

Imagination Doctors

January 13–March 21, 2026

Gallery 400, University of Illinois Chicago

Exhibition Checklist - Extended

Alberto Aguilar, Ieva Maria Tersigni, Saoirse Ahumada Furin, Nico Valentina Mairesse

***Final Cut Pros Arts*, 2025**

Digital video, 41:21 min.

***Welcome Mat Mimes (After Diana Solis)*, 2025**

Inkjet prints

Both courtesy the artists

The joy of collaborative discovery was not just an outcome of many of Pros Arts' activities and performances, but an integral part of their practice, too. By empowering youth with a sense of agency over their own creativity, Pros Arts fostered students' curiosity and made clear the expansive capacities of their imaginations. This film and the accompanying photographs, which are inspired by a Pros Arts group portrait by photographer Diana Solis, were produced when the four artists, teacher and students, visited the Pros Arts archive.

Aguilar says, "In the same way that Pros Arts made a practice committed to working with youth, I do something very similar. I view my students as collaborators, and I respect the contributions they bring to the table. I didn't just want these final works to be my singular vision (which is limited) but a collective one created in a concentrated period, while filled with wonder. Our time on site began seated in the front studio followed by touring their magical space. This is very reflective of how I understand them. Pros Arts' work is relatable, layered, complex, and expansive. It spans many years and a lot of labor, care, and committed work."

Alberto Aguilar

***Handmade Magic (An Ominous Presence)*, 2025**

Costume monster hands, wood glue bottles, guitar neck rest, found frames

Courtesy the artist

Aguilar found these frames in the back alley of the building housing Pros Arts' archive. In keeping with the Pros Arts tradition of using whatever is at hand, the frames have been repurposed into altar-like fixtures for a pair of monster gloves from Pros Arts' costume archives. Aguilar invites us to find purpose in and celebrate the silly and nonsensical things we may otherwise overlook.

Sophia Karina English

Votives For A Forgotten Blessing, 2025

Ceramic, glass beads, plastics beads, stones

Courtesy the artist

The 1978 Mural Dance Performance was among the first collaborative spectacles that Pros Arts initiated in Pilsen's public spaces. Pros Arts co-founder Ruth Bauman painted a mural on the railroad viaducts on 16th Street, which served as a backdrop and stage for a performance by fellow co-founder Jean Parisi and a reading of Pilsen by the poet Salima Rivera and Los Otros Poetry Collective. Reflecting on Pros Arts' impact, English says, "Listening to the fond memories of Pros Arts educators has given words to an unspoken feeling I've always had around the arts in Chicago. There is a certain magic here that can only come from a radical love for people and what excites them. Pros Arts has built and nurtured the Chicago arts education community into what it is today. My experience with them demonstrates the power to cultivate a union of ambitious educators who constantly explore what education can look like for anyone and everyone, and progressive ways of bringing art outside of institutions and into the hands of Chicago's children and families."

William Estrada

We Call Artist Zine and Poster, 2026

Color risograph on 80lb sulphite paper

Courtesy the artist

Estrada is among the many teaching artists who worked with Pros Arts. He says, "This zine and poster are in response to the window signs that Pros Arts distributed to community members who supported community art programming in Pilsen. Pros Arts did not just provide art activities; it served as a profound incubator, inspiring and shaping the careers of a multitude of professionals across various disciplines, including teaching artists, public school art teachers, grassroots community artists, administrators, classroom educators, and emerging community arts organizations, as well as philanthropic arts foundations. A core strength of the Pros Arts' methodology was its focus on centering human beings and their unique experiences. We, as artists, were not only trained to execute programs but were also actively encouraged to pursue work that genuinely interested us, fostering a spirit of inquiry. For artists continuing to navigate the complex terrain of working effectively and ethically within communities, Pros Arts provided crucial support, enabling maximum agency while rigorously minimizing potential harm."

Maria Gaspar

De tu risa leve, que es como un cantar, ella aquieta mi herida, todo todo se olvida (after C.G), 2025

Artist's mother's black leather purse, cellophane birthday balloons, hook, wire

Courtesy the artist

Gaspar says, "My mother was a natural show person; she was a clown and teacher for much of her life. I was a clown with her for several years when I was 5 to 7 years old. We performed shows in Little Village,

primarily at birthday parties for the kids at her school. I didn't like it at the time because I was timid. When I was a young teaching artist, one of the most memorable experiences was learning how Pros Arts engaged with clowning. It revived my interest in performance because I recalled that Pros Arts and my mom used clowning similarly, as a social practice. It felt radical and politically subversive in many ways to be doing performance and clowning with the students. Mainly because, as someone who grew up in the hood, being audacious, wild, and funny through art was not necessarily something that was accessible at the time. And I was teaching in those same communities where the kids were so thrilled to have the opportunity to play and experiment and didn't follow a preconceived narrative."

Maria Gaspar

***Hovering Cloud*, 2008/2025**

Papel picado, latex paint, duct tape, transparent string, grommets

Courtesy the artist

Gaspar's work transforms papel picado, an ephemeral material that deteriorates in the rain and sunlight, into a lasting object that brings to mind memory, mourning, and protection. Light and fragile, papel picado is a 500-year-old traditional Mexican paper art used to adorn outdoor and indoor spaces during annual celebrations. Artisans draw images, words, and designs on pages of tissue paper and then cut them out to be strung en masse above the heads of gathered celebrants. Pros Arts led professional development workshops that taught local educators this cultural tradition. Their ceremonial parades and festivals, such as the first Dia del Niño in 1995 on Pilsen's 18th Street, revitalized traditions that might otherwise have been forgotten within the neighborhood's Mexican community.

Mauricio Lopez

***Eso que era una no, ahora es un sí / What used to be a no is now a yes*, 2025**

Wood, crayons, markers, sound, aluminum kazoozaphone

Courtesy the artist

The title Imagination Doctors draws from a Pros Arts performance in which two characters invited classroom children on a playful treasure hunt using an old suitcase and a map to guide them on a journey through an imagined terrain. Together, they transformed ordinary objects, like furniture, into obstacles such as a volcano, a mountain, or a desert. Upon arriving at their destination, the suitcase was opened, only to be found empty. The lesson learned was that imagination, an essential part of creativity and invention, itself was the treasure.

Lopez reflects on what this ethos means for him, "Arriving in a new country means entering a place shaped by memories and records I was never part of. I often wonder, where do I place myself within events that weren't mine? Learning about Pro Arts resonated immediately. Their interventions connected me to the moments from my childhood when my mother would let us freely draw on the walls of our home whenever we moved into a new house—an act of rebellion nurtured in care. Pro Arts

reminded me of the value of those recollections, and how fundamental they are to my own practice: being exploratory, almost disobedient, and using that to open yourself to your surroundings.”

Victoria Martinez

***Two worlds and in between*, 2026**

Acrylic paint, dyes, gouache, fiber paste, enamel, silk, thread, canvas

Courtesy the artist

Incorporating hand stitching, this painting pays homage to a series of drama workshops led by Pros Arts members Jean Parisi, Susana Aguilar, and Tatiana Rodriguez Giles at Galileo Academy in 1997. Groups of third-grade students were prompted to write and perform their own fairy tales. Pros Arts engaged students in a range of drama skills, including improvisation and body language. Referencing a photograph that documents a drama production, Martinez says, “What enchanted me are the plaid pattern dress, the red v-neck dress, the hand-painted clocks and cats, the layers of yellow ochre, blues, and turquoise backdrops. I admire that the backdrops depict domestic spaces, family photos, and Mega Mall, a former establishment near my childhood home in Pilsen. This specific photo reminds me of two things: growing up in Pilsen, participating in extracurricular activities, and my history as a teaching artist. I taught carnival, textile, and painting classes to young people at Pros Arts/Elevarte at Dvorak Park in 2013. I also participated in collective fiber projects led by El Stitch y Bitch founded by Thelma Uranga and Stephanie Manriquez, that were exhibited at the National Museum of Mexican Art. These projects ground me in community memories and inspire me to keep Chicago close to my heart.”

Alan Medina

***One Grand Place*, 2026**

16mm film transferred to digital video, 12:11 min.

Courtesy the artist

In 1979, Pros Arts Studio initiated the first Día de Los Muertos parade in Pilsen. The procession invited children, youth, and their families to participate in a Mexican tradition that celebrates life and death by creating ofrendas (offerings), altars welcoming the spirit of the deceased to the living realm. The ceremonial procession was held as an homage to José Guadalupe Posada, a Mexican printmaker well-known for his use of calaveras (skeletons) in political cartoons. Medina uses audio captured from the 1997 Día de Los Muertos parade to soundtrack his observations in Pros Arts’ rich archive. He says, “Like many kids in Pilsen, I crossed paths with Pros Arts in the mid-90s through one of their school partnership arts programs. Together, we painted murals and theater sets. Their practice invites you into the world of play and limitless improvisation, in the classroom, in the streets, in life. I accepted this invitation. Their archive is a honey hole, one grand place bursting with material memory. You lose yourself in it. It’s as much an archive of the artists as it is of the neighborhood.”

Leticia Pardo

***Exquisite Corpse*, 2025**

Plaster casts
Courtesy the artist

During her multiple visits with Pros Arts, Pardo was moved by their sense of collective authorship. This work emerges from stories the ensemble shared of the many props they used for their performances. Pardo says, “Nothing in the studio felt inert. Instead, imagination and play are embedded in the everyday.” Pardo first molded fragments of historical props and walls in the studio, combined molds, cast them in plaster, and then prompted the ensemble to play exquisite corpse, a surrealist game based on chance and collective creation to produce an otherworldly artwork or poem. On one sheet of paper, the Pros members each successively wrote a sentence related to the cast objects, folded the page to hide what they had written, and passed it on to another member to complete the page/game. The constructed image and accompanying text “reveal a practice in which every object carries a history,” Pardo says, “and where meaning is generated by translating the logic of recombination into language.”

Pros Arts Studio

***Lavanderia*, 2004**

Cardboard, tape, acrylic paint, canvas, wood, metal hardware, lighting gel filter
Courtesy the artist

Pros Arts Studio says, “This interactive set was part of *There Goes the Neighborhood!*, a sad but true comedy performed at Pilsen’s Dvorak Park in 2004. This set was designed and built by Pros Arts Studio member Lionel Bottari and painted by others in the collective. An original, collaborative, and mainly improvised production performed by Pros Arts artists, community members, and Pros Arts Kids Circus, *There Goes the Neighborhood!* was a commentary on Pilsen’s gentrification. It chronicled one poor soul who wanted to fix their window and stay in the neighborhood, only to bring on a parade of devious developers and Chicago’s Department of Buildings inspectors who insisted on ridiculously complex building codes. All the denizens of Pros Arts’ neighborhood were there in this comedy of attitude and misunderstandings: the ladies with their laundry carts, school kids, giant dancing paletas, and carousing calaveras, a riot of characters that keep the neighborhood going as cultures and languages crash, heat up, and melt into one another like sugar on a concha.”

Pros Arts Studio

Nuestro Entorno (Our Environment)

Entorno is often translated from Spanish to English as environment, but it falls short of capturing what it means to us. Entorno is about the impact your surroundings have on you and how you shape them as well.

For Pros Arts Studio, the many layers of who we were is built on artists, board members, and our community. On many occasions, these layers were interwoven in beautiful ways, allowing someone to start in one capacity, move into another role(s), and continue to expand their experience through

different situations. One example is how elementary school students could join a program, stay engaged, grow up to become interns in high school or college, and then find themselves with the skills and interest to become teaching artists. We found ourselves witnessing this phenomenon with board members who came from the community, board members who were also artists, and children in our programs who were comfortable enough with us to talk about the kinds of art they wanted to experiment with. It all started and remained centered on artists who wanted to share wonder with the people who were around them.

This list is based on our memory, so we may have missed people due to brain fuzzies and limited access to organizational records. We also could not list the thousands of students and their families who were the constellations to our arts adventures. We thank you all!

For community and creativity,
Pros Arts Studio

Pros Arts Studio
Ofrenda

Pros Arts says, “Our ofrenda is dedicated to people and places that had a significant impact on Pros Arts Studio, starting with founding artist, Ruth Bauman, and the organization itself, which ceased to exist in 2013. One of the programs we were well known for was our month-long Día de Los Muertos series, which included workshops and a neighborhood procession to connect with the community and celebrate culture. People in the portraits on the higher levels of the ofrenda were part of our network early on and are resting on a white keffiyeh. As an organization whose tagline was “For Community and Creativity,” we have always been staunchly anti-war, anti-militarization, and advocates for peace in our world. May justice be served for Palestine, Congo, Venezuela, everywhere across the globe, and in our own streets as we push back against fascism.

In the spirit of the collective we were, we made a call to gather and work together to make hojalata (embossed tin) frames for this ofrenda. We want to extend a special thanks to the following people who joined us: Myrna Alvarez, Cyndy Alvarez, Lionel Bottari, Cynthia Chico, Susan Friel, Patsy Gonzalez, Douglas Grew, Rosalie Mancera, Jean Parisi, Elvia Rodriguez, Delilah Salgado, Diana Solís, Liz Fryzna Sturm, and Kevin Sturm.”

Pros Arts Studio, Chicago Access Network Television
Día de Los Muertos Parade, 1997
Video, 60 min.

Print ephemera, 1978–2004

20th Annual Día de Los Muertos Procession T-shirt, 1999

T-shirt

All courtesy Pros Arts Studio

The video documents the 18th annual Día de Los Muertos parade. Pros Arts participants, children, youth, and their families began the ceremony at Pilsen's Dvorak Park, where they adorned each other in makeup as calaveras, marched through the neighborhood with noisemakers, handing out posada reprints, and ended at the now-closed cultural center, Casa Aztlán. The trance-like, hypnotic drumming heard here soundtracks artist Alan Medina's film in the next room.

Jiashun Zhou

***Staying*, 2025**

Floor loom weaving

Courtesy the artist

Jiashun Zhou's tapestry weaves fibers, histories, and memories. Responding to the architectural site of Pros Arts Studio and their archive, Zhou's work traces the depth of Pros Arts' historical impact while imagining the many people who have crossed the building's threshold and the transformations that have occurred within it. Pilsen's St. Procopius Church and School on Allport was always called St. Pros. As visiting teaching artists, Ruth Bauman and Jean Parisi, among others, had been volunteering at St. Pros until 1978, when their peers at Urban Gateways encouraged them to establish a nonprofit organization and officially form Pros Arts Studio.

When St. Pros needed their space back, Pros Arts moved into an 1860s tavern and dance hall. Throughout Pilsen, these Civil War era buildings were originally built and commercialized by Eastern European immigrants. By the late 1970s, though, they were often abandoned or burned down in the wake of suburban migration. Reanimating the building's once lively and sociable spirit, Pros Arts operated in the building, just blocks from St. Pros and Dvorak Park, through the 2000s. While they continued to lead parades and public interventions, the building gave them a place to host indoor performances, installations, and programs. Whether at St. Pros, in the former tavern, or at one point at Dvorak Park, they were always present and embedded in the neighborhood. Zhou says, "Pros Arts Studio reminds me of a cultural procession, not loud or commercialized, but deeply rooted in community. Their history shows that art is not just an object, but a bridge that connects people, stories, and places. My weaving is a tribute to that bridge."