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Left: French-Egyptian artist Ghader Amer collaborated with the Guadalajara-based workshop Cerámica Suro to create her sculptural works © Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Bruno Daureo
Right: Part of the 'Thoughts' series of abstract sculptures that Ghader Amer created with Cerámica Suro © Courtesy of Ghada Amer and Kewenig Gallery. Photo: Lepkowski Studios

THE SECRET TO GREAT ART? FINDING SOMEONE ELSE TO MAKE IT

BY DEBIKA RAY
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Marina Abramović, William Kentridge, Jasleen Kaur and other leading artists reveal the fabricators they entrust with their creations.

Picture an artist. Do you see a lone master in a studio dabbing paint on to canvas? Or someone at a wheel, shaping clay? What's less likely is that you'll envisage a team. Yet great artworks throughout the centuries have often emerged as a result of collective endeavour: think of the artisans who decorated tombs in ancient Egypt, or Fra Angelico's 15th-century workshop that produced frescoes across Florence, or Rodin's 19th-century Paris studio, where assistants sculpted and cast under his direction. And this way of working hasn't gone away: many artworks today are not physically made by the named artist, but by specialist fabricators such as AB Fine Art Foundry in London and Factum Arte in Madrid.

"The time of Michelangelo and Leonardo are gone," Marina Abramović tells me. "With today's tools — including AI — it's no longer necessary for artists to learn a craft. What matters is the content, the idea. It doesn't matter what tools you use if you achieve it." But even Abramović has found fabricators indispensable. On her carved self-portraits Five Stages of Maya Dance (2013), she spent seven years collaborating with Factum Arte co-founder Adam Lowe — who

she calls “an inventor, scientist and technician in one person”. Lowe “invented an entire machine to produce the works”, she says, as well as identifying alabaster as an alternative to marble to capture the sense of transience she was seeking. In the final pieces, Abramović’s image appears clear from afar and vanishes as you get closer. “We were both so happy that life and death could be represented in one piece,” she says.

Often these collaborations are born from the need to solve a problem. When New York-based Ghada Amer was struggling to enlarge her Thought series of abstract sculptural forms, she turned to Cerámica Suro in Guadalajara, Mexico. “By understanding Ghada’s approach, we developed a ceramic body [the mix of clay] and firing curves [the various temperatures] that let us create large, complex pieces,” says the studio’s director José Noé Suro. “It was a three-ring circus — colour, construction, firing, all working in harmony.”

For Amer, fabricators are crucial “both as creators in their own right and as teachers”. But while they contribute specific skills to her work, she — like Abramović — is clear about the boundaries. “They do not influence the ideas and I continue to control the outcome.”

William Kentridge has a less clear-cut conception of authorship. For decades he has worked with Stephens Tapestry Studio in Eswatini, southern Africa, first with Marguerite Stephens and now with her daughter Christine Weavind, on tapestries layering bold silhouettes over antique maps. “Translating an image into tapestry isn’t just mechanical,” Kentridge says. “Every stitch involves decisions — what to enlarge, what to simplify, what colour to use. It’s the skill of the weaver that gives a tapestry a particular quality.” Weavind describes it as a relationship of mutual respect. “William entrusts us with his designs and leaves the translation largely in our hands.”

For Jasleen Kaur, whose poignant yet humorous installations often reference her Punjabi-Sikh background and her upbringing in Glasgow, collaboration and attribution are moral issues. “It’s an ethical question,” she says, “respecting expertise and employing independent makers rather than large firms. I’m careful to credit the people I work with.”

She works with a host of collaborators: embroiderers, ceramicists, glass casters and even coders. “It’s an enmeshed process,” she says. “There’s lots of dialogue and I’ve developed these relationships over years.” In 2023, for Alter Altar — her show at Glasgow’s Tramway that won her the Turner Prize — Kaur asked local fabricator Billy Teasdale to cast two large resin works. “Resin is unpredictable,” she says. “It cures differently depending on temperature and humidity, so it was nerve-racking.”

For Teasdale, going down that “epoxy rabbit hole” was a challenge: “I’d never been asked to pour a solid block of Irn-Bru-coloured resin with an image and roti cast in it before — and at that scale,” he says, referring to Kaur’s works from 2023, which encased family photos and fragments of flatbreads in orange-tinted resin. “Doing is learning,” he adds. Teasdale sees his role as preserving the artist’s vision while negotiating the realities of materials. “Artists’ ideas don’t always match the practicalities.”

London-based artist Emma Witter uses materials such as discarded bones, oyster shells, eggs and lobster claws to create sculptures that appear as if found in nature. Having experimented with electroforming to coat these found objects in copper, she became interested in welding. But the technical complexities of bringing her ideas to life came into sharp relief when she enrolled on a course with blacksmith Natalie Bradwell in 2021. “I think you saw fairly quickly that the skill takes a lot of practice,” recalls Bradwell. “I wasn’t very good,” Witter admits. “And the workplace was a sensory overload — heavy clothing, the mask, loud noises, sharp edges, the feeling your hair might catch fire. I left thinking Natalie was a rock star.” When she returned to Bradwell a year later, it was to commission her to weld the frames of a series of vintage mirrors decorated with barnacle-like embellishments, which Gallery Fumi is showing at PAD London.

Francis Upritchard, whose figurative sculptures reference everything from ancient mythology to science fiction, had a similar lightbulb moment when she travelled from the UK to New Zealand, where she grew up, and visited potter Nick Brandon in New Plymouth, on the west coast of North Island. “I asked him to throw some lamp bases for me to alter with faces,” the artist recalls. “He did it within minutes — to slab build would have taken me much longer. That collaboration freed me to put my energy into making the faces.” Today, Brandon throws vessels in accordance with Upritchard’s preferences and she glazes them. “The work lies in learning how to communicate — to explain, instruct or energise the process,” she says. “The final object almost feels secondary.”

The question of attribution, she says, is "complicated". "The vessels are Nick's forms — chosen by me — while my role is in the decoration and the contexts in which they're shown. He makes extraordinary sculptural forms, but when our works are exhibited, they're read within the themes of my practice." She tries to credit Brandon whenever possible, but some galleries resist: the market still prefers a single named author. "Collaborations are hard to sell," says Upritchard. "Collectors like neatness."

Museums often wrestle with these questions of authorship. Priyesh Mistry, associate curator at London's National Gallery, notes that performance, where an artist may act as director, or multi-part sculptures made in a variety of workshops, complicate matters. The use of AI raises further questions about attribution. "My instinct is to follow an artist's lead on how they want others to be credited," he says.

Studios, Mistry adds, often resemble production companies led by an artist's vision — a longstanding model, which is simply more visible today. "The whole mythology about the artist hand imbued with genius has historically been what makes a work valuable, but art has always been more expansive than that — it's about networks and relationships."