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Montreal artists Rebecca Munce and Steffie Bélanger will be paid an hourly wage to create art this summer from July 11 because of a creative funding idea by Concordia's Faculty of Fine Arts (FOFA).

"There's exhibitions and residencies already out there," said FOFA exhibition coordinator Sarah Amarica, "but to apply for a job as an artist to make art is virtually unheard of."

FOFA's exhibition will emphasise the labour that goes into creating art by showing the two artists as they work every weekday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Amarica said the project began when FOFA gallery director Jennifer Dorner had an idea to "put out a job call for artists".

When the faculty put out the call in March, close to 100 students fitting the job description applied nationwide.

"It was so well received because this sort of opportunity doesn't exist elsewhere," said Amarica. "We narrowed it down to a dozen applicants and then interviewed them."

Of the dozen applicants, the faculty selected Munce and Bélanger, focusing on the labour-intensive nature of their work.

"With Rebecca's work, so much effort goes into these tiny little pieces," Amarica said. "You can see her labour manifest almost."

On the first day of the exhibition on Monday, Bélanger was involved in a car accident and while she was unharmed, she was absent.

Munce stood alone within the four white walls of Concordia University's FOFA gallery, adding details to one of her drawings.

From afar, her piece appeared to be one large cohesive design, but upon closer inspection, minute details revealed the chaos within: broken liquor bottles, pine trees, couples holding hands, three bears.

"My work portrays collectives of people that show different experiences happening simultaneously: from the mundane to the absurd, positive to negative, moments of ecstasy and suffering," she said. "I'm interested in how a surface can contain both."

While Montrealers strolled the street metres away outside, Munce agreed the idea behind the exhibition inside was a little absurd.

"An hourly wage is bizarre; it's not something you would normally find," she said. "For any city, this is a very unique structure. I was surprised to hear about it myself."

Munce said another advantage of the exhibition was she was "already in a 'white cube'".

She explained that an artist's studio is usually amess with works-in-progress and materials. Once finished, the artist takes their piece and places it in what is known as a white cube for viewing.

The FOFA exhibition is both a studio and a white cube; a hybrid between a place of work and a place of display.

As Munce spoke, a boy outside on Ste-Catherine St. pressed his nose to the glass and peered into the white cube; every now and then, other passers-by did the same.

She had received visitors on the first day, Munce said, and while she was not used to being so open to the public, the exhibition's openness bridged the gap between the public and art.

"Ultimately, the goal of the exhibition is to educate the public in the process of art-making and help them understand making art as a profession," she said.

Munce said Concordia University's agenda was to use the exhibition to connect the public with art.

An agenda adopted by Nathalie Bondil, director of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts on Sherbrooke St., two blocks away.

In May 2015, the Montreal Gazette wrote Bondil's aim, since becoming director in 2007, was to make accessibility to the arts a priority.

The public responded to her efforts with close to 1 million people visiting the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts in 2014.

But even though the arts continue to drive Montreal's tourism industry, artists are underpaid across all fields.

In June 2016, Statistics Canada reported about 77,000 people were employees in art, culture, recreation or sport in Quebec.

Those employees were paid an average wage of \$21.31 an hour, less than the average hourly wage of \$23.97 for an employee in any industry province-wide.

These figures may not include the time outside of work hours artists spend on their pieces.

"Artists are drastically underpaid for their work across all fields," said coordinator Amarica. "Sometimes they may be given a budget for materials but they are very rarely paid for their labour."

Showing the public how artists are exploited for their labour was also central to the project.

The project was made possible only with funding and without it, the FOFA gallery would have closed over the summer, Amarica added.

"The reality is, we were able to do this because of funding," she said. "We thought outside of the box."

This summer, Young Canada Works – a Department of Canadian Heritage initiative – accepted FOFA's proposal to put the job call out for artists, agreeing to pay the artists' wages.

Amarica said she hopes FOFA's proposal idea inspires other institutions to be more creative when it comes to pursuing project funding.