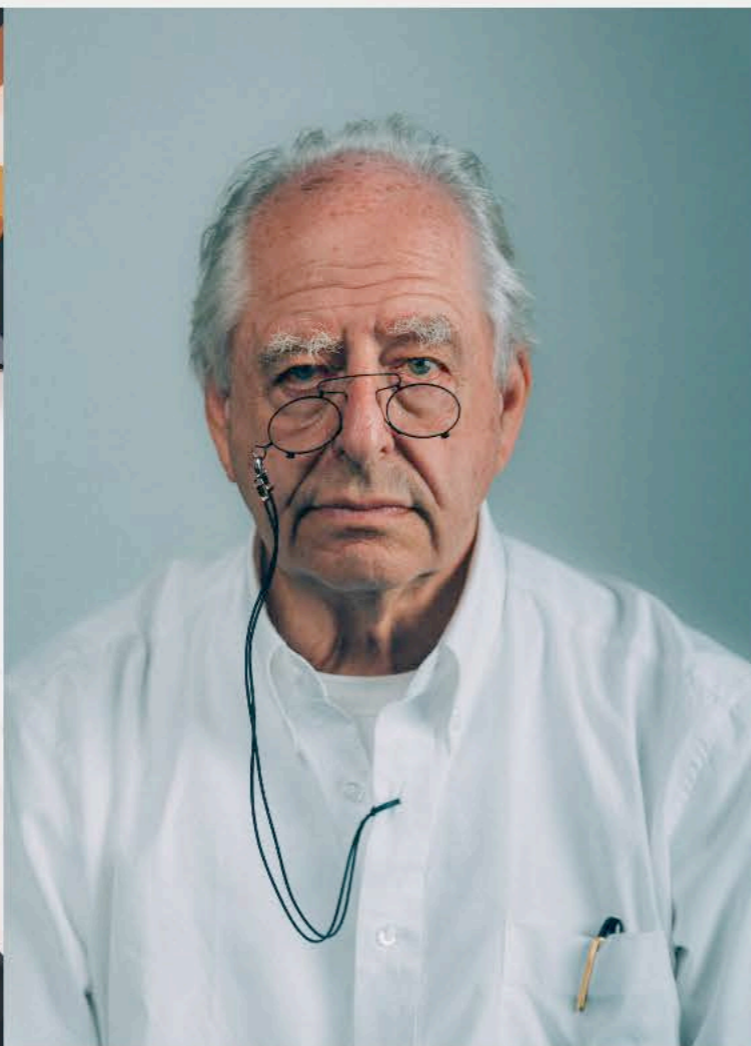
So in this latest transitional moment, we decided, for T's annual art issue, to have four in-depth conversations with seasoned artists who've all prospered in the face of myriad struggles in their creative lives. We spoke with [Derrick Adams](#), 55, a Black painter who came of age at a time when much of the art world didn't consider Black painters to have any value; [William Kentridge](#), 70, a political artist who grew up in Johannesburg against the backdrop of apartheid; [Howardena Pindell](#), 82, who as a Black woman born during World War II was forced to break down many barriers, one of which was integrating the staff of New York's Museum of Modern Art; and [Lisa Yuskavage](#), 63, a woman who paints women, and whom gatekeepers rejected for years for doing so.

As different as these artists' work is, certain consistencies emerged: They've all had important supporters who inspired confidence at a moment when it was desperately needed, and they've all received some lucky break. But more than anything, these interviews offer proof that being a serious artist means little else than continuing to do the work that matters to you, even when nobody else seems to care and the future is unknown. As Yuskavage puts it, "That's what an artist's job is, to breathe life into something that no one thought could make any sense as art."

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Derrick Adams



William Kentridge



Howardena Pindell



Lisa Yuskavage