

Some Impressions of an Artist's Ladders:  
Labor and the Negative Joke in Dakota Higgins' *Impressions*

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When I first asked Dakota Higgins to explain the motivations behind his 2023 series *Impressions of an Artist's Ladder*, he began simply by describing ladders as “the tools most responsible for elevating artists.” At the time, between casting in colorful pigmented silicone every ladder he could get his hands on, he was deeply invested in theorizing the concept of the joke as it related to semiotics and art. Our friendship at this early stage was, in part, founded on the promise of me helping him in this endeavor — part of a broader project he was undertaking, or anxiety he was experiencing, about developing the conceptual underpinnings of his work.

In the year and a half since he introduced me to the *Impressions* series, Dakota has disabused himself of this obligation.<sup>1</sup> Though I cannot take any credit for his maturation (in fact, I was among those consistently pushing him towards a tighter and tighter conceptual position), I'm glad he's moved through it. The longer I spend invested in the field of art, the greater sense I get that young artists are continuously pressured by residencies, grantors, curators and academic admissions/hiring panels to produce not only artworks, but evidence of their exhibition, critical analysis around these works and exhibitions, and the metanarratives of their artistic practices that these works, exhibitions, and criticisms collectively form. In rejecting these pressures, Dakota has arrived at what seems to me a much healthier and more fruitful relationship to artistic practice itself. And most importantly, having let go of this anxiety, he seems a lot happier.

To have a conceptualized project and a conceptualized practice, however, seems to remain important for any artist hoping to operate at the intersection of the commercial and academic worlds of art. The project of this essay, having already done much of this analysis in casual conversation with him, is now to do some of that work formally, for him. I've begun by providing the background of Dakota's earlier aspirations towards an explicitly conceptual artmaking process in order to contextualize this analysis honestly as the product not just of my own musing but also as an imperfect summary of Dakota's intellectual labor, alongside that of the many others with whom I've discussed *Impressions*.<sup>2</sup> And in this accounting of intellectual labor, I'd like to center *labor* itself and propose that it is from the object of *artistic labor* that the originary joke of *Impressions* departs and develops into a much more complex (but no less funny) system of negations and negotiations.

It is immediately clear that the humor of defining ladders as “the tools most responsible for elevating artists” lies in the dual meaning of “elevate.” To “elevate artists” is reminiscent of the over-professionalized, entrepreneurial jargon used by those seeking to “uplift” and “promote” destitute artists in need of a platform. Ladders, of course, facilitate the physical elevation of their users. The *artist's ladder*, specifically, is emblematic of ambitious work, of an artist laboring to produce at scales beyond those of their own body. And if we are to imagine the stereotypical

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<sup>1</sup> Dakota's text “Things Done for Love” elegantly outlines his new relationship to artmaking.

<sup>2</sup> These interlocutors include but are not limited to Raghvi Bhatia, Matt Reiner, Boz Deseo Garden, Carlos Agredano, and Molly Zuckerman-Hartung.

artist's studio, short of the paintbrush, the ladder is arguably *the* icon of the artist's labor performed therein — notably fixed in this semiotic role and distinct from the products of that labor (the painting, the sculpture, etc.) which go on to lead very different symbolic lives of their own.

The *Impressions* series, then, constitutes a very transparent gesture to close this divide. The products of Dakota's artistic labor are "about" artistic labor: not just his labor to produce them, but also the abstracted *idea* of artistic labor. His departure from the pun of "elevating artists" extends this subject even further to include the work of supporting artistic laborers, implicitly recognizing a cadre of other art world inhabitants: gallerists, educators, critics, viewers, peers, etc. However, if we are to pause and consider how Dakota's artistic labor takes shape, the humor and complexity of *Impressions* emerges directly *against* this apparent indulgent celebration of the art world and its labor.

Now, in order to get at the generative irony of *Impressions*, I'd like to briefly discuss the work of one of these implicitly acknowledged peers exhibiting concurrently, the artist Sophie Friedmans-Pappas. Her practice is truly playful in its own way (shit and piss often appear, very seriously, as key subjects in her research-based projects), but it is in the *work* of her recent work *Kiln Building Quilting Button* (2023, not on display) that a useful foil to Dakota's *Impressions* lies. *Kiln Building* is an apparatus as much as it is a sculptural artwork. The piece consists of welded and clamped pipes and tubes extending from opposite, short sides of an insulated metal box. The work terminates with a corded blower on one end and unplugged gas tubing on the other. True to its name, *Kiln Building* is a kiln, however this kiln can only be fired once. The work of this artwork is to simultaneously make and unmake itself — in the process of its firing, the interior surface of the kiln is irreversibly chemically altered and the piece transmutes from a tool of artistic production into an art product itself.

Dakota's *Impressions* series seems to similarly be produced by a kind of firing. It is not unfair to say that each *Impression* resembles a plastic ladder, lightly baked. The works are flaccid and gooey. Each is produced at a one-to-one scale in the same hues and patterns of its referent, droopily hung to rest just inches above the gallery floor. But while the colorful, bumpy exteriors of these ladders drip towards the ground, their interior surfaces consist of flat surfaces and hard edges. As he hints with the very word "impression," each piece is cast directly on its reference surface, the titular "Artist's Ladder." Thus, like *Kiln Building*, Dakota's *Impressions* symbolically *and* materially turn art tools into artworks. And because making an *Impression of an Artist's Ladder* requires the physical artist's ladder itself, Dakota's representation of the labor of each "Artist" in his series requires that he temporarily render their ladder unusable and their labor impossible. This material intervention into the practices of its subject artists, essential to the *Impressions* series, reveals how *Kiln Building* might serve, procedurally, as a foil: whereas Friedman-Pappas has devised an artwork that terminates itself, Dakota has developed artworks that terminate the work of others.

Despite this apparent antagonism, Dakota is actually quite generous towards both his collaborators and his viewers by outlining, very explicitly, the terms of engagement governing

how each ladder is acquired and its silicone replica is made. Alongside many of his *Impressions*, he produced an additional wall work of pigmented silicone on canvas drop cloth titled *DHLLC Leasing Contract*. At the center of each *DHLLC* is what roughly resembles a pointillist rendering of a stunted doric column floating in a field of drips, smudges and stains.<sup>3</sup> In the bottom corner appears an 8.5" x 11" image transfer of a document, signed by Dakota and the ladder lending artist, with the heading "DHLLC EQUIPMENT RENTAL AGREEMENT" and body text stipulating an agreement in which Dakota leases the ladder from an artist for the express purpose of its cleaning. The document's clauses outline how the Dakota Higgins Ladder Laundering Company (DHLLC, Dakota's clever creation of an LLC without having to actually register a Limited Liability Company) will:

...clean the Lessor's Ladder... by subjecting it to DHLLC's unique cleaning process, whereby excess dirt and grime (etc.) will be removed from the surface of the Lessor's Ladder without negatively impacting the form or function of Lessor's Ladder, or Lessor's money back.

Besides the absurdity of this bolded money-back guarantee in light of the earlier, also bolded, valuation of the lease "for a total sum of **\$0.00** (zero dollars and zero cents)," the contract reveals another inversion: although the lending is a material imposition on the artist with whom he is working, it is also consented upon and ostensibly a labor of service he is providing them. In promising the lessor a percentage of the gross profit received from the sale of any "byproducts resulting from DHLLC's unique cleaning process," the contract does acknowledge that the production of goods is inherent to the leasing arrangement, however its language (dismissing the artwork to a mere "byproduct") ensures that such production remains explicitly secondary to the more central provision of a service.

Reading these contracts, I am reminded of Andrea Fraser's redefinition of the artist's work as "providing a service."<sup>4</sup> In a series of early-career exhibitions and essays, Fraser sought to interrogate the mischaracterization and reduction of artistic practice to the simple "production of goods." In her 1994 text "How to Provide an Artistic Service: An Introduction," she argues that the expectation of certain services is not only imposed upon artists whose practices could be categorized as "project work." At "openings, dinner parties, press conferences, and so on," she writes, even the studio-based artist is required to provide certain uncompensated services, and in doing so performs a kind of Marxian "surplus labor" that is exploited by both "organizations and individuals." Ultimately, Fraser argues that the art world operates to obscure the fact that the "competitive struggles" cultivated among artists and art workers serve the interests of individuals and institutional leaders who stand to gain economic and cultural power from the reproduction of the art field. In its dance between services and goods, Dakota's *DHLLC Contract Agreement* similarly hinges on exploitation, but it is unclear whether Dakota (providing a service at no cost) or the lending artist (hoodwinked into losing their ladder without remuneration) is being taken advantage of.

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<sup>3</sup> Another subtle nod to acts of "support" and "elevation."

<sup>4</sup> Fraser is an educator at UCLA, and therefore another member of the art world cadre who come to mind when considering Dakota's interest in "elevate artists."

This humorous inconsistency is responsible for the *Impressions* series' departure from Fraser's rational discourse and, accordingly, is exactly what comparison to Fraser's logical navigation of artistic labor serves to highlight: where Fraser seeks fair compensation for all the artist's labors, Dakota ensures that there is not, and will never be, any money exchanged in return for his services; and whereas Fraser argues convincingly that service provision is just as essential as goods production to the artist's work, Dakota transparently and unconvincingly tries to disguise his production of goods as a selfless act of service. In fact, beyond their shared skepticism towards art, the only true alignment between Fraser's "How to Provide an Artistic Service" and Dakota's *Impressions* is in their interest in contradiction: in her conclusion, Fraser asserts "the contradictory principle" of artists' professional life is that "dependence is the condition of our autonomy," while in Dakota's *Impressions* series each, gesture seems to negate every other.

To demonstrate the reflexivity Fraser so consistently champions in her work as an artist and educator, I cannot help but recognize that my own desire to describe and analyze Dakota's *Impressions* through its foils (both Friedman-Pappas' *Kiln Building* and Fraser's writing on labor) is perhaps something the work has "activated" in me. This activation may be a reflection of how essential the inverse and the negative are to the *Impressions* series itself. First, being silicone forms, the works are completely unusable as ladders. Each piece is also the physical negative of the ladder upon which it is cast, and their silicone materiality only serves to emphasize this alignment with negative mold making. Moreover, as I've argued, just as the work itself is the physical negative of its referent, this production strategy negates the artist's practice it seeks to represent by removing one of their most essential tools. With the *DHLLC* contracts, it seems Dakota has attempted to gaslight us into believing this is not actually the case, that he is instead generously supporting artists by cleaning the ladders he takes. The most overarching negation in the show, though, is the fact that all the sculptures and paintings addressed in this essay represent the culmination of Dakota's pursuit of a master's degree in photography (the photographic negative, one of the most important "negatives" in art, is conspicuously absent from this show). At every turn we are confronted with the very opposite of what we've previously been led to believe, yet rather than feel frustration, these funny twists only draw us further in. With each surprising negation, the humor of the work is built.

Reflecting on the sequential, negative building of this multi-tiered joke, I'm inclined to believe the depth of the work's humor is coextensive with the depth of its critical rigor. After all, sustained investment in the productivity of negation is precisely what drives the critic. And more specifically, the *Impressions* series performs a kind of critique insofar as with each turn it *reveals*. In this body of work we are shown the entanglement of support and incapacitation, of representation and restriction, and of goods production and service provision, all inherent to "elevating artists" and the performance of artistic labor. Unlike Fraser's explicit critiques of art labor systems, there is not a clear position taken by the *Impressions* series as a result of its revelations. But there is still incisive value in Dakota's inversions, for as we move through each joke, we gradually come to occupy a skeptical position. In this way, rather than presenting us with a closed critical narrative, the work instills within us a critical orientation, an expectation of the trick. And herein lies perhaps the most impressive inversion of *Impressions*, several years in

the making: by abandoning his pursuit of a conceptually-driven practice rooted in humor, Dakota has arrived at a practice in which the gesture of the “joke” effortlessly builds conceptually rich art.