

Work, embedded by Sarah Jaffe

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Gospel of the Working Class

New work by Tabitha Arnold (American, b. 1995)

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At the Durham miners gala in England each summer, the first thing you see is the banners. Hand-painted and slung on poles balanced precariously by a team of workers, each banner tells a story of the local labor union it represents: a town, a workplace, a community, the motto of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM): the past we inherit, the future we build.

The union banners are not, mostly, considered “fine art”; when they are not being paraded down the street, they are housed in union halls, though the room at the NUM’s headquarters in Barnsley where many of them are displayed is grand enough for any museum. The NUM, like so many unions these days, is a shadow of its former self but in Durham in the summer it still bursts into vibrant life—the old banners fluttering in the wind as the brass bands play and tens, even hundreds of thousands, flock to the city for a festival celebrating working people of the past and present.

Tabitha Arnold’s tapestries recall these banners. Sized to be striking at a distance but reward closer viewing, they are accessible yet rich in references: little gifts for art authorities and labor history buffs alike. Like the union banners, Arnold’s tapestries know which side they’re on and aim to pull the viewer in as well. Whose streets? one asks, depicting a flaming police car and marchers in the streets, a crowd of multiracial women’s faces, fists raised, calling into a bullhorn. In the tapestry *Gospel* (2023), the age-old cry of the labor movement, Which side are you on? unfurls on a banner within the banner, echoing the song written in 1931 by Florence Reece for the United Mine Workers, the American miners’ union.



Gospel, 2023

The heroes of Arnold’s work are workers of every stripe—airplanes and postal service trucks are honored alongside manual labor, carrying and stacking of boxes, electrical workers and farmers, bicycle couriers and baristas like Arnold herself. The workers are both specific and stylized, made heroic, a mirror into which the viewer can find their work reflected and lifted up.

Arnold’s textiles also evoke the work done in the home, historically by women. Weavers and embroiderers join the other laborers in her productions, but it is so easy for so many people to look at depictions of workers and see only men. The labor movement too has been guilty of this mistake; by lionizing labor in a handcraft medium, Arnold subverts our expectations of who is a worker. It takes 200 hours of painstaking effort for her to hand-create one of these tapestries, work done in her studio, alone.

Tapestries appealed to Arnold, she explained to me, “because we live with textiles. We have an understanding of them as something we’re allowed to touch.” They felt accessible to a broader audience in the way that paintings did not. Arnold studied art from the time she was small, attended a magnet high school for the arts and then the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts,

where she disciplined her body and mind into the kind of painter that she thought the art world would respect and more importantly, pay. But the discipline made her miserable.

An encounter with the textiles of Ann Hamilton inspired her to try something completely different. She taught herself the work of weaving and then punch-needle from videos and encounters on the Internet, accepted gifts and skill-sharing from strangers, and discovered that she liked the reverse side of punch-needle works better. It was sharper, allowing the details to shine, and the reversal echoed the reversal of her practice.

A capitalist society tends to depict artists as a breed apart, gifted and strange and perhaps a little bit magical. But Arnold's work is relentlessly material and social; she wanted to make works that appealed to her colleagues in the cafe where she worked after finishing her degree, to the strangers who bought coffee from her, and she wanted to include the burgeoning political consciousness that was reshaping her life as she worked to unionize her cafe and join a labor movement slowly being rekindled to life by her generation. Arnold's art was not and is not on a separate plane from her day job; it is work, embedded in the broader web of capitalist social relations.

In this practice Arnold is also in conversation with generations of radical artists. There's William Morris, who designed textiles and housewares and wrote of a socialist future to come that would satisfy what he considered the worker's three hopes: "hope of rest, hope of product, hope of pleasure in the work itself." Or the Mexican muralists, whose work adorned union halls and public buildings, who experimented with

modern materials like automobile paint guns, and who built a Communist artists' union. There are the New Deal-funded photographers and painters who took inspiration from Mexico and depicted the struggles of working people through the depression; I think of Lewis Hine's worker, bent to his wrench, muscles straining. Printmaker and organizer Ralph Pearson argued that the artist should see themselves as "a workman among workers."

Tabitha Arnold exemplifies this ideal: she is not simply making art about work and working people but she is making art as a working person, in conversation and solidarity with other working people. Her tapestries show at once the beauty and dignity of workers and the way the workplace flattens us, the way we are interchangeable in the eyes of capital. They exhort us to collective action, like those banners flapping at Durham, precisely because our individual value and creativity will never be recognized by a system that sees us as mere cogs.



Pure Finder, 2021

It was a spreadsheet assembled by art industry workers, after all, built to compare their wages and conditions, that inspired the cafe workers in Philadelphia where Arnold began to organize. Museum workers began to rapidly unionize in the past decade, tired of the industry dictum that they ought to work out of love for



Time Off Task, 2022

the art; on the other side, Arnold said, she was tired of the idea that baristas weren't real workers, that their labor didn't stack up to that of coal miners. Such negative solidarity only fired her up more; it is why even in her tapestries focused on a single industry (Pure Finder (2021) about leather tanning; Time Off Task (2022) depicting the Amazon warehouse; These Hands (2024), inspired by the autoworkers at Volkswagen in Chattanooga), there are multiple types of workers featured.

Arnold aims to make public art rather than commodities to be locked away by wealthy buyers, a challenge in an art world that turns on the sale of

appreciable assets. Working-class people are underrepresented in the arts— the education required alone creates a barrier to entry, and neoliberalism has seen what little public funding there is for the arts stripped back in the United States and elsewhere, leaving artists cobbling together a living from sales and private grants and side hustles, often in the gig economy. But this too is the broader condition of work these days for just about all of us: precarious and ever-shifting. We so rarely have anything that ties us down.

In the face of such pressure, Arnold again reversed expectations: instead of moving to New York she returned home to Chattanooga and embraced—and was embraced by—the local labor movement as well as the art world. "I feel very connected to this place, honestly, on a spiritual level," she told me. Yet she has been frustrated by "how intentional it is that no one in Chattanooga understands



These Hands, 2024

any labor history that's happened here. It's a very calculated destruction of history."

This exhibit, then, stands against such destruction and calls the viewer to understand this place, its industries past and present. In her piece *Mill Town* (2024), she honors the textile industry, its layers of labor and the organizers of the Congress of Industrial Unions (CIO) who aimed to shake up the hierarchies of factory and city alike. "In all of my work, including this work, I'm really interested



Mill Town, 2024

in how Southerners being our Bible belt selves, we use Biblical language to talk about things," she said. "Church here, it's very conservative. But you also see religious language and metaphor coming out in how people understand a righteous struggle and good and evil in a union context."

That religious upbringing came out for her in her work ethic; in the discipline of her early art studies and even still in her prodigious hustle as an independent artist, taking illustration commissions and selling prints as well as applying for grants and residencies to subsidize the full-size tapestries. "I had to kill the boss in my head when I started freelancing because I was treating myself really badly, and I just had no understanding of work that is healthy, balanced in a reasonable way." She worked the religious images into her creations—the workplace as a form of hell, William Blake's "dark satanic Mills" made literal—as she worked to loosen the workplace's hold on her mind.

As generations of radical artists before her knew, though, Arnold is clear that the struggle to liberate oneself and one's creative energies from the constriction of capitalism is not an individual one. It is one that takes place in the streets and workplaces and meeting halls of Chattanooga and the world, one that deserves to be celebrated in beautiful works of art that anticipate the moment when we are truly free.

Sarah Jaffe is a labor journalist and the author of *From the Ashes: Grief and Revolution in a World on Fire*, *Work Won't Love You Back: How Devotion to Our Jobs Keeps Us Exploited, Exhausted, and Alone*, and *Necessary Trouble: Americans in Revolt*.

Sources

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² Sarah Jaffe, *Work Won't Love You Back*, (New York: Bold Type Books, 2021) 3-4, 179-205; William Morris, *Signs of Change: The Aims of Art*, Marxists Internet Archive, taken from 1896 Longmans, Green, and Co. edition, originally prepared by David Price for Project Gutenberg, www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1888/signs/chapters/chapter5.htm; D. Anthony White, *Siqueiros: Biography of a Revolutionary Artist* (Charleston, SC: BookSurge Publishing, 2009), loc. 424-430, 722-1398, 2045-2155, Kindle; E. Doss, "Looking at Labor: Images of Work in 1930s American Art," *Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 24 (2002): 231-257, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1504189>; "The Future of America: Lewis Hine's New Deal Photographs," International Center of Photography, www.icp.org/browse/archive/collections/the-future-of-america-lewis-hines-new-deal-photographs; A. Joan Saab, *For the Millions: American Art and Culture Between the Wars* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 2, 6-8, 15, 24-27.

³ Jaffe, *Work Won't Love You Back*, 194

⁴ William Blake, "Jerusalem," <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/54684/jerusalem-and-did-those-feet-in-ancient-time>

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