



Artist Profiles | Featured | Visual Arts

If You Build It . . . Amy Jorgensen

BY LAURA HURTADO ON JANUARY 3, 2020 • ([LEAVE A COMMENT](#))

Amy Jorgensen may operate out of the town of Ephraim, but her influence reaches across the state: in 2019, she was named to the board of the Utah Arts Council; DE | MARCATION, the limited-edition portfolio surveying the work of Utah contemporary photographers she created with Edward Bateman, is on exhibit at the Utah Museum of Fine Arts (<http://umfa.utah.edu>) through January 12; and she is the juror this year of Weber State University's Student Exhibition (she'll be presenting a lecture at the Shaw Gallery (<https://www.facebook.com/events/540195570043410/>) Friday, January 24 at 6 pm). The following profile on the artist appeared in Utah's 15: The State's Most Influential Artists (Vol. II), published earlier this year by Artists of Utah (order a copy here (<http://artistsofutah.org/15Bytes/index.php/announcing-utahs-15-volume-ii/>)).



Amy Jorgensen at Granary Arts in Ephraim, photo by Simon Blundell.

“In Sanpete County, as in other rural towns, you have to build the community you want to be a part of,” says artist Amy Jorgensen. Build she has.

Since 2005, Jorgensen has worked as an associate professor of visual arts, and photography area head, at Snow College in Ephraim, Utah, transforming the department from one with a strong focus in process to one informed by conceptual art practices. During her tenure there, she has founded the Art Talks series, established two permanent student galleries, and developed the now thriving photography and media program from the ground up.

In 2012, she co-founded Granary Art Center (now Granary Arts) with fellow artist Kelly Brooks, and now serves as the executive director and chief curator. Working out of two historical buildings, Granary has shown more than 50 exhibitions since its opening and serves some 1,200 children through arts education programs yearly. Jorgensen has successfully created a community conversation around contemporary art – building an art program where emerging and established artists share the same platform. Currently, Granary is in the process of restoring a neighboring historical building to allow for an artist-in-residency program with on-site housing. Such efforts speak to the rise of an art community in rural Ephraim and an overall cultural redistricting in the town itself.

Some may see the rural isolation of Ephraim as cultural exile, but Jorgensen has continually made space for contemporary art dialogue, exploration, and innovation in Sanpete County for well over a decade. While this sort of community building is most certainly exhausting work, it is meaningful, and as Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in his study of philanthropy in the United States, very American. “... as soon as several inhabitants have taken an opinion or an idea they wish to promote in society, they seek each other out and unite together . . .,” he wrote in *Democracy in America*. “From that moment, they are no longer isolated but have become a power seen from afar whose activities serve as an example and whose words are heeded.” American volunteerism and philanthropy, for de Tocqueville, stems from the desire for change and is incredibly powerful and transformative, on a broad societal level. While placing Jorgensen in this frame may be too simplistic (as well as too overtly and optimistically patriotic), Jorgensen’s efforts do stem from a belief in community, a belief in the power and impact of art, and a belief in the ability to render change through engagement.

Typical of her practice, Jorgensen is unwilling to look at a place under its most simplistic and most common terms. This “see a void, (interrogate the void), fill the void” mentality is most recently manifest in the portfolio project, DE | MARCATION, co-curated with University of Utah Professor Edward Bateman. Inspired by a visit to the Center for Creative Photography and the historic photography folios she saw there, Jorgensen decided to re-create the practice, with an emphasis on contemporary Utah photographers who, as the portfolio’s introductory text explains, “challenge the photographic traditions of the West as a hallowed land – the landscape as a rugged vista

to be conquered and tamed under the banner of Manifest Destiny and the settling of Zion.” Three years in the making and released in November of 2018, DE | MARCATION is a diverse and rich collection of images by 20 artists. While earlier photographic surveys of the American West chronicled physical territory, this portfolio is designed to examine “the conceptual landscape of creative practice by photographic artists spanning the vast spaces of Utah.” It serves as a record of photography in Utah today and, like the Granary Arts’ programs, includes established artists as well as emerging ones, thus capturing the present state and forecasting the future of the medium.

In addition to her roles as professor, curator, director, advocate, Jorgensen has continued to maintain an active art practice, exhibiting, in the last three years alone, at major venues in Utah (the Kimball Art Center, Utah Museum of Contemporary Art, Sears Museum, NOXContemporary), Los Angeles (LA > < Art Digital Billboard, Photo LA, LACE, The Situation Room), and New York (Elizabeth Houston Gallery and AIPAD), to name a few.

An invested interest in photography began early for Jorgensen, who started making photos on her mother’s Brownie when she was 10, and who, by the time she was in high school, had her own darkroom, enlarger, and several cameras. Early on, the camera became a social navigation tool that could serve as a filter, interruption, shield, and conduit between her and the outside world. “If you sprawl out on the sidewalk, people will stop, stare, and maybe ask you if everything’s all right,” she says. “But if you put a camera in your hands, it suddenly gives you license to break those norms.”

Jorgensen holds a BFA degree from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and Tufts University. Fresh out of Boston, Jorgensen was starting to explore how performance art could inform her practice as a photographer when she had the opportunity to study under famed performance artist Eleanor Antin at the University of California at San Diego (where Jorgensen earned her MFA in 2002). Her time with Antin helped solidify her already developing shift from a being process-based creator to a conceptual one. She is now an artist who blends photography, performance, and video in order to, as she explains, “mine historical and contemporary perspectives to explore alternative and intersecting narratives of the body, desire, violence and power.”



"Body Archive 02.19.13," 2013, archival pigment print, 55 x 85 inches, courtesy the artist

Both Antin and Jorgensen use self-portraits as a platform. While Antin creates imaginary narratives for her self-portraits to explore the ways history takes shape through narrative and visual representation, Jorgensen's work often uses the self-portrait as a site of personal interrogation, drawing on performance art, photography, narrative, film, and institutional and political critique. One example of this is Jorgensen's ongoing project *The Body Archive* (2000 – present). The project itself began as an exploration of (and obsession with) early crime and medical photography – and how they were believed to be accurate records of an event. Jorgensen's images are made by placing photographic emulsions on various places on her body and allowing light and heat to ultimately create the image – removing the subjectivity of cropping, framing and developing, while allowing her body to serve as the ultimate author, removed from the scopophilia of the lens. Visually, the images show sweat, body hair, and skin texture in hues of flesh and blood, but ultimately, the photographs are abstracted – the subject blurry, unreadable as a tangible object.

“I was working for both the artist John Baldessari (creating source images for a conceptual piece he was building) and on an ad campaign for Miller Brewing Company (shooting lifestyle images of people in bars,” she says of the project’s genesis. “I was really disillusioned with photography and the construction of the reality photographers create through the lens.” Tackling this disillusion, Jorgensen sought ways to remove herself and allow the subject to speak for itself. At the time, she was also reading Walter Benjamin, who referred to photographs as “evidence of an occurrence,” and she wanted to explore how she could make the medium of photography *evidence* of her own “occurrence” as well.

The Body Archive can be read both as images in themselves and as ephemeral documents of daily micro performance. The process allows the body to be its own author, and to create its own point of view, outside of the subjectivity, historicities, and hierarchies of the camera’s (male) gaze. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes wrote, “the photograph is the advent of myself as other; a cunning dissociating of consciousness from identity.” But here, within Jorgensen’s body-made photographs, outside of the shutter that captures a frozen image, outside of the voyeurism of otherness, the work is an extension of the self, birthed through its heat, light, and fluids, completely self-authored.

Jorgensen also was interested in the way the body can contain and communicate markers of identity. “In the early 1890s, you have the discovery of the fingerprint as a kind of identifier and in the 1980s, you have DNA that can be used as a marker, and I’m enamored with the idea that perhaps in time people will be able to give us information about how and when I made these images based on the data they capture and provide.”

Jorgensen’s interest in evidence is particularly interesting considering our modern culture of tracking, surveillance, cellphone cameras, and DNA testing — we are seen and documented daily in so many invisible places. The belief inherent in the medium of photography itself to furnish evidence is something Jorgensen explores in a way that is both current and compelling. As Susan Sontag said, “Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we’re shown a photograph of it. In one version of its utility, the camera record incriminates.” But like the foggy and abstract documents of the surveillance state photographs of Trevor Paglen — that both claim revelatory access and

simultaneously obscure it – what is ultimately visible through the particularly unique point of view of *The Body Archive* is muted and blurred dematerialized body.

Jorgensen's work also explores self-representation in pieces like "60-Second Apple" (2006), "Red Delicious" (2013), and "The Marshmallow Test" (2013). These projects use the visual vocabulary of the photo booth to explore Jorgensen's interactions with both food and desire. Unlike *The Body Archive*, for these works Jorgensen creates a persona, by dressing in braided pigtails and a button-down shirt, performing the stereotype (or parody) of what she calls "a wholesome all-American girl," who chases or eats an apple, or – referencing the Stanford Marshmallow Test about delayed gratification – bites, documents and saves 1,000 partially nibbled marshmallows. Taking on the iconography of 1950s American suburban food culture (not to mention biblical imagery, in the case of the apple), Jorgensen's videos explore the complicated nature of women as objects of both consumption and desire within consumer culture, as well as food as a fraught site of guilt and pleasure. The videos become sites of resistance to these narratives, continuing to explore the discourse within feminist art practices, begun by artists like Antin, Marina Abramović, Orlan and Jeanie Antoni, of the codes that are imprinted on women and the fetishization of femininity.

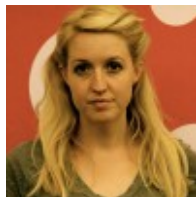


Still from "Red Delicious," 2013, 7:23 min, hd video, courtesy the artist

Jorgensen's practice also manages to look beyond the self, to analyze and critique societal and political structures. In a trio of works from 2014, the apple, a quintessentially American symbol, appears as a central and loaded subject that Jorgensen deconstructs literally and symbolically. In "An Apple a Day," the apple is nearly obliterated by the hit of a sledgehammer, its entrails splattered abjectly on a raw piece of wood in a way that curator Rebecca Maksym wrote, suggests "decay, repulsion, and unsanitary conditions." Similarly, in "Apple of My Eye," apples are used in target practice, and are repeatedly shot and exploded. In "Far From the Tree," a near-drowning Jorgensen bobs for apples in a way that is terrifying and haunting, the innocent children's game recoded within the context of waterboarding. All works offer a critique on America's obsession with brutality, the proliferation of gun culture and violence, and execution of government-sanctioned torture. By doing so, they invert the perceived goodness of apple imagery, and its extended implication of American goodness, within the framework of a political critique. Within this context, the fruit (and nation) becomes vilified when paired within the landscape of post-9/11 America.

What Jorgensen says about living in rural towns is true in broader contexts: you do have to build the community you want to be a part of. The influence of first-wave feminism, of which her mentor Antin was a central part and which Jorgensen inherited and continues to expand, cannot be understated, and continues to be relevant to audiences today with the rise of the #MeToo movement, the continuation of gender inequality, the fluidity of gender as a construct, and many other deconstructions of essentialism and expanding roles as they take shape and fall apart, especially when understood within the landscape of Utah. As Abigail Solomon-Godeau writes, “... it is, and was, the goal of feminist endeavors in the arts and elsewhere to keep alive the notion that, after all, and for however long it takes, another world is indeed possible.”

On the broad national and international stage, Jorgensen’s work continues these endeavors, through institutional critique and deconstruction of dominant social structures, through visual interrogation of the body and the male gaze, and a commitment to shared activism. Closer to home as professor, curator and gallery director in Sanpete County, Jorgensen cultivates change, keeps alive the notion of the possibility of another world, and continually rolls up her sleeves to build it.



Laura Hurtado

Laura Allred Hurtado is the Global Art Acquisitions Specialist for the LDS Church. She has worked at SFMOMA, BYUMOA and UMOCA. She received her master’s degree in Art History from the University of Utah.

