



SHIFT/WORK

PORTRAITS OF PRECARIETY

An exhibition of the cross-disciplinary project
**PRECARIOUS WORK AND MENTAL HEALTH:
Understanding Uncertainty through
Research-Creation**

PRIMARY RESEARCH TEAM:

Dr. Breanna Lawrence, University of Victoria

Prof. Lisa Wood, Brandon University

Dr. Rachel Herron, Brandon University

RESEARCH ASSISTANTS:

Renata Truelove, Brandon University

Michael Vachon, Brandon University

Dhairya Vaidya, Brandon University

Bibiana Munoz Bocanegra, University of Victoria

Yasmeen Barakat, University of Victoria

IMAGE LEFT: *Balance/Chaos*, Lisa Wood, Renata Truelove, 2025

IMAGE COVER: *Dangle/Knots* (detail), Lisa Wood, Renata Truelove, 2025

THANK YOU to the project participants for sharing their experiences with the research and art teams so their voices can be raised and the impacts of precarious work on mental health and family living can be heard. Thank you to the artist research assistants Renata Truelove, Michael Vachon and Dhairya Vachon for committing substantial time and effort to this project, taking risks, being open, working hard and making it fun. Thank you to Renata Truelove for staying on with the project into the subsequent phases, participating in qualitative analysis, paper writing, and complex woven sculpture making. Thank you to Brendon Ehinger for designing the impeccable promotional materials and creating a rich sound experience that literally gives voice to our participants. Thank you to research leads Dr. Breanna Lawrence and Dr. Rachel Herron for providing the research frameworks and academic inquiry contexts needed for the project and for trusting in the artistic process as a meaningful and important mode of understanding, Thank you to the Victoria-based Research Assistants, Bibiana Munoz Bocanegra who acted as the data steward, understanding and employing data collecting software and conducting qualitative analysis and Yasmine Barakat who is extending the project to investigate the specific experiences of precarious work and mental health on newcomers who are in the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. Thank you to Cora Dupuis and the Co-op Program for helping to support two full-time art research assistants and making BU the first Canadian University to have a fine arts program engaged in co-operative learning. Thank you to Ishkaabatens Waasa Gaa Inaabateg Department of Visual Art for supporting the exhibition through gallery space and studio + gallery assistant help. Thank you to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for funding this project via an Insight Development Grant, and the Brandon University Research Comity for supporting this exhibition with a Knowledge Mobilization Grant.

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Lisa Wood
Renata Truelove
Michael Vachon
Dhairya Vaidya

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Glen P. Sutherland
Gallery of Art



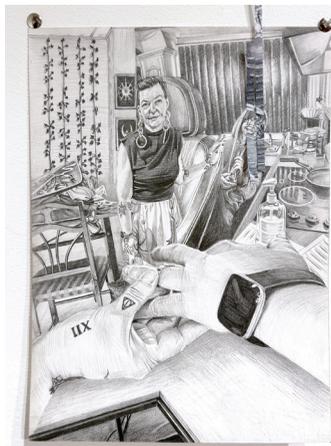
IMAGE ABOVE: *Up in the Air (Hold Back/Throw Off)*, Lisa Wood, 2025 IMAGE BELOW: *Complexity/Many Layers (1/4)*, Michael Vachon, 2024

SHIFT/WORK: Portraits of Precarity transforms the data from the multi-disciplinary project *Precarious Work¹ and Mental Health: Exploring Uncertainty through Research-Creation²* into compelling visual and experiential artworks. The project, led by counselling psychologist, Dr. Breanna Lawrence with rural health geographer, Dr. Rachel Herron and visual artist, Prof. Lisa Wood, sought to learn about and describe the lived experiences of people who are experiencing precarious work, and the intersection of uncertainty, mental health and family life in rural Manitoba.

Taking inspiration from Natalie Loveless' book *How to Make Art at the End of the World: A Manifesto for Research-Creation³*, **SHIFT/WORK** explores how art can build space for resistance and resilience, using art and artistic process to represent people and their experiences in a robust way that leads to empathy, respect and action.

To create *SHIFT/WORK: Portraits of Precarity* Lisa Wood worked with three artist research assistants, Renata Truelove, Michael Vachon and Dhairya Vaidya. The team created narrative collage-like drawings from photographs and text submitted by recruited participants. Participants identified as residing in rural Manitoba, experiencing precarious work and living in a broadly defined family unit. The drawings synthesized participant responses, which at first seemed disparate or

disjointed, to create an understandable picture of the multi-dimensional simultaneous routines of everyday life. Elements of the participants' responses, such as juggling responsibilities, compartmentalizing, and coping mechanisms were emphasized through formal devices like distortion, repetition, overlap, crowding, and use of negative space.



The resulting drawings served as a portrait of each participant's life, and became the foundation for the next phase of art production. Participants were invited to be interviewed on camera about their intersectional experiences with precarious work and family. The interviews were coded for body language, looking for repeated gestures, facial expressions and movements that could reveal their felt experiences. Using coloured pencil and oil paint on drafting film, Wood created additional participant portraits with multiple hands and faces, depicting overlapping gestures to amplify the portraits' visual impact through distillation and repetition. These portraits subvert the traditionally stoic, static postures of portraiture and figuration, and instead seek to reveal the emotional and psychological impacts of the multiple life factors shared in the interviews.

Three dimensional sculptural elements are intertwined with the figurative paintings as a physical representation of the structural systems of precariousness and the impacts of intersectional

marginalization and vulnerabilities. Reproductions of the early collage-drawings were shredded and rearranged into various forms such as knots, tangles, nets, and woven elements, becoming visual metaphors of deconstruction and reconstruction. The symbolic use of layering, shredding, weaving and entanglement represents chaos, multiple roles and responsibilities, uncertainty, imbalance and anxiety, as well as coping mechanisms, family support and relief.

To accompany the visual artwork, Wood worked with sound artist Brendon Ehinger to compose a multichannel audio collage using the participants' recorded voices to create fragmented thematic narratives as told in their own words.

Lisa Wood is a visual artist and Associate Professor at IshKaabatens Waasa Gaa Inaabateg Department of Visual Art at Brandon University. With an MFA from Yale University and a BFA from the University of Manitoba, her figurative art practice broadly investigates inclusion, marginalization and interpersonal connections. Her work celebrates others, rarely venerated by portraiture: those who are decidedly not of the aristocracy and not of great wealth. These have included herself, older women, trans youth, equity seeking artists and seasonal agricultural workers. She has been the recipient of many awards and scholarships and exhibits her painting and prints nationally and internationally.

Renata Truelove is a recent Brandon University graduate, majoring in Psychology and minoring in Drawing. Aspiring to work in the field of creative arts therapies, Renata is passionate about how creative expression can promote well-being and serve as a meaningful research modality, offering unique insights into complex human experiences. This project provided her with the opportunity to work at the intersection of arts and psychology, strengthening her belief in the value of integrating these disciplines to advance research and understanding in mental health. Renata resides in Cypress River, Manitoba, and has participated in the Co-op program at Brandon University.

Michael Vachon is a Drawing Major pursuing his BFA at Brandon University. He grew up on his family farm outside of Oak Lake Manitoba, and has first-hand experience with precarious work and rural living. Michael was commissioned to contribute drawings to the recently released book *Uncut: A Cultural Analysis of the Foreskin*, by Dr. Jonathan Allan, and is set to be the first ever visual art student to graduate from the Co-op program at Brandon University in 2027.

Dhairya Vaidya was born in Gujarat, India in 2002. He has pursued training in a range of mediums and styles, including acrylics, watercolour, oil, graphite, charcoal, and coloured pencil. Dhairya experiments with

The audio combines clips—identified through qualitative analysis—on themes such as the reality and stress of work, experiences of precarity, training and work experience, family responsibilities, family support, coping and resilience and the meaning and purpose of work. The result aurally mirrors the visual metaphor of weaving and entanglement.

SHIFT/WORK: Portraits of Precarity is a layered, immersive art experience that amplifies participants' voices and honours their work and their complex intersectional experiences. Art can move people and reach audiences in a way that other forms of research outputs can not, and in this way *SHIFT/WORK* seeks to generate understanding and create social impact.

hybrid mediums consisting of both traditional and digital art. Dhairya is currently pursuing his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in drawing and digital art in a joint program between Brandon University and Assiniboine College.

Brendon Ehinger is a Red River Métis/settler multi-instrumentalist and sound artist based in Brandon, MB. His solo practice uses a mix of acoustic instrumentation, field recordings and electronics to explore relationships between identity, environment and technology, and he has performed solo and collaboratively in alternative spaces, galleries and venues in Canada and Europe. Ehinger was commissioned to create the sound design for this exhibition using the thematically organized interview recordings under the direction of Lisa Wood.

Dr. Breanna Lawrence, PhD, is an Associate Professor in Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies at the University of Victoria and Principal Investigator for *Precarious Work and Mental Health: Exploring Uncertainty through Research-Creation*. Her program of research centres on exploring intersections of mental health, career, and learning, drawing on ecological resilience and relational developmental systems frameworks. Dr. Lawrence's research interests have largely been shaped by her professional background working in educational and clinical mental health settings.

Dr. Rachel Herron is a Professor in the Department of Geography and Environment at Brandon University, a Tier II CRC in Rural and Remote Mental Health, and founding Director of the Centre for Critical Studies of Rural Mental Health. She has a strong background leading, publishing and mentoring students in collaborative, multi-method, qualitative research. Dr. Herron works with researchers, students and community partners to develop solutions to rural mental health, ageing and care needs. Her research examines safety in settings of care, social inclusion, the diversity of experiences living with mental health problems.

1 Precarious work is defined as short-term, contract-based, and without security and stability (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2017; Vosks, 2006)

2 Research-creation is a way of working that uses both creative practices and academic inquiry, where the process of making art becomes as a way of knowing, understanding, and interpreting.

3 Loveless, Natalie. *How to Make Art at the End of the World: A Manifesto for Research-Creation*. 2019, read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/2622/How-to-Make-Art-at-the-End-of-the-World-A-Manifesto.