Artists Speak: The Anonymous Was A Woman Survey

ANONYMOUS WAS A WOMAN

SMU DataArts

The Burns Halperin Report

STUDIO BURNS

Contents

Introduction

When I founded Anonymous Was A Woman (AWAW) in 1996, a lot was on my mind. The National Endowment for the Arts had stopped awarding individual grants to artists. And in conversations with family, friends and peers—other mid-career women artists—it became clear just how many opportunities were missing. Gender discrimination strongly affected who was written about, published, exhibited, and known. Even when women artists did gain visibility, they were under-compensated.

My good friend Marcia Tucker, the legendary founder of the New Museum, helped me develop a no-strings-attached award designed to recognize and financially support mid-career women artists. From the start, the goal was simple: to offer direct support to individual artists as a way of celebrating them, while trusting them to know what they need.

For the first 23 years of the award, I remained anonymous, preferring to keep the focus on the artists rather than on myself as the donor. As a practicing artist, I also wanted to keep my own work separate. But in 2018, amid a wave of women speaking out publicly about abuses of power and the persistence of gender inequity, I decided to go public because I wanted to be able to more effectively advocate for our recipients and for women artists in general.

This report is part of that advocacy. We commissioned it in partnership with Charlotte Burns, Julia Halperin, and SMU DataArts, at the same time that AWAW was developing an exhibition featuring artists from the first 25 years of our award ...at NYU's Grey Art Museum (up from March 31—July 19, 2025). Reflecting on this quarter-century history became a prompt to consider the future. What do women artists need now, in their own words? And what kinds of support and creative thinking does the art world need to engage in to meet those concerns?

In gathering and making this data publicly available, we are hopeful that it can be a tool for positive change: to share information so that working as a woman artist can become more sustainable, to shape future grantmaking for more effective support, to influence the decisions of funders, museum boards, and gallerists, and—most importantly—to empower artists in their own organizing and activism.

This data is just a starting point. We are publishing this report at a time of intensified social and political crises, many of which directly target women, nonbinary, and transgender people. Still, having specific information about what is needed is the best way to determine where there are opportunities for change, and what individuals and organizations can contribute towards transformation.

I am deeply grateful to the 1,263 artists who generously took the survey and shared it, as well as Loring Randolph, Sarah Goulet, and Gaby Collins-Fernandez for their work in organizing the survey, report, and symposium; Annie Bares and Jennifer Benoit-Bryan, our partners at SMU DataArts; Nehema Kariuki for the visual translations of this data; and Charlotte Burns and Julia Halperin for their brilliant conception, framing, and analysis of this report.

Susan Unterberg,
Founder, Anonymous Was A Woman

Report Foreword

When we launched this survey in partnership with AWAW, we hoped that at least 100 women artists would complete it. In the end, more than 10 times that many—1,263 artists—did so. The overwhelming response made one thing clear: women artists were eager to share details about their lives, careers, and needs. They just needed to be asked.

What they told us is that the art world as we knew it has already ceased to exist for most professional artists, many of whom have found other ways to survive and sustain their careers. Their most valuable resource? Each other.

The survey highlights areas of deep consensus and solidarity among women artists, particularly in their shared experiences of gender bias, which impacts their lives in profound ways.

The responses also reveal gaps and distance between artists' lived experiences, particularly across generational and racial lines. The data underscores how the art world reflects broader society, revealing historic inequities as well as newly emerging challenges and dynamics.

For the purposes of this survey and report, we have defined women to include cis women, trans people, nonbinary people, genderqueer people, and any way of identifying as a woman not listed here. In this report, we refer to those who took part in the survey as respondents, women artists, or simply artists. For more details on the composition of respondents, see page 55.

A survey of women artists on this scale has never been conducted before. We hope the findings serve as a powerful tool for artists and those who wish to support them. We are deeply grateful to Susan Unterberg and Gaby Collins-Fernandez for their leadership—and look forward to seeing AWAW continue to evolve in the years to come.

Charlotte Burns and Julia Halperin,
journalists and founders of the Burns Halperin Report

Key Takeaways

Key Takeaways

1. Women artists thrive in community—and enjoy a strong sense of belonging.

- A striking 59% of respondents describe their sense of artistic belonging and community in the past year as “strong” or “very strong.”
- The overwhelming majority (79%) cite artistic community and networks as key to their careers. This experience is shared across ages and races.
- The top three resources that would further enrich respondents’ sense of belonging are: group residency programs (48%), feedback and conversation (41%), and non-resident group fellowships (33%).

2. But they feel let down by traditional institutions, and many are going at it alone.

- Almost two thirds (63%) of respondents say that a lack of museum or institutional backing hinders their careers.
- More than half (59%) feel the same way about galleries.
- As a result, many are striking out on their own: 55% are selling their work independently.

3. Gender bias is real.

- Only a quarter of respondents say they are treated equitably within the art world.
- A significant majority (68%) say gender discrimination has had either a “negative” or “strongly negative” impact on their experience.
- Slightly less than half (49%) say their work is taken seriously.
- They also encounter other roadblocks: One third (33%) say they experience gender-based harassment and nearly one fifth (19%) have experienced sexual harassment.

4. There is no ideal age for women artists.

- The overwhelming majority (84%) of respondents over 65 say they experience age discrimination. But so do 73% of respondents between 40 and 64 years old, and almost half (41%) of respondents under 40.
- Despite the MeToo movement, artists—especially those who are younger—continue to experience sexual harassment at significant rates (30% for artists under 40 and 20% for those between 40 and 64).
- Being an artist is not the kind of job one retires from. Older respondents are working at nearly the same rates as their younger counterparts: 46 hours per week compared with 50 hours for middle-aged artists and 52 hours for the younger generation.

5. Censorship is top of mind.

- Half (50%) of respondents feel they cannot speak freely without fear of career consequences.
- The concern is especially pronounced among artists under 40 (63%) and artists of color (68% of African American and Black artists and 61% of Asian respondents felt this way compared with 45% of white respondents, for instance).
- Pressure to make work based on identity is more keenly felt among younger generations and artists of color: 46% of respondents under 40 felt this way, compared with 34% of middle-aged artists and just 17% of those over 65.
- 51% of Asian, 49% of African American and Black, and 41% of Hispanic and Latinx respondents said they felt pressure to create art based on their identity, compared with 22% of white respondents.

6. Women artists don't survive on sales alone—not even close.

- Sales of art account for a mere 17% of household income, while other art-related income, such as prize money, honoraria, creative collaborations, and licensing, accounts for just 8%.
- Respondents made, on average, $20,000 from art sales in 2023.
- This means most respondents who consider themselves full-time artists (85% of the total) rely on sources of income beyond art sales.
- Half (49%) of respondents depend on sources of income entirely unrelated to their art practice.
- The largest share of income comes from other jobs (35%, on average).
- Passive sources, such as investments or real estate (9%), and income from partners and family (24%), together account for 33%.
- The breakdown of pre-tax household income by race reveals deep inequities. For instance, white respondents report that, on average, 37% is derived from passive or family income, a much higher share than Asian (28%), Hispanic and Latinx (23%), Indigenous (19%), and African American and Black (15%) artists.

7. Women artists spend less than half their time actually making art.

- Respondents work over a third (36%) more hours than the **average American woman** (49 hours vs. 36 per week).
- But they spend less than half that time (38%) actually making art.
- The rest is consumed by other paid work (30%) and administrative tasks (25%).
- The older generation is spending nine more hours a week making art than their younger counterparts. Respondents over 65 spend 25.1 hours in the studio, compared with 16.7 hours for middle-aged respondents and 16.4 hours for the younger generation.
- Artists of color spend more time on administrative, teaching, and other paid work, with African American and Black artists spending the most time on these tasks (34.5 hours each week), followed by Hispanic and Latinx (30.5 hours), Indigenous (28.8 hours), Asian (28.3 hours), and white (25 hours) respondents.

- The time artists dedicate to making art varies widely by race as well: white respondents spend nearly a quarter more of their time (20.2 hours) in the studio compared with Asian (16.9 hours), Indigenous (16.6 hours), African American and Black (15.3 hours), and Hispanic and Latinx (15 hours) artists.

8. Financial precarity is a reality for most.

- One third (32%) of respondents have an annual household income below $50,000.
- Just the top 1% of respondents report household income above $500,000.
- The average income of respondents is $105,360, but the median is much lower, at $75,000—suggesting that a small number of high earners skew the perception of financial stability.
- With a median income of $62,000, respondents outside the U.S. make far less money than their American peers, likely because of the concentration of market activity in America.
- Almost half of artists living in major cities make less than a living wage. With a median income of $80,000, 46% of New Yorkers don't make the MIT Living Wage. Respondents in LA report a median income of $70,000; 50% have household incomes below the MIT Living Wage.
- The median incomes of the younger and older generation are comparable: $62,250 for the former and $68,000 for the latter. The middle generation is faring better, with a median income of $87,500.
- African American and Black artists report the highest median income ($82,000), followed closely by white respondents ($80,000), with a gap before Asian ($70,000) and Hispanic and Latinx ($69,000) artists. Indigenous respondents report materially lower income than their peers ($45,000).
- Respondents with a disability had a median income of $62,500, compared with $80,000 for those without a disability.

9. Lack of studio space is a major challenge.

- The cost and availability of studio space is respondents' top financial stressor (53%).
- More than half of respondents (52%) say they have had to make changes to their work due to inadequate space.
- A fifth (18%) of respondents said their studio space was "unstable" or "extremely unstable."

10. Women artists are less likely to have children than the general workforce.

- Twenty-eight percent of respondents are parents or guardians (compared with 39% of U.S. households overall).
- Artists with children have fewer than average: respondent households had 1.17 children under age 18, 40% less than the U.S. overall (1.94).
- Asian women artists report spending 12.18 hours on caregiving weekly, over a third (36%) more than respondents overall.
- In written responses, a number of artists say they are reluctant to become mothers because they are concerned that doing so would hinder their career prospects.

Chapter One

Experiences in the Art World

Professional Development: Most Crucial Resources

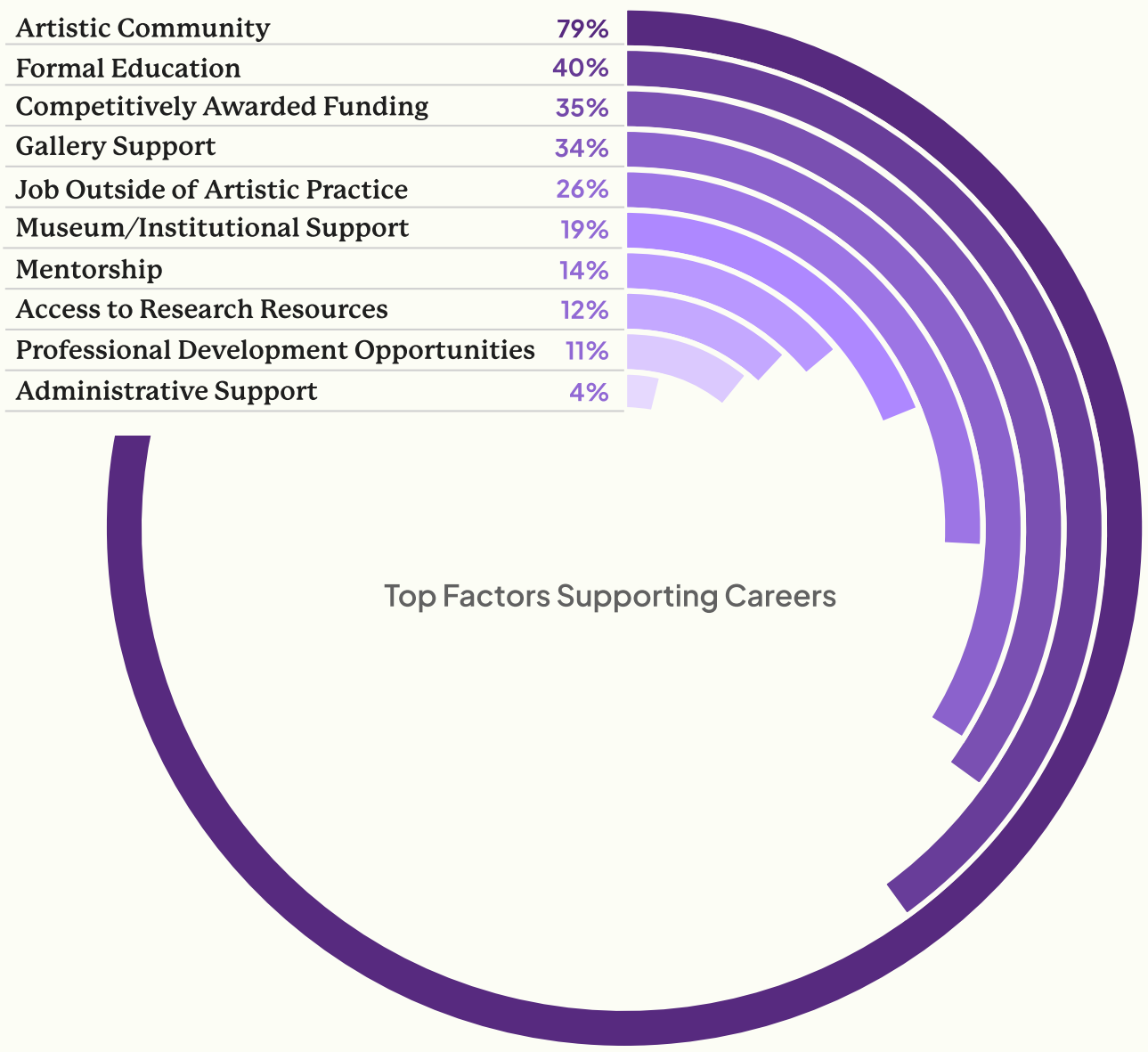
Women Artists Thrive Together

Artists show overwhelming consensus about what they consider to be the most vital resource for their success: other artists. The vast majority of respondents (79%) cite artistic community and networks as essential to their careers.

They also experience a strong feeling of community with fellow artists: a notable 59% describe their sense of belonging in the past year as “strong” or “very strong.” This seems to increase with age, being particularly true of artists 65 and older (62%) compared with those between 40 and 64 years old (59%) and those under 40 (49%).

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Resources Most Crucial to Women Artists' Careers



Gender Bias Is Real

Despite this strong sense of belonging, artists are clear: gender bias impacts their treatment within the art world. Only a quarter (26%) of respondents say they are treated equitably. Even fewer African American and Black (19%) and Indigenous (19%) artists feel that this is the case.

A majority of respondents (68%) say gender discrimination has had either a “negative” or “strongly negative” impact on their experience. Slightly less than half (49%) believe their work is taken seriously.

Women artists also encounter other roadblocks: One third (33%) say they experience gender-based harassment and almost one fifth have experienced sexual harassment (19%). Hispanic and Latinx women report gender-based harassment at the highest rate of any racial or ethnic group (42%).

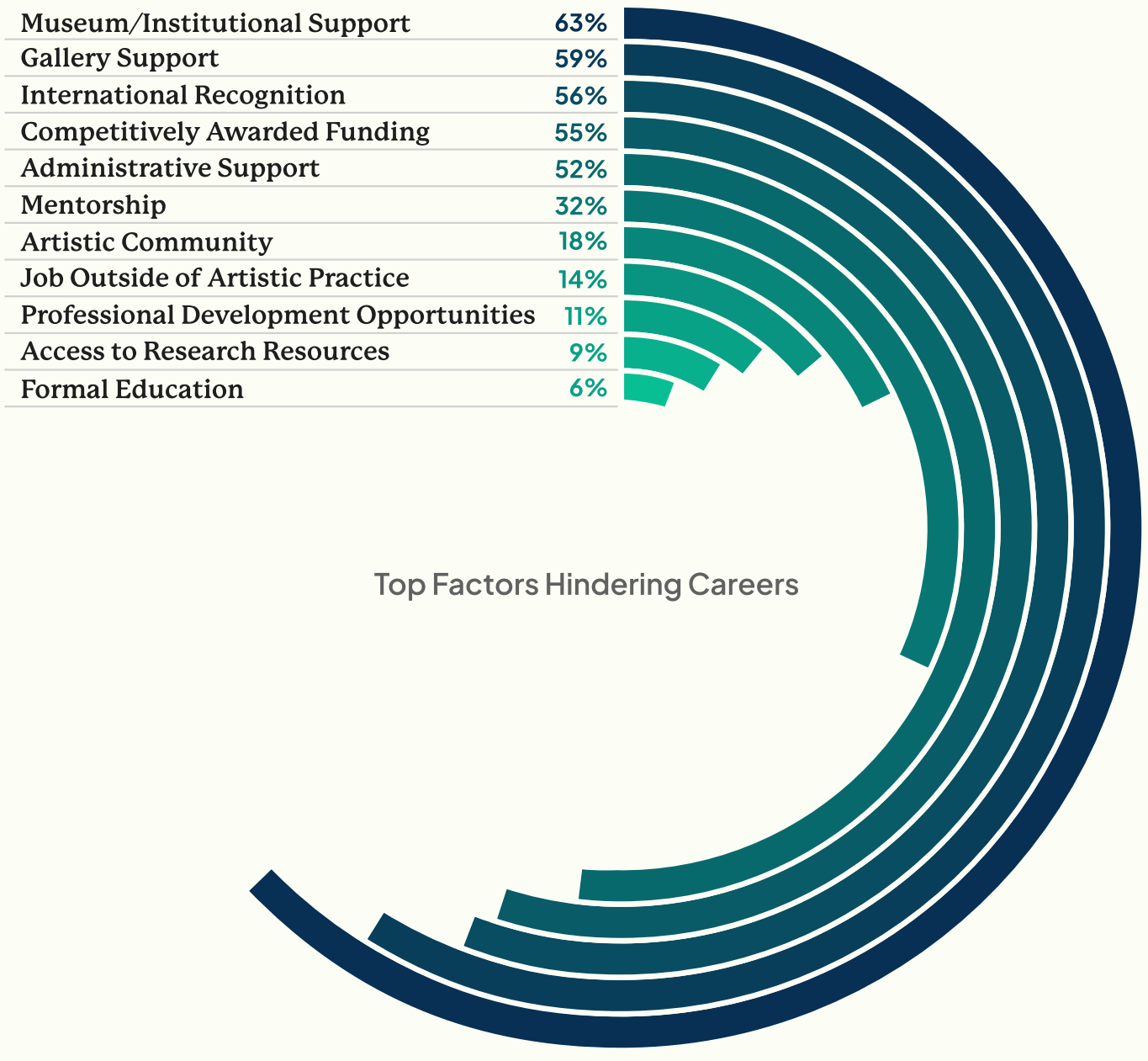
Professional Development: Resources Most Lacking

Institutions Are Failing Artists

The relevance of institutions is withering. More than half (63%) of respondents say that a lack of museum or institutional backing hinders their career, while 59% feel the same about galleries. Accordingly, most artists feel they don't benefit from the recognition (56%), financial resources (55%), and administrative support (52%) that institutions can provide.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Resources Women Artists Most Lack



Women Artists Are Going Out on Their Own

The traditional art world is also becoming less central to artists' livelihoods. More than half of survey respondents (55%) say they are selling work independently of galleries and advisors. Artists over 65 are leading the way in selling art directly (59% have done so in the past five years, compared with 53% of artists under 40).

In written responses, a number of artists articulated a desire to build new institutions and approaches better designed to serve their needs.

Art School Still Matters

For many artists, formal education has been a game-changer: 40% say that art school, college, or university education has been critically important to their careers.

While art school has become a necessary entry point into the art world for some, the link between formal education and financial health remains less clear, given that so many respondents say they are facing debt and unable to make a living from their art.

…for Some More Than Others

Non-white artists consider formal education less essential to their success (23% of Indigenous artists designated it as a top resource, compared with 44% of white artists, for example). Yet they also feel the absence of formal education hinders their careers at higher rates (18% of Indigenous and 15% of African American and Black artists say this, compared with 4% of white artists).

Mentorship—an alternative form of education—is cited as important by more Indigenous artists (27%) than any other group.

Artists Speak:
Thinking Beyond Institutions

“I’m concerned with how tied the art world is to the academy and centers of wealth. The audience seems very narrow and the institutions are reliant on rich donors. I hope we can refocus on making art outside of these spaces, bringing work to a larger community rather than expecting them to come to you.”

“Despite the strength of my artistic community, I feel like I am forever ‘emerging,’ with few sales, no institutional recognition, and no way to move my career forward with agency. To have the support of curators opening doors and contextualizing the work would be of great value. Subsidizing my work, or allowing for WPA-style paid artist work, would be life-changing.”

“Often there is the impression of gatekeeping. Only certain artists have access to curators and art critics. I don’t feel like the gatekeepers do the work to get out there and meet artists who are marginalized. Where’s the bridge? Artists do support each other, but there’s a lack of support from the other half. We are expected to pay for application fees, our own shipping, install our work ourselves, and receive no honorarium for our labor.”

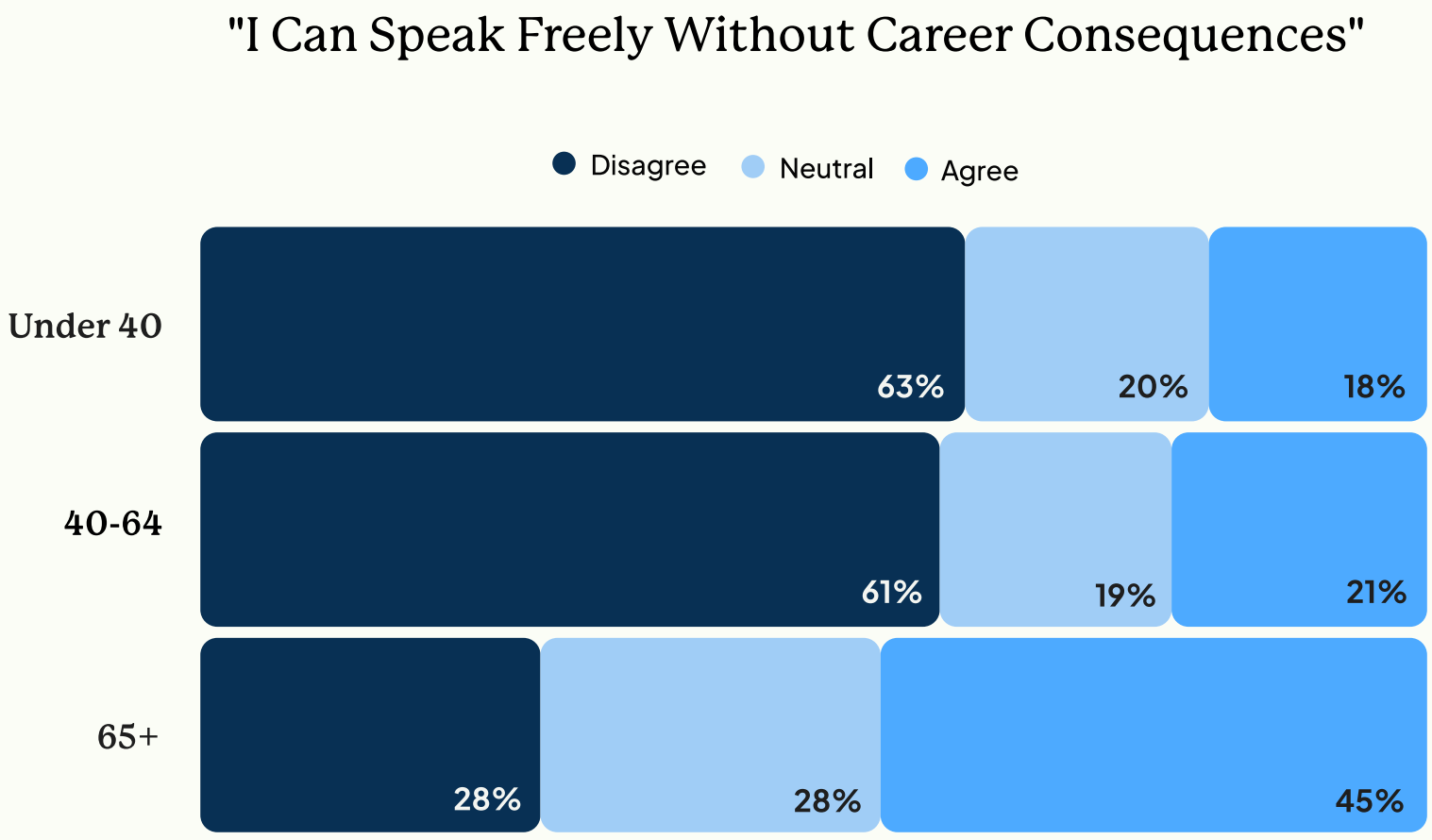
Women Artists on Censorship

Censorship Is a Key Concern

In a field apparently fueled by creativity and expression, it is alarming how many artists are worried about censorship. Half (50%) say they cannot speak freely without fear of career consequences.

But the Anxiety Is Not Evenly Distributed

Censorship concerns are especially pronounced among younger artists (63%), although it is notable that over a quarter of artists over 65 (28%) report similar anxiety. Freedom of expression is a major concern for white and Indigenous artists (both 45%)—but even more so for African American and Black (68%), Asian (61%), Hispanic and Latinx (59%) artists.



Half (**50%**) of respondents overall feel that speaking freely could compromise their careers

Institutions Lag Behind Artists

The distance between artists and institutions is clear on the issue of censorship. While half of the artists in the AWAW survey think free speech is a major concern, only 20% of museum directors said that censorship was a “very big problem” for museums in a recent **survey** conducted by the Association of Art Museum Directors, PEN America, and Artists at Risk Connection. Almost 75% of museum directors thought censorship was at least “somewhat of a problem.” But 90% of those surveyed did not have a written censorship policy to address challenges and complaints from the public, board members, political officials, and others, suggesting that the art world is ill-equipped to deal with the issue.

Artists Feel Production Pressure Around Identity

Some respondents experience pressure not only around speech, but also around the content of their art. This is especially the case for artists of color: 51% of Asian, 49% of African American and Black, and 41% of Hispanic and Latinx artists felt pressure to create work based on aspects of their identity, compared with around a quarter (22%) of white artists.

This pressure is experienced acutely by artists under 40 years old (46%) but less so for middle-aged artists (34%) and even less for the older generation (17%).

Artists Speak:
What Is the Price for Speaking Out?

"My work is feminist and formally about the realities of our patriarchal heteronormative white supremacist world, and I am quite sure that I have been declined from opportunities because of this due to conservative donors/board members in the art world."

"I have spoken up freely in my local art community about the ways organizations have failed artists, and have definitely paid a price for speaking. I don't regret it for a moment, but the opportunities and venues for my work have become more limited."

"Conservatism grows, cooperation with luxury branding grows, artists are less able to succeed without actively branding themselves and maintaining neutral opinions about everything—art, politics, everything. Expressing an opinion will damage your career. Influencing and making art are colliding, the entire art world is corporatizing."

"I am concerned my work addressing society's problems is too toxic for most curators and hurts my chances of being asked to be in exhibitions. I'm having more success outside of the city I live in and that's worrying me quite a bit."

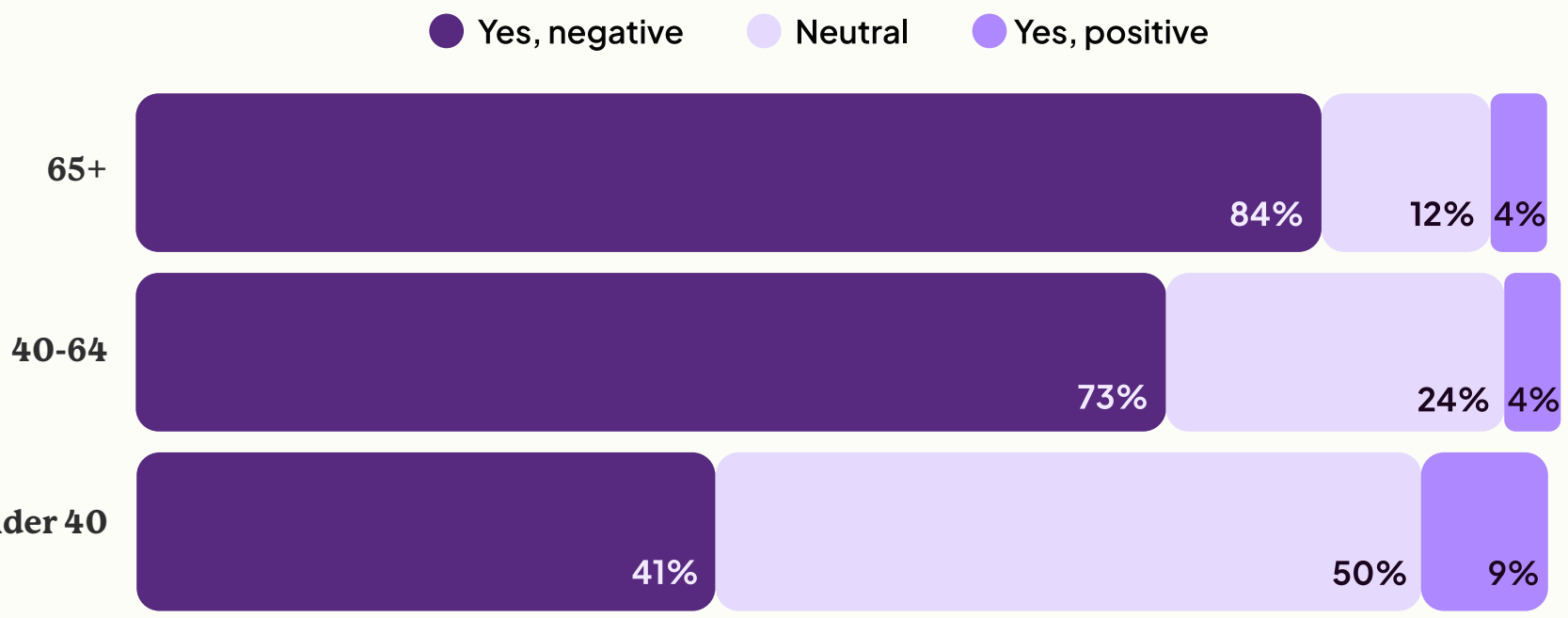
Women Artists on Identity: Age And Socioeconomic Class

There's No "Right" Age for Women Artists

Nobody feels the right age. A staggering 84% of older respondents say they experience age discrimination, as do 73% of those in middle age. Youth isn't a guaranteed benefit, either: 41% of respondents under 40 say their age works against them. And despite the MeToo movement, younger artists continue to experience sexual harassment at high rates (30% for those under 40 and 20% for those between 40 and 64).

In written responses, some artists described feeling "invisible" as early as middle age and expressed anxiety about the financial challenges associated with preserving their life's work. But others talked of making the best work of their lives in their 80s.

"I perceive a difference in the way that I'm treated in the art world due to my age"

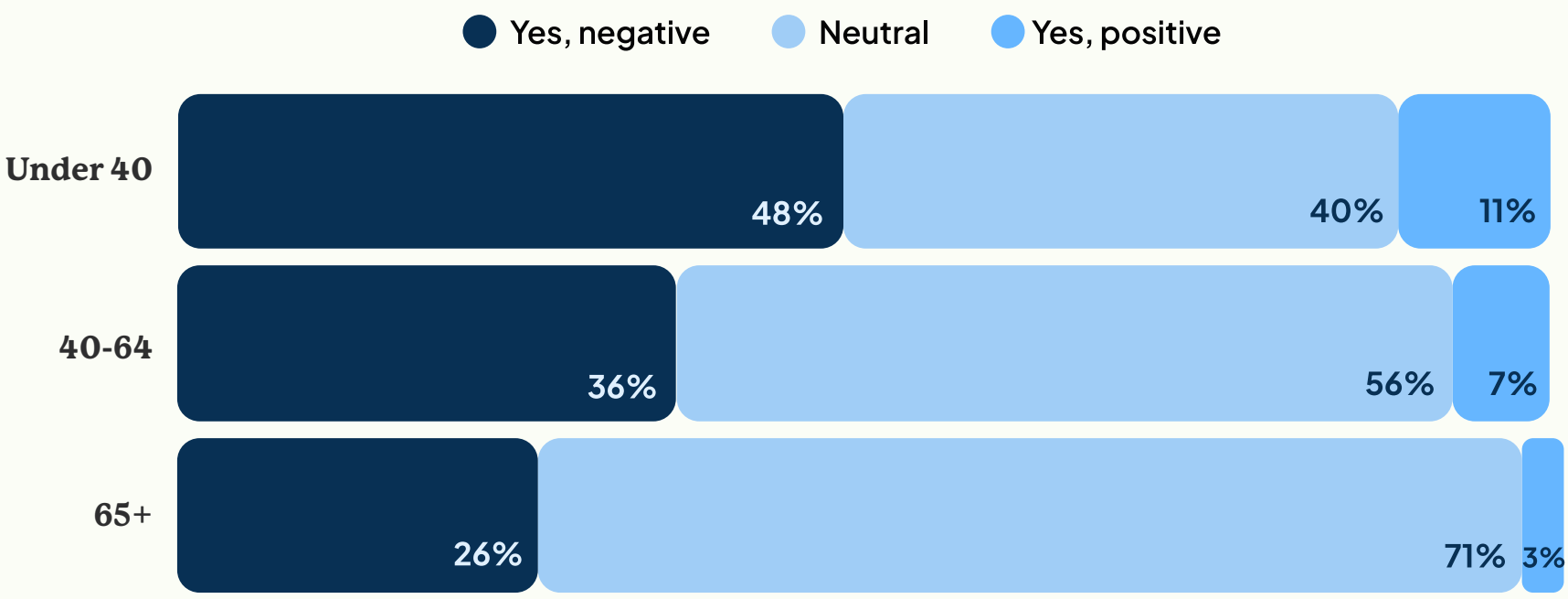


Young Artists Are the Most Conscious of Socioeconomic Class

Debt is a defining burden for artists under 65 (41% of artists under 40 and 36% of those between 40 and 64 list it as a cause of financial stress). But, it is of far less concern for the older generation (12%).

Class discrimination is also less of an issue for older artists (26%) compared with middle-aged respondents (36%) and almost half (49%) of those under 40.

“I perceive a difference in the way that I’m treated in the art world due to my class”



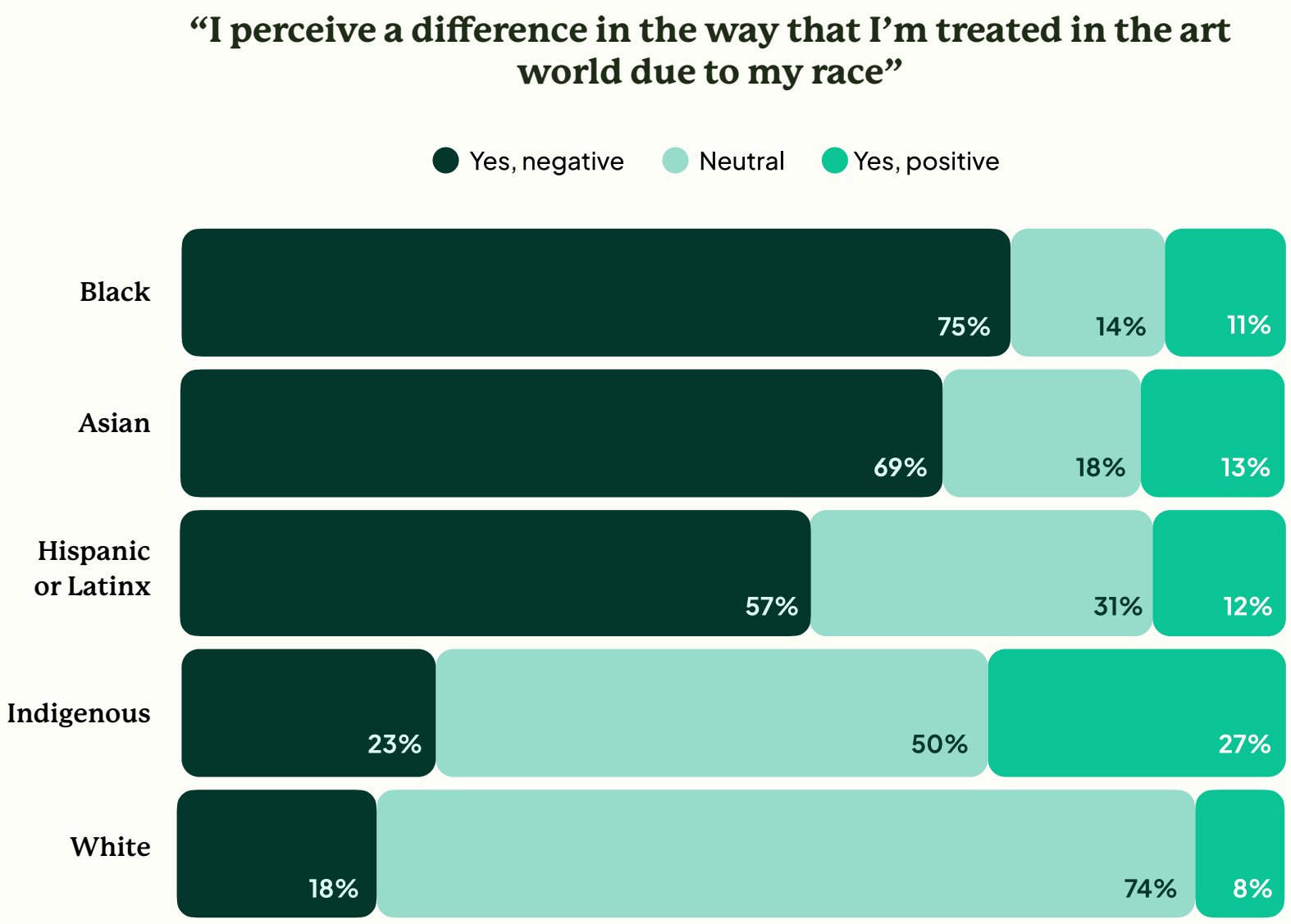
Artists Speak:
Reflections on Age and Aging

“I am doing my best work but at 82 years I don’t have much time left to secure my legacy. My papers, numerous sketchbooks and artwork need archiving. My paintings need to be seen. I have had several gallerists and curators die recently just as we were planning exhibitions, art fairs and monographs. Setbacks and sorrow.”

“I’m over 40 but still being told I’m too young for some galleries.”

“I used to be sexually harassed often until I was about 40. Now I experience more invisibility if anything at all.”

Women Artists on Identity: Race



Experiences Vary Widely Based on Race

Few respondents felt that their race was a positive factor in their experience of the art world. Only 9% felt their racial identity had led to more favorable treatment.

White respondents (who account for the majority of survey participants) were the most likely to feel neutral (74%). Hispanic and Latinx, Asian, and African American and Black respondents showed less neutrality—and were simultaneously more positive about the treatment they had received because of their racial identity (12%, 13% and 11% respectively, compared to 8% of white respondents) and more negative (57%, 69%, and 75% respectively).

It is notable that almost a fifth (18%) of white respondents said they had experienced negative treatment in the art world because of their racial identity. In written responses, several white artists aired grievances that their racial identity made it more difficult to gain attention from curators and collectors. This should be seen within the context of the broader backlash against efforts to address systemic racism that, for many mainstream American cultural organizations, only began in earnest in 2020—and, in some cases, are now being abandoned.

Artists' Needs Vary by Race

More than any other racial group, white artists (66%) feel that a lack of support from museums is hindering their careers. Least likely to feel this way are Indigenous (36%) and African American and Black (47%) artists (though it is not clear whether this is because they feel more supported by museums or because they rely less on museum support in the first place). A particular concern among African American and Black artists is a lack of access to media and archives (22%, compared with 6% of white artists, for example).

Artists Speak:
Reflections on Identity

“For me, coming into the art world with a working class background was more significant than being a woman, or it was twofold.”

“My experience in the art world is marked by a sense of invisibility, and really is not so different from the rest of the world. I am pretty sure I have never walked into a room where I wasn’t ignored, underestimated, ‘corrected,’ harassed, or all at the same time. This is just the nature of being a small, non-white woman.”

“I am deeply concerned at the vacuum left by the failure of certain DEI initiatives, and the simultaneous exclusion of qualified BIPOC artists and also qualified white artists. I have seen a huge amount of funding and responsibility piled upon a tiny sliver of the art community that is BIPOC, known, urban, and checks institutional boxes. They are overfunded and overtaxed while many emerging BIPOC and mid-career white artists are being excluded.”

Chapter Two

Life and Work

How Women Artists Spend Their Time

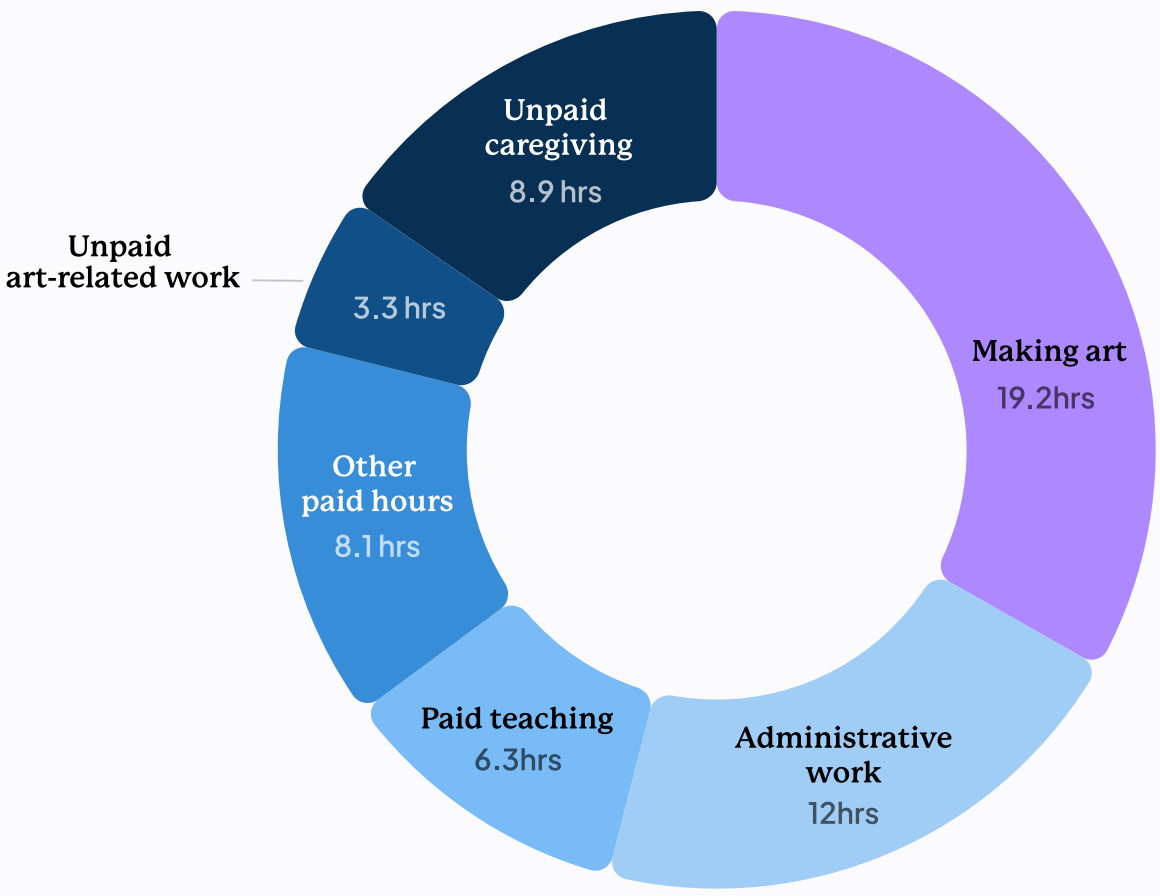
The Myth of the Full-Time Artist

This data paints a comprehensive picture of day-to-day life for women artists—one of intense labor, fragmented creative time, and persistent caregiving responsibilities. Respondents work over a third (36%) more hours than the **average American woman** (49 hours vs. 36 per week). But they spend less than half that time (39%) actually making art. The rest is consumed by administrative tasks (25%) and other paid work (30%).

Artists juggle the gig economy and side jobs alongside the bureaucratic demands of sustaining their art practice, from chasing invoices to shipping. On average, respondents are spending 12 hours a week on art-related administrative work, making this the third largest time commitment. This tallies with the fact that more than half of respondents say a lack of administrative support hinders their career.

WEEKLY BREAKDOWN:

How Are Women Artists Spending Their Time?



Respondents are spending ⅓ of their time making art

Artists Don’t Really Retire

Being an artist is not the kind of job one retires from. Older respondents are working at nearly the same rates as their younger counterparts: an average of 46 hours per week, compared with 50 hours per week for middle-aged artists and 52 hours for the younger generation. (This also reflects a larger trend in the U.S. workforce overall; in 2023, only 45% of 65-year-olds were retired.)

But They Spend More Time Making Art as They Age

The older generation of respondents is spending much more time—almost nine more hours each week—making art than their younger counterparts (25.1 hours compared with 16.7 hours for middle-aged respondents and 16.4 hours for the younger generation).

But administrative work remains a reality for artists of all ages, with older artists taking on the most (12.7 hours per week compared with 11.1 for younger and 11.9 for middle-aged artists).

Time Spent Making Art Varies Widely by Race

The time artists spend in the studio varies widely by race: white respondents spend nearly a quarter more time making art (20.2 hours) compared with Asian (16.9 hours) and Indigenous (16.6 hours) artists, and a third or more time than African American and Black (15.3 hours) and Hispanic and Latinx (15 hours) artists. African American and Black and Indigenous artists spend three more hours each week on administrative work than white artists (14.5 vs 11.5 hours).

Women Artists Spend a Lot of Time Caregiving

Respondents spend more time caregiving—whether for children, aging parents, or their communities—than they do on paid teaching or other paid work. On average, they dedicate more than a working day each week to giving care.

Artists with children report spending 29% less time making art than those without. Reporting particularly long hours of caregiving are Asian women artists, who spend 12.18 hours each week, which is over a third (36%) more than respondents overall.

...Especially the Sandwich Generation

Middle-aged artists, sandwiched between children and aging parents, are spending more than double the time caregiving than any other generation: 12.7 hours each week (compared with older artists’ 3.7 hours and younger artists’ 5.9 hours).

New Yorkers Get More Time to Dedicate to Art

New Yorkers are spending the most time making art and the least amount of time caregiving (23 hours making art and 6.1 hours caregiving each week). Notably, New Yorkers also enjoy the highest proportion of passive income (11%)—more than double the share of artists in other parts of the U.S., including Los Angeles (5%).

Meanwhile, artists in LA dedicate more time to caregiving than those in any other region we examined (13.8 hours) and significantly less to creating art (18.3 hours).

Artists in other parts of the U.S. spend almost twice as much time on their creative work (17.8 hours) as they do on caregiving (8.8 hours).

The picture looks different abroad. Within the U.S., there seems to be a clear tension between hours spent caregiving and art-making. International survey respondents report both the second highest number of caregiving hours (11.3) and hours spent making art (19.8)—but they spend less time on teaching and other paid work. (For context, 9% of survey respondents are located outside the U.S.; we considered their responses in aggregate rather than breaking them down by country.)

Artists Speak:
Life as a Balancing Act

“High-paying jobs with benefits mean more responsibilities, less time for work. For me it’s a chicken and egg: If I teach more, I make more money, but have less time to make art. If I teach less, I have more time to make work, but not enough money to live.”

“Caregiving, for me, saps the ability to immediately create. I’m just so tired, and the days are so full. And then I’m not creating enough to be competitive for residencies you have to apply for. I have ‘treated’ myself to a paid 1 or 2 week residency while I was caretaking full time, which was a balm.”

“I think there are two major themes at play in my experience: visibility (or the lack thereof) and administrative pressures. If you don’t have the kind of visibility that is legible in the Art World™, then you spend a lot of administrative time crafting your own opportunities. This necessarily competes with my practice which in turn requires that I pursue unconventional paths that require more administrative skill and so it goes…”

“Artists rarely think about being dependent on their bodies for the production of their artwork. I had to take months off after rotator cuff surgery, time that I could not make art at all and that has impacted my studio time.”

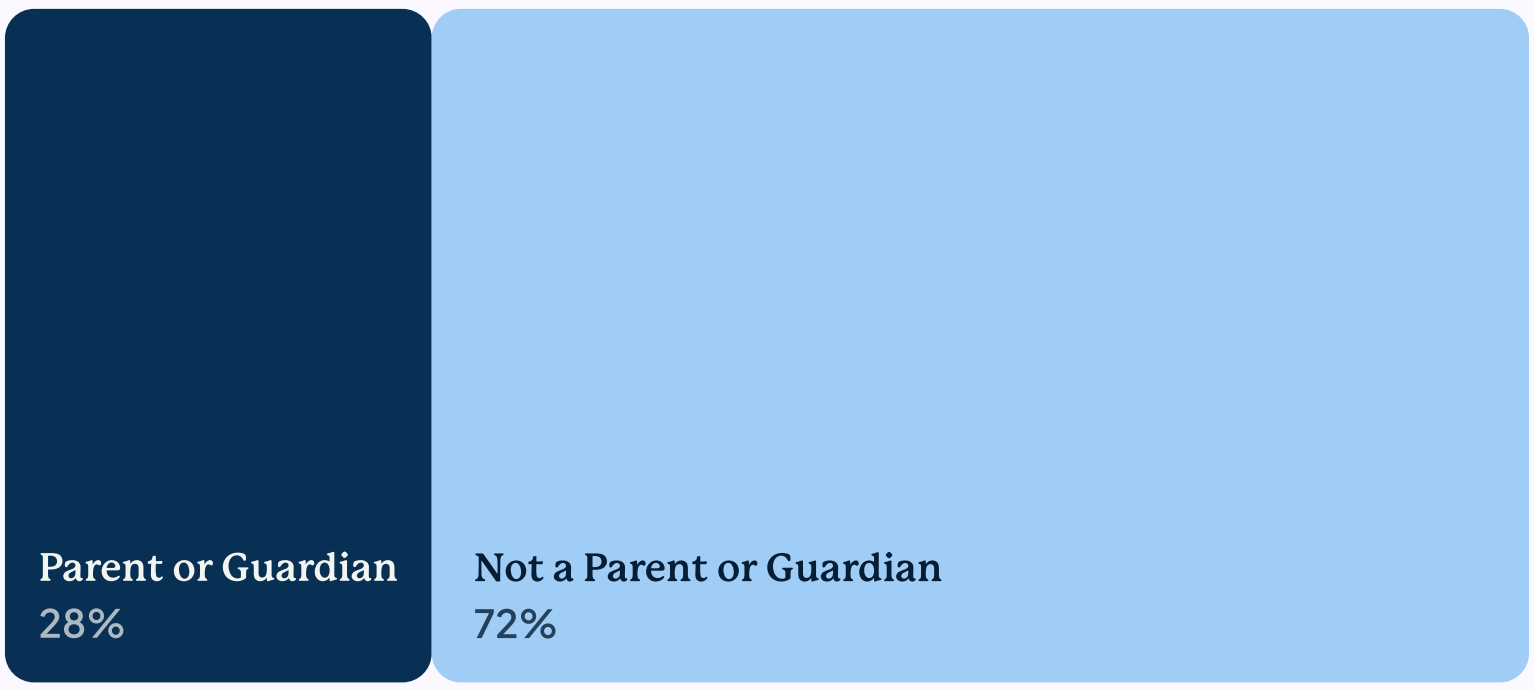
Family Time

Most Women Artists Are Not Mothers

Less than a third of respondents (28%) have children (compared with 39% of U.S. households overall). And artists who do have children have fewer than the average American: 1.17 children under 18, which is 40% less than **the U.S. average** (1.94).

In written responses, 15% of parents noted that their treatment in the art world was negatively impacted by the fact that they had children. Meanwhile, a number of artists wrote responses expressing reluctance to become mothers for fear of hindering their career prospects.

How Many Women Artists Are Parents or Guardians?



28% of respondents are parents or guardians of children or other dependents

Artists Speak:
To Have Children, or Not to Have Children?

“The restrictions of motherhood in a controlling patriarchal marriage have both hindered and enabled my art practice.”

“It’s been challenging to juggle a (financially essential) full-time teaching job with the demands of a commercial gallery (though it’s a lucky problem to have!). One of the big consequences for me has been delaying trying to have a family and anxiety about how motherhood might impact my art career. “

“I feel [as] though that I have to keep my age and my children a secret.”

Chapter Three

Finances

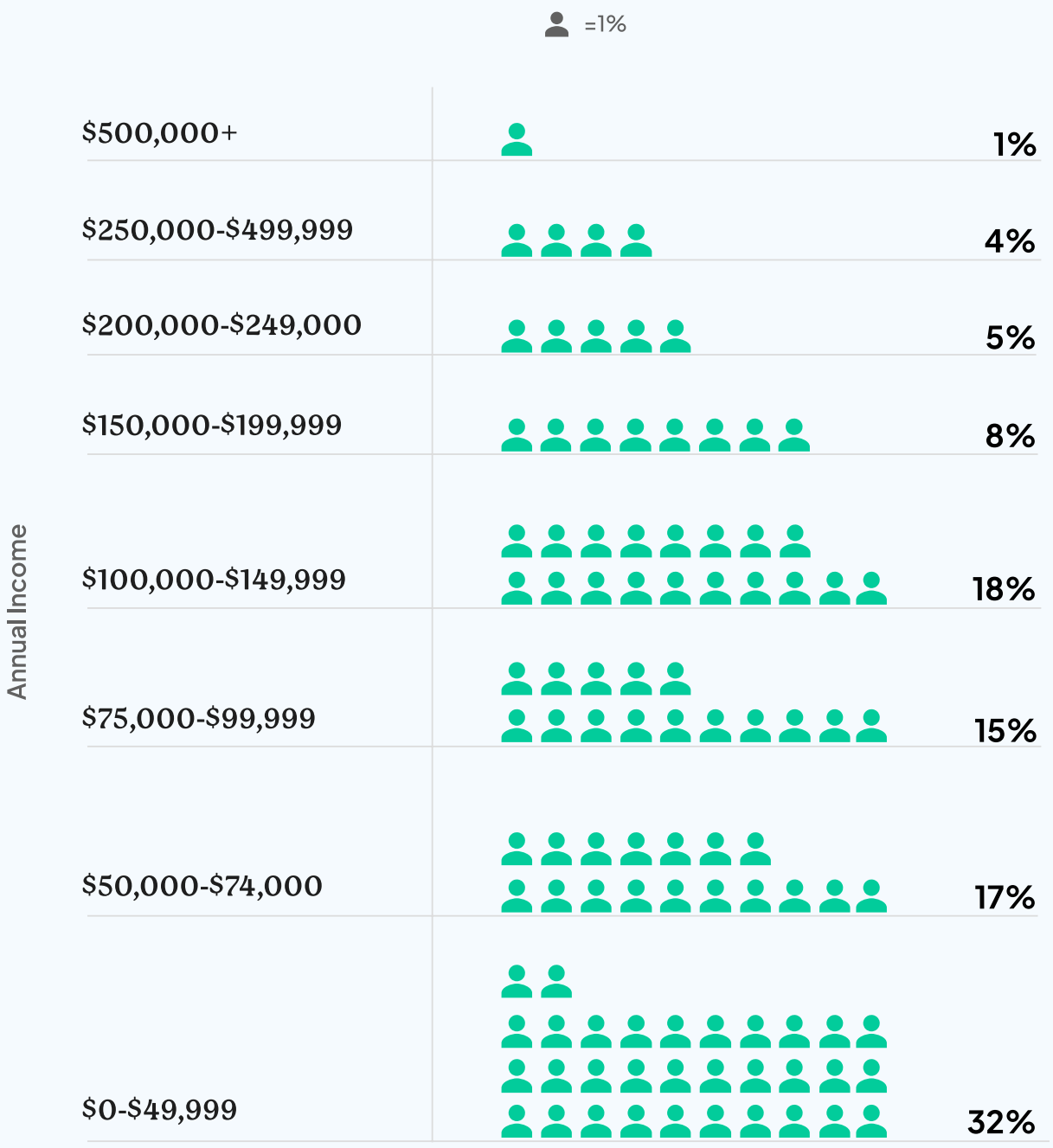
Women Artists' Household Income

One-Third of Artists Make Under $50,000

The experience of artists reflects the stratified nature of the broader economy, and nowhere is that more clear than in their household income. Only the top 1% make more than $500,000 annually. Meanwhile, a third of artists make less than $50,000, reinforcing the financial precarity of the profession.

THE 1% CHART

How Much Money Women Artists Are Making



One-third of artists make less than $50,000 annually

Data is drawn from respondents' estimates of their 2023 pre-tax household income

High Earners Skew the Rest

The average income of respondents is $105,360, but the median is much lower at $75,000—suggesting that a small number of top earners skew the perception of overall income.

Earnings Rise (and Then Fall) With Age

Artists under 40 and artists over 65 earn nearly the same median income: $62,250 vs. $68,000. They are outearned by artists in middle age, whose median income is $87,500.

While younger artists may be lower on the pay scale, older artists are more likely to be living on a fixed income. A third of written responses related to finances singled out social security, pensions, or some combination as sources of stability. Notably, not all of this is guaranteed for the younger generation: In America, for instance, cuts to social security are being pushed by the current government.

Income Varies Based on Location and Disability

American artists are earning an average median income of $75,000, which is significantly more money than their international peers, whose median income is $62,000. These results reflect the comparative concentration of market and museum opportunities for artists in the U.S.

However, the median income of American artists is still below the median income of the average American, which was $80,610 in 2023, according to the **United States Census Bureau.** And nearly half (47%) of artists living in major U.S. cities make less than a living wage.

New Yorkers report a median income of $80,000, which means that, based on their household size, 46% don't make the MIT Living Wage (an estimate of what one full-time worker must earn to help cover the cost of their family's basic needs in a particular U.S. location while still being self-sufficient). Respondents in LA report a median income of $70,000, with 50% being below the MIT Living Wage for their household size.

The figures also reveal disparities by disability: respondents with a disability had a median income of $62,500, compared with $80,000 for non-disabled artists.

Artists Speak: Professional Success Doesn’t Always Pay

“I am considered a successful artist by most measures, and I am excellent at hustling and advocating for myself. Still, I am functioning far below the poverty line.”

“Because I am represented by a major gallery, people assume I am doing well and do not realize I am struggling financially and in the process of having to give up my studio and downsize my life.”

“This much uncertainty about income while experiencing institutional demand for my work is not how I imagined having a moderately successful career would feel.”

Money Worries

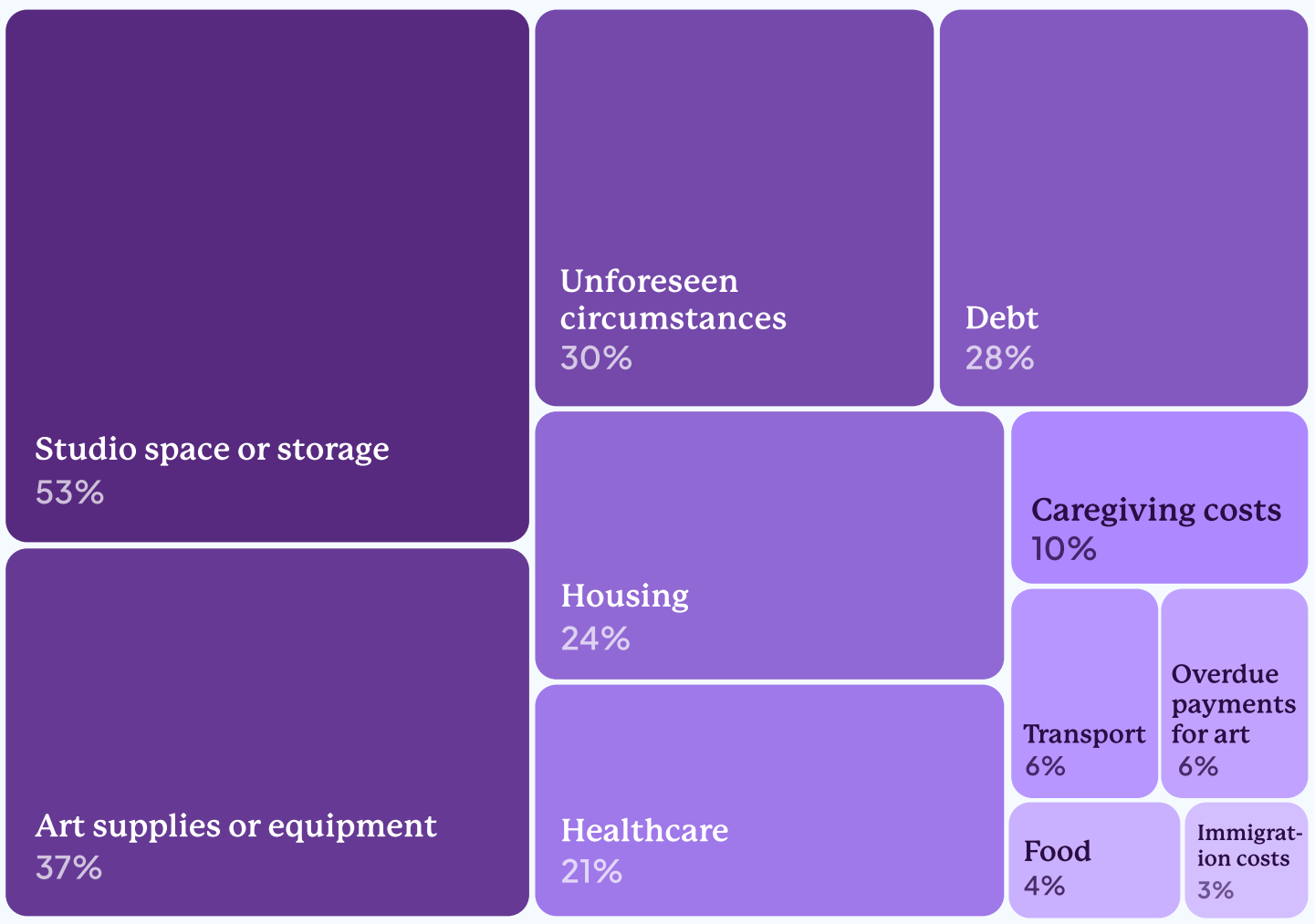
Life as an Artist Is a Financial Tightrope

It's expensive to be an artist. Respondents' top financial concerns—storage costs (53%) and materials (37%)—are professional rather than personal. Housing, healthcare, and debt are significant, but lesser, financial stressors whose impacts range more widely based on respondents' age and race.

Young Artists Are (Very) Stressed About Money

Fifty-six percent of respondents report having debt. Of those, 64% say that their debt is unmanageable. The burden is concentrated in the younger generations. 28% of younger artists say that they have unmanageable debt, as do 22% of middle-aged artists and 6% of older artists.

Sources of Financial Stress That Hinder Women Artists' Careers



53% of respondents say that a lack of studio space is a major financial stressor

Artists of Color Have Less of a Financial Cushion

The art world celebrates risk, but it is clear that most respondents are not in a financial position to gamble.

Money worries impact all women artists, but the data reveals clear patterns along racial lines. While a quarter of white respondents worry about unforeseen expenses (25%) and debt (24%), these concerns essentially double for artists of color: 49% of African American or Black, 41% of Indigenous, and 38% of both Asian and Hispanic and Latinx respondents cite unforeseen expenses as sources of stress. Meanwhile, 59% of Indigenous, 52% of African American and Black, 42% of Hispanic and Latinx, and 30% of Asian artists are concerned about debt.

Eighty-five percent of African American or Black artists have debt, compared with 52% of white artists, and they are more likely than any other group to describe their debt as “unmanageable.”

Housing Instability Eases as Artists Age

Housing instability is another source of financial stress, affecting nearly half (49%) of artists under 40. But, for our respondents, housing stress decreases over time: only 9% of artists over 65 were worried about housing. This trend may not continue, however: younger Americans are experiencing less favorable mortgage terms, higher interest rates, and higher home prices than their predecessors.

The Precarity of Artists’ Healthcare (Especially in America)

Overall, healthcare is a financial stressor for a fifth (21%) of artists.

The majority (92%) of survey respondents are based in the U.S., where the healthcare system carries high costs and relies on employer-provided insurance. This means artists must navigate a patchwork of expensive private insurance or subsidized plans, or go without coverage altogether. Racial disparities are present here, too: Just 3% of white respondents lack health insurance compared with almost a quarter (23%) of Indigenous, 11% of Black and African American, and 8% of both Asian, and Hispanic and Latinx artists.

The issue is also pronounced for younger artists: 11% of artists under 40 are completely uninsured.

Artists Speak:
Reflections on Financial Stress

“My income this year will be half of what it has been. It is a combination of factors: companies licensing work less because of their concerns and the development of A.I. I am also getting fewer online sales as I assume people are being more careful about spending. Shipping costs also take a huge chunk of my profits.”

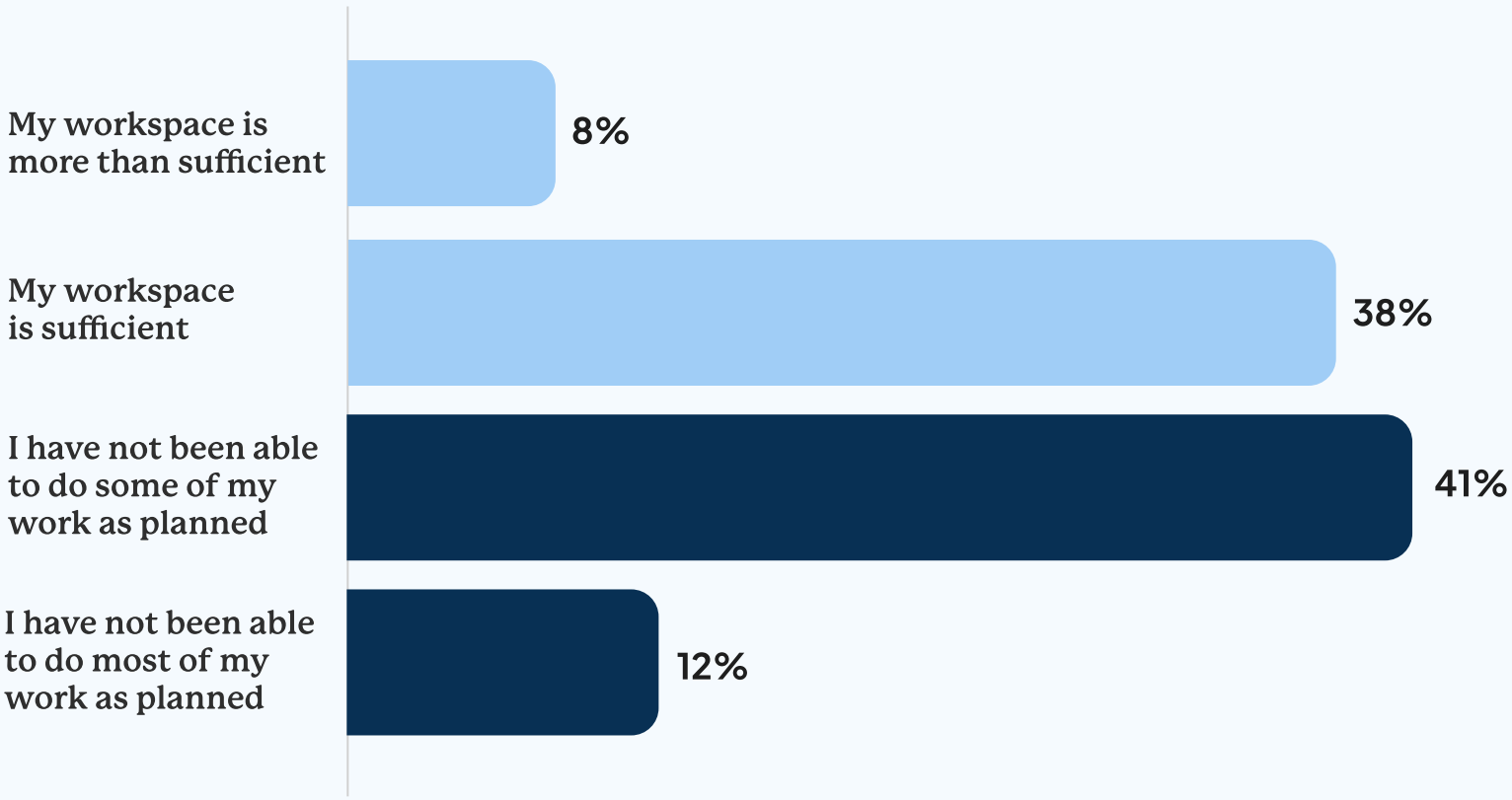
“While I do own my house, due to increases in taxes and insurance I may soon have to sell, but don’t know where I will live.”

“As a senior, single Black woman without a spouse, significant other, or adult children, I am concerned about my creative legacy of at least 50 years, so I’m preparing to archive my work—however, that process is very tedious and expensive, requiring paid assistance, especially due to my partial blindness.”

A Closer Look At The Studio Squeeze

MONEY WORRIES: A CLOSER LOOK

How Does Studio Space Impact Women Artists' Work?



53% of artists have had to adjust their work due to space constraints

(Un)Creative Real Estate

The lack of studio space impacts the kind of art that makes its way into the world. Fifty-two percent of artists say they have had to make changes to their work due to inadequate space. The figure is a forceful illustration of how financial constraints shape artistic expression. This is a particularly pressing issue for African American and Black artists, 64% of whom have had to make changes to their work due to inadequate space.

Nearly a Fifth of Artists Have Unstable Studio Space

Almost a fifth (18%) of respondents noted that their studio space was "unstable" or "extremely unstable." Artists of color are twice as likely to experience this as white respondents.

Middle-Aged Artists Feel the Squeeze

Studio access doesn't improve in middle age. Artists between 40 and 65 have had to adjust their work due to inadequate space at similar rates (57%) to younger artists (60%), compared with 40% of artists over 65. Additionally, a fifth of middle-aged and younger artists report "unstable" or "extremely unstable" space, compared with 11% of older artists.

The WFH Conundrum

In written responses, some artists describe feeling paradoxically limited and liberated by working from home. On the one hand, they can make art at any time, but on the other, they face constant interruptions and fear they are taken less seriously by curators and critics.

Cities Offer Better Workspaces

Perhaps counterintuitively, given the high real estate costs and lack of stability, artists in major cities like LA (55%) and New York (49%) report more satisfaction with their workspace than those elsewhere in the U.S. (46%) or internationally (43%).

These cities are more likely to have better infrastructure for artists, such as residency programs, studio buildings, shared workspaces, and access to community support. Nonetheless, as several artists commented, some city-dwellers are also more dependent on developer incentives that are subject to the whims of volatile real estate markets.

Artists Speak:
How Space—or a Lack of It—Informs Their Work

"Thirty years ago, when doing so was still possible for artists, I bought a small house and later built a studio on the property. Without this, I would surely have been forced by economic circumstances to stop making art seriously."

"I am about to lose my studio. For the past 7 years I have been lucky to receive subsidized studio rent… this is reaching the end of its term limit. I am confused and lost over this and unsure if leaving NYC will be necessary. A permanent space… is a necessity at this stage in my career that I long for."

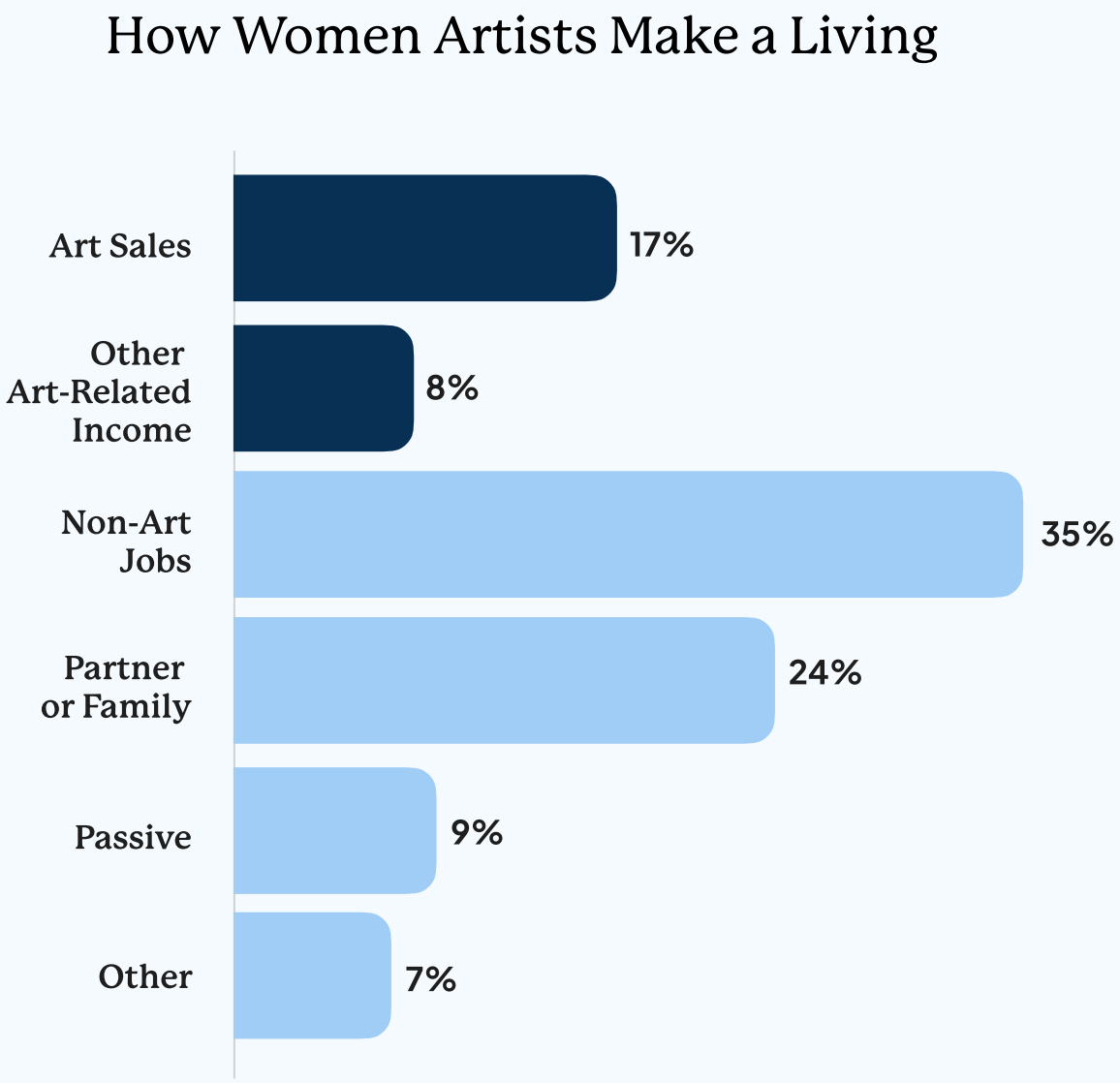
"I work from my bedroom, so I decided to work with fabric to avoid toxic and harmful materials. I use my space limitations as part of my artistic practice."

"I think the notion of physical space and materials…is negatively tied to capitalism. My marginalized location as a Black femme artist has inspired (required) modes of working that are collaborative, placing the onus of space/materials at the institutional level. This has radicalized my practice—freeing me from the financial burden that has historically limited my work."

"I'm an artist who is a mother to two toddlers. The space is in my unfinished basement but at least it's accessible to me at any time. The most challenging thing is the lack of community and openness of curators and gallerists to visit the studio."

"I went from a home garage studio to a new studio space offsite, recently. I can work bigger, and not be burdened by distractions (dishes, messes, spouse). It is a luxury. I'm flat broke but elated."

Total Household Income Breakdown



Most respondents don't make a living from art alone. On average, just **25%** of their total income comes from art-related work.

Sales Represent a Fraction of Artists' Take-Home Pay

This chart dismantles the romanticized notion that professional artists can sustain themselves solely through their art practices. Most of the respondents (85%) consider themselves full-time artists, and have been working this way for an average of 28 years. Yet the majority rely on sources of income beyond art sales. Respondents made, on average, $20,000 from art sales in 2023.

On average, art-related revenue—a combination of sales, grants, prizes, licensing, speaking, and creative collaborations—accounts for a mere quarter of respondents' household income in 2023. Direct sales represented just 17%.

Artists Rely on Other Jobs to Survive

Artists are making more than twice as much money from non-art jobs as they are from direct sales of their art (35% vs. 17% of take-home pay).

Teaching, in particular, is an important source of financial stability. Nearly a fifth of written responses noted that it provides valuable access to benefits, studio space, equipment, and technology alongside a steady income.

Much of the income for middle-aged artists, who are the highest earners, comes from non-art jobs (39%). Non-art jobs are also the most significant income generator for artists under 40 (51%), but this generation has a lower income overall.

Is the Life of an Artist Possible Only for the Rich?

Passive income from real estate, investments, trusts, etc., as well as money from family members or partners, accounts for almost as large a chunk of respondents' income (33%) as non-art-related jobs—and nearly twice as much as direct sales.

This invites questions about who can afford to be an artist in the first place, reinforcing characterizations of the art world as a bastion of privilege.

Middle-aged artists, the largest group of respondents (53%) have a bigger share of combined investment and family income (31%) than younger artists (20%), but less than older artists (43%).

Artists Speak:
The Burden, and Blessing, of Having a Job and a Vocation

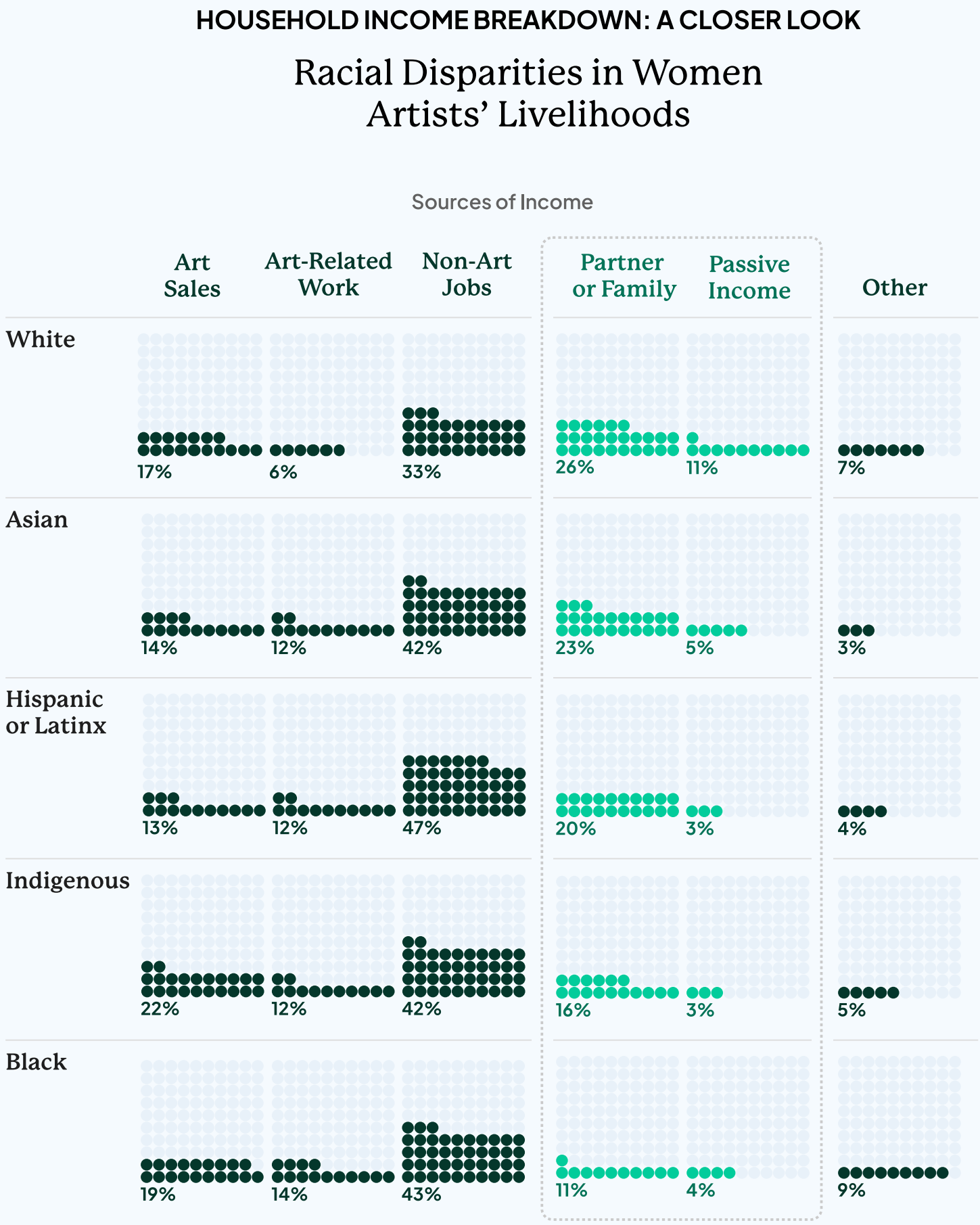
"The reason most of us do not have time to form collectives, artistic movements, [or] have open dialogue about things is because we are all surviving, typing away at a desk."

"My financial situation would be very very different if I wasn't supported by my partner financially. When our marriage was rocky, and I contemplated divorce last year, it was very scary to think about how much my art practice would suffer without their financial stability. This is not the reason we are still married, but it is a truth that I hate. I hate admitting that even with a full-time job, I cannot afford my art practice and I rely on their support to be able to afford to own a home, live in a city I love, and have my own studio."

"I feel trapped in my current position because it's a rare M-F schedule [and] there's really very few opportunities for older artists."

"I will always make work, because I must, but I am not chasing validation the way I used to."

A Closer Look at Racial Disparities in Income



White artists are more likely to have additional sources of income from family or investments

White Artists Are More Likely to Benefit From Passive and Partner Income

White respondents' proportion of passive income is nearly triple that of artists of color. They also have the highest share of income from partners or family members (26%, compared with 11% for African American and Black respondents, who have the lowest share). The data illustrates a clear racial divide in who benefits from generational wealth and access to other non-professional income. In 2023, these two income sources (passive and family) amounted to, on average, $40,000 for white, $25,000 for Asian, $18,500 for African American and Black, $17,400 for Hispanic and Latinx, and $13,250 for Indigenous artists.

They Are Also Less Likely to Rely on Non-Art Jobs

White respondents also rely less on non-art-related jobs, which makes sense considering they report more robust, and less temporary, financial cushions. Non-art-related work still accounts for a third (33%) of white respondents' income, but this is meaningfully less than respondents of color, for whom non-art related work accounts for up to half (between 42% and 47%) of take-home pay. African American and Black artists had the highest average income from other jobs ($50,700 in 2023), followed by Asian artists ($37,500).

Notably, white artists feel less stress about getting paid late for their art; only 4% cite outstanding art payments as a source of stress, compared with 15% of African American and Black and 8% of Asian artists, for example.

Examining the Racial Income Gap

Overall, African American and Black artists report the highest median household income ($82,000), followed closely by white respondents ($80,000), with a gap before Asian ($70,000) and Hispanic and Latinx ($69,000) artists. Indigenous respondents reported markedly less income than their peers ($45,000).

On average, African American and Black artists earned the most ($38,200) from art-related income in 2023, followed by white ($25,000), Asian ($23,400), Indigenous ($23,150) and Hispanic and Latinx ($19,400) artists.

But, there is a more significant gap between the mean and median household income—and specifically, art-related income—for African American and Black respondents than any other racial group, suggesting that the income figures may be weighted by a small number of high earners. This aligns with the "superstar effect" that has characterized the entire art market, and has been especially acute for underrepresented artists. For instance, the most recent **Burns Halperin Report** found that just one female artist accounted for nearly 80% of all auction sales for Black American female artists in 2016.

And, notably, African American and Black artists are working more hours than other artists: 53.9 hours each week (compared with 49.5 hours worked by Hispanic and Latinx; 49.3 hours by Indigenous; 48.8 hours by Asian; and 48.2 hours by white respondents).

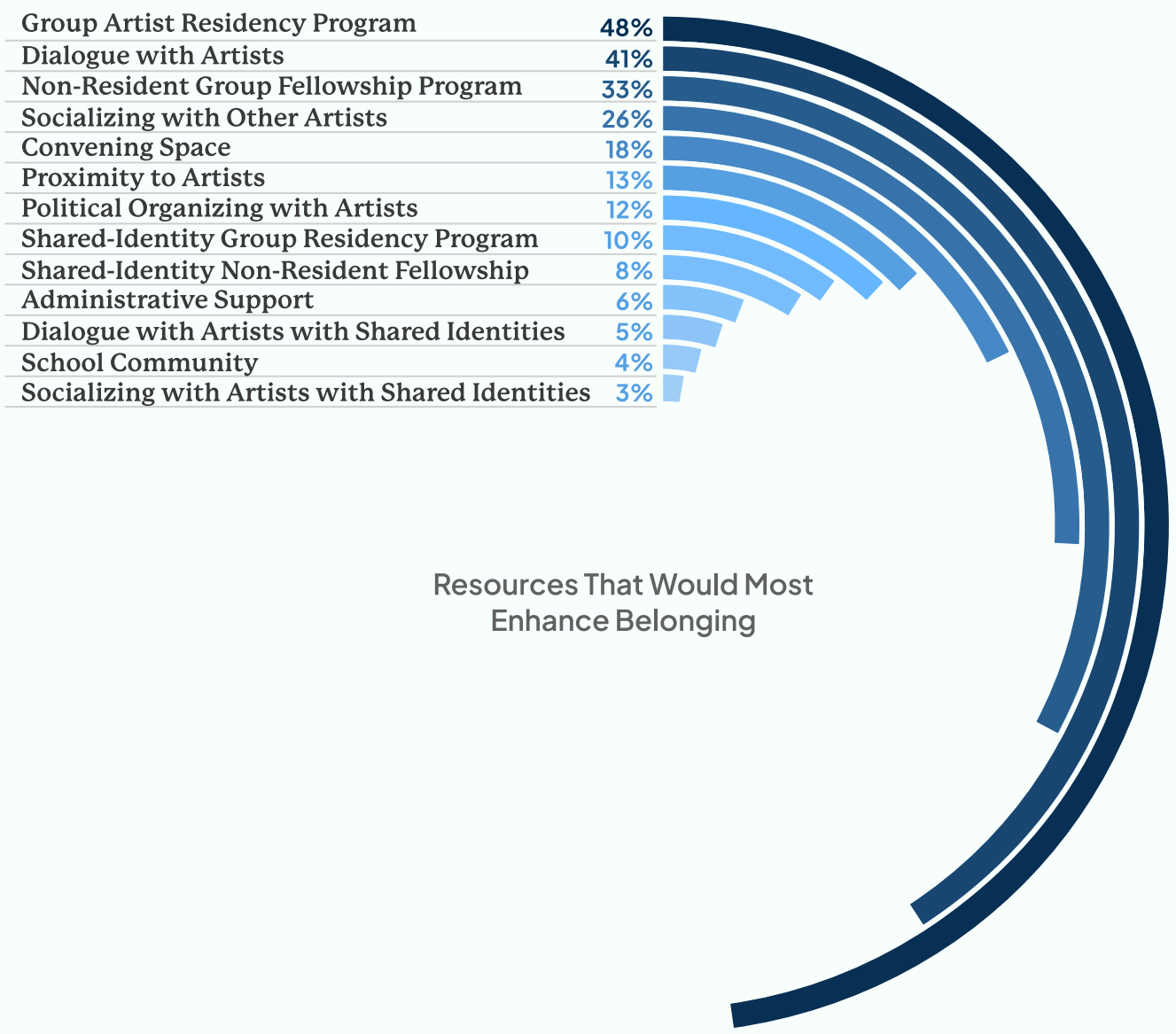
Efforts to Address Systemic Inequities Are Evident

There are signs that the art world has been working to address systemic racial inequities. Artists of color are significantly more likely to have participated in a funded artist residency or fellowship program in the past five years (65% of African American and Black, 59% of Asian, 55% of Indigenous, and 48% of Hispanic and Latinx artists, compared with 37% of white artists). Artists of color are also 50% to 300% more likely to have received a monetary prize of $10,000 or more. It remains to be seen whether these efforts and other specialized programs to support artists of color will continue, especially under the current U.S. administration.

Chapter Four

Conclusion

Career Support



Artists Want Structured Ways to Work Together

Being an artist is an independent, self-directed job. But many respondents are longing for more structured ways to learn from and work alongside their peers. Asked to pick three resources that would most enrich their sense of belonging, artists preferred group residency programs (48%), feedback and conversation (41%), and non-resident group fellowships (33%).

African American and Black artists are particularly interested in opportunities to connect around shared identity via residencies (20%), fellowships (20%), and feedback opportunities (11%). Indigenous artists are especially interested in residencies with peers with shared identities (27%).

The message from artists is loud and clear: their biggest form of support is one another. They thrive together, and crave more opportunities to be in community.

Artists Speak:
Sharing What They Want and Need

"Even with a wide network and a supportive artist community, procuring studio visits with curators and museum professionals is very difficult. I wish there were more nonprofit arts organizations that focused on organizing events where artists without gallery representation could meet curators and writers in the community."

"I've benefited hugely from the connections I've made at residencies, through which I've met artists from across the country."

"Would like more opportunities (dinners, small gatherings, intimate talks, etc) that aren't parties, fairs, or exhibition openings to deepen relationships with other artists and others in the art community."

"Daytime events that parents could attend while children are at school would be really useful."

"My artistic practice is supported by individuals who believed in my work before I did, and believed in me. I met people who supported my work, shared their experiences, and encouraged me."

"I feel very much supported, loved, stimulated and fulfilled by my art community. The issue is how to access the art world per se—getting a gallery, and opportunities that can create more opportunities and growth in my world."

Afterword

Women artists are not a monolith. This study—unprecedented in its scope—reveals how they form a vast and multifaceted community, one that could be even more strategically aligned in the fight for equity. One thing is undeniable: gender bias remains a reality.

In many ways, what respondents say they need are the same things that all creative workers need: time, community, money for materials, space to make art, less administrative work. But there are pressures unique to the art world, too, like concerns around censorship, a lack of support from galleries and museums, and pressure to make work about one's own identity.

The art world celebrates risk, yet we see in the data that few artists can afford to take chances. Most respondents are not making enough money from artistic work to survive. What's striking, however, is the contrast between those with a financial cushion from investments, real estate, or family support, and those who are forced to take on debt and additional paid work. Entirely absent from the survey, of course, are those who left the field—or never pursued an art career in the first place—because they could not afford to do so.

This report provides, for the first time at this scale, a common reference point for the distinct needs and experiences of women artists across demographics. It elucidates clearly the legacy of racism and structural inequality, and how this translates into the distribution of key resources: time and money.

By understanding their shared and distinct challenges, women can use this data to strengthen support for one another, recognizing differences while pursuing common goals. In this way, the data can be a tool for mutual support, advocacy, and philanthropy.

The findings reveal unexpected areas of solidarity—shared financial struggles between younger and older artists, for example, or the near-universal burden of storage and studio space—offering new pathways for allyship.

We've found, for example, that young artists who feel unsupported by their galleries have much to learn from artists over 65, who are leading the way in selling work independently.

The data also shows how directed efforts can alleviate specific burdens. We see that emergency grants may be especially beneficial for artists of color, who cite unforeseen circumstances as a major financial stressor. Meanwhile, mentorship programs are particularly valuable for younger artists, with 78% of respondents under 65 identifying a lack of mentorship as a barrier. And respite services and mutual aid might be especially meaningful in LA, where artists reported spending more time caregiving than anywhere else.

There are clear warning signs for the future, too: many resources that older artists have depended on are not guaranteed for the next generation. The survey closed on January 6, 2025, before the devastating fires in Los Angeles, which impacted so many artists, and before the Trump administration had taken office, implementing changes that affect many in the community.

Now is a time for women artists, and those who support them, to come together. It is a moment to share experiences and chart new paths forward. Hopefully, the insights from artists that enabled this report will engender conversations that challenge and inspire us to think differently. Artists, as always, are leading the way. An overwhelming 79% agree that their most valuable resource is one another, underscoring the power of collective strength.

“Women have often felt insane when cleaving to the truth of our experience. Our future depends on the sanity of each of us, and we have a profound stake, beyond the personal, in the project of describing our reality as candidly and fully as we can to each other.”

—Adrienne Rich, 1975

Methodology

Annie Bares, Every Page Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow, SMU DataArts

To better understand the careers and needs of women artists, Anonymous Was A Woman and SMU DataArts collaborated on the design and execution of an international survey. SMU DataArts led the structure and design of the 42-question survey, with collaboration on content from the Anonymous Was A Woman team. Titled the "Anonymous Was A Woman Survey," it included topics like experience in the art world; career and finances; and households and family. Five women artists tested a draft of the survey, and their feedback informed the final version.

The Anonymous Was A Woman team led the survey distribution. The survey was initially distributed through email invitations to around 700 women artists, 322 of whom were previous recipients of Anonymous Was A Woman Awards and the rest of whom were other contacts of the Anonymous Was A Woman team. We also used a snowball sampling technique, where research participants were encouraged to forward the survey to additional potential survey respondents. To incentivize participation, participants could opt in to being included in a drawing for cash prizes.

In total, 1,263 artists completed the survey between November 13, 2024 and January 6, 2025. The SMU DataArts team cleaned the data and developed tables of responses overall and of key comparison groups for a core dataset of 1,253 responses. In the analysis, averages were used rather than medians given the priority of understanding financial trends and dynamics of the group overall. However, medians were used in reporting income given the large variations and outliers in the data.

In addition to analyzing the data based on all responses, the data was segmented to allow for comparisons across three specific respondent identities: (1) age, (2) race/ethnicity, and (3) location.

All survey questions were optional. Respondents had the option, but were not required to, provide their name and email address. All identifying information is only available to SMU DataArts researchers. Data is securely stored by SMU DataArts.

Respondent Characteristics:

Age

The average age of respondents is 58 years old. 15% are under 40 years old. 53% are 40 to 64 years old. 32% are 65 years old.

Race and Ethnicity

Respondents were asked to identify their race/ethnicity based on standard U.S. Census categories. Data was segmented based on broader categories in some cases: 70% of respondents identified as white; 13% identified as Asian (East Asian, South Asian, West Asian, Middle Eastern, North African, or Southeast Asian); 8% identified as Hispanic or Latinx/a/o/e; 6% identified as African American or Black, 2% identified as Indigenous (Indigenous, Native Hawaiian, or Other Pacific Islander), and 12% identified as another race or identity. Given the ambiguity in the range of identities reflected in this final "another race or identity" category, this group was not included as a comparison when race and ethnicity splits were run. However, these responses were included in overall data analyses. As the survey was fielding, we re-assessed gaps in respondent composition and amplified outreach to underrepresented groups by region, race, and ethnicity. It's notable that the racial and ethnic identities of respondents to this survey are closely aligned with a recent study of the fine arts workforce at large (see table below):

	% Of Anonymous Was A Woman Survey Respondents	% In Fine Arts Workforce Overall (2022)[1]
White	68%	68%
Black	6%	6%
Asian	13%	7%
Hispanic or Latinx	8%	13%
Indigenous	2%	0.4%

[1] National Arts Statistics and Evidence-Based Reporting Center. A1 Tables, "Measuring the Arts: Domain A, Artists and Other Cultural Workers", 2022.

Location

Location of respondents was determined by their primary residence. 91% of respondents live in the United States. 9% live in other countries. 63% of total respondents live in U.S. cities that are not the five boroughs of New York City or Los Angeles. 23% of total respondents live in New York City (Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, Manhattan, and Staten Island). 5% of total respondents live in the Greater Los Angeles Metro Area.

Gender Identity

88% of respondents identify as a cisgender woman; 5% identify as genderqueer/nonconforming; 1% identify as another gender.

Sexuality

65% of respondents identify as heterosexual. 12% identify as queer. 11% identify as bisexual. 5% identify as lesbian. 5% identify as pansexual. 2% identify as asexual. 1% identify as gay.

Disability

20% of respondents have a disability. Of those, 8% are neurodivergent and/or autistic; 6% have a chronic illness; 5% have a mental health disability; 4% have a learning disability; 3% have a physical disability or mobility impairment; 2% have an emotional or behavioral disability; 1% have an intellectual, cognitive, or developmental disability. 2% have a disability not listed on the survey.

Education

69% of respondents' highest level of education completed is a Master's degree. 21% of respondents have up to a Bachelor's degree. 6% have a Professional or doctorate degree.

63% of total respondents have an MFA, and 1% were currently enrolled in an MFA program upon taking the survey.

Credits

Report: Written by Charlotte Burns and Julia Halperin, with support from Annie Bares and Jen Benoit-Bryan of SMU DataArts

Survey: Developed by SMU DataArts, AWAW, Charlotte Burns, Julia Halperin, and Loring Randolph, administered by SMU DataArts

Logo, Graphics, and Design: Nehema Kariuki

Readers: Maya Strohmeier and Melissa Smith

Funding for the survey and report was provided by Anonymous Was A Woman. Funding from the Every Page Foundation also supported SMU DataArts' work.

ANONYMOUS WAS A WOMAN | SMU DataArts | The Burns Halperin Report | STUDIO BURNS