

## Arc Studios News September 2017

This month Arc Studio News features artist Amy Ahlstrom who works out of studio #206.

### A Conversation with Amy Ahlstrom

by Sherri Cornett

As a child, riding the train to Chicago from her home in Waukegan, through the poorest and richest neighborhoods, past burnt-out, abandoned buildings and the fanciest of shops, urban quilter Amy Ahlstrom was instilled with a love of cities and their diverse, visual richness.

At the age of five, Amy already felt compelled to draw and sew, inspired by old National Geographic magazines and, her big obsession, Charles Schulz' Peanuts. After getting her MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), Amy spent ten years as a cartoonist and then as a graphic designer. "Making comics, which was essentially creating mini-compositions in boxes, really strengthened my design ability in general." She describes herself as an "image-making machine," an analogy backed up by her numerous brightly colored, quilted works, which often become historical records of city neighborhoods.



SC: Amy, I can imagine you as a young girl, face glued to the window of the train, taking in all that is passing by. How have those earlier years in Chicago influenced living in San Francisco?

AA: I still love to ride any sort of public transit to anywhere I've never been before. Sometimes I'll just get off a bus or train and explore a new place. When I lost my job as a designer during the first tech boom, I had no money but I did have a Muni pass, and I rode every train and bus. Even now I have every bus route number memorized. It was really cheap entertainment!

SC: These perambulations are so evident in your art. Would you tell me about your medium and process?

AA: Most of my work is urban quilting, in which I use samples of hundreds of photos I take of found imagery from city streets - graffiti, signage and sticker art - to design my quilts. I'm inspired by seeing anything new, whether it's a patch of sidewalk or a new mural in a back alley. My style is greatly influenced by pop art, graphic design, and street art, and this is reflected in the images I choose and the way that I create compositions.

I will typically bring 6-8 images into Adobe Photoshop, where, similar to a DJ, I sample, add, subtract, change color and scale, resample and change again. Then I design the quilt full-scale, create paper patterns to cut by hand from silk and cotton and fuse these together to form the quilt top. I quilt free-motion, in that I move the fabric under the needle of the sewing machine to create patterns. It's very similar to drawing with brush and ink; if you sew too quickly or too slowly the line quality suffers.

SC: I notice that most of the people you portray in your quilts are women. Is that a deliberate choice?

AA: Yes. Last fall I began developing a new series of portraits of women, and they are both text-heavy and more political in nature. Lately I have been creating what I call a "double reverse portrait", in which I make a portrait twice but flip the second panel so they are mirror images. It is fun and challenging to try to make a second quilt that is a reversed "copy" or something that evokes a screen print, in that these are made by hand and so they can never be duplicated perfectly. I exhibited the first two double portraits at Arc's "Resistance" show that ran from July 22 until August 12.

SC: What would you like viewers to go away with from your art?

AA: I want to challenge the idea of what a quilt can be. For me, it is just as natural to make art from fabric as it is to draw on paper. That's partly why I stretch my quilts over canvas and frame them. That said, I am first and foremost a quilter and that's why I don't cover the quilts with glass. I want the viewer to slowly realize that they are looking at a quilt.

I love when someone sees my art for the first time and instinctively gets what it is that I'm trying to do conceptually. It's even more meaningful when a viewer goes deeper and wants to talk about why I do what I do. It's one of the reasons I really enjoy participating in Open Studios and why I am currently the co-chair of the Open Studios Committee for ArtSpan in San Francisco. They give me more opportunities for meaningful interactions.

SC: Was there a moment when these interactions were particularly rewarding?

AA: During a [residency at the San Jose Museum of Quilts and Textiles](#), I had asked the community to send me pictures- of themselves, their neighborhood, and the places they loved- to be considered for inclusion in a quilt. At the opening one of the people depicted in a quilt, a local singer, showed up with her whole family. It was so wonderful to meet all of the people connected to the images and to see them along with art that I created. It was the inspiration for my new portrait series.

SC: And finally, what is it like to have your studio at Arc and be part of the Arc community?

AA: Arc is really a kind and supportive family of artists and partners. There is a great vibe in the space. Each show and opening brings an entirely new crowd and opportunities to open my studio and interact with folks. The partners who run Arc are truly dedicated to having Arc be a destination for art, artists, and the art-loving community. I appreciate all of the hard work that goes into making this place hum and I love the history here.

Amy Ahlstrom's website is <http://www.amyahlstrom.com/>  
Sherri Cornett is a curator, consultant and artist living in Billings, Montana.  
[www.sherricornett.com](http://www.sherricornett.com)



Amy Ahlstrom, *Double Diamond*