

INTERVIEWS

Meet the Art Community of the US Southwest: Amy Jorgensen Wants to Democratize Art Criticism

An interview series spotlighting some of the creative community members in the US Southwest. Hear from artists, curators, and art workers about their current projects and personal quirks.

Ellie Duke March 30, 2020



Artist and curator Amy Jorgensen (courtesy Amy Jorgensen)

This is the latest installment of the interview series *Meet the Art Community of the US Southwest*. Check out our past interviews [here](#).

Amy Jorgensen is cofounder of Granary Arts and is currently their Executive Director and Chief Curator. With the vision of supporting long-term engagement between artists and communities, she has curated over 50 exhibitions of artists working in contemporary art and produced companion exhibition catalogues. In addition to developing a spectrum of cultural and educational programming, she launched the Granary Arts Fellows program, Film Feast, and the initiative Critical Ground which explores the impact of art criticism hierarchies and the democratization of art critique. Dedicated to the arts as a maker, facilitator, and educator, Jorgensen was recently honored as one of Utah's

Most Influential Artists. In 2019 she spearheaded the publishing of the portfolio and exhibition of *DE|MARCATION*, the first comprehensive look at the state of contemporary photography in Utah.

Jorgensen is also an interdisciplinary artist whose diverse practice involves creating conceptual, immersive works that blend photography, performance, and video. In the realization of her work, she mines historical and contemporary perspectives to explore alternate and intersecting narratives of the body, desire, violence, and power. She is an Associate Professor of Visual Art at Snow College where she is head of Photography and Media, a member of the Board of Directors for the Utah Arts Council, and a member of the Acquisition Committee for the State of Utah Alice Merrill Horne Art Collection.

Born in Milan, Italy, she received a BFA from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and Tufts University, and an MFA from the University of California San Diego. Jorgensen lives and works remotely in the high plains desert of Utah, and wholeheartedly embraces the practice of building the community you want to be a part of.

How long have you been in Ephraim/Utah?

I moved to Ephraim, Utah 15 years ago after an equal amount of time living in major metropolitan areas. It was an intentional move designed to cultivate a life with greater access to the wide open spaces of the West, and be in closer proximity to family. I finished high school in Utah, and placed some deep roots on this turf, the landscape holds formidable ground in my imagination.

What is the first strong memory you have of art?

My parents' home was filled with art — every wall, table, surface, and stairwell covered. They had a deep appreciation for the relationships and attachments they made with artists and places, in many ways they were collectors of both memory and objects. My childhood friends jokingly referred to my house as the “museum.” So, I suppose I've been living and working in museums and galleries for a lifetime. They had a large-scale painting that hung over the dining table, my recollection is that it came from Germany or Poland. It was a heavy and dark scene of a nighttime forest in the depths of winter, and deeply marked with visible brush strokes, more like peaks and troughs. In the midst of this low-key sea of murkiness, there was one blob of creamy white paint. It was my favorite part of

the painting, a kind of visual lifeboat in this emotionally hopeless image. This one, creamy, solitary mark on the surface of that canvas is my earliest and strongest memory of art. In retrospect, it's such a powerful and visceral indicator of the connections we build to art, and the experiences of the artists who create it.

What are you questioning through your practice right now?

At the time of this interview, the world has been utterly upended by the coronavirus pandemic, COVID-19, and most of the country is under some form of isolation or lockdown to prevent the spread of the virus. It's difficult to think of anything else; this is a defining moment. I am questioning how this will change us. What are the long-term impacts going to be for artists and creative communities? And how will the arts speak to this moment from the perspective of the future?

As Granary Arts transitions from a physical to a virtual space as part of this global response, we are collaborating with the PARC Collective as our next Granary Arts Fellow. They will be exploring the impact of incubation in communities through online content sharing.

What challenges do you face as an artist in Ephraim/Utah?

I'll respond from two perspectives, first, as a curator. In the state of Utah, there are only a handful of museum-based curators dedicated to contemporary art, and they are all located in urban areas. I'm the curator at a non-profit contemporary art space located in rural central Utah in a county with a population of roughly 30,000. There are many challenges embedded in the above statistics — isolation, politics, resources, networks, poverty — all of which are amplified tenfold as a rurally-based curator. Yet, Granary Arts and our mission of supporting contemporary practice is thriving. Built into heart of our structure is the interchange between local and global — what has meaning and value to one is also relevant to the other.

Responding as an artist, isolation is the most significant hurdle. In a rural area, there is no immediate access to the vast cultural network and resources found in urban centers, so you have to work much harder to build those systems yourself. I recall when I first moved to Ephraim, the people taking my ticket at the local movie theatre were also the police chief and a city council member. It was fantastic, yet it was the moment I realized everyone in small towns wears multiple hats. The vision for cofounding Granary Arts with fellow artist and long-time

friend Kelly Brooks emerged from a similar realization. We recognized that we wanted to live in a place with access to great contemporary art, and that meant engaging in the community, and making it happen.

What is the most impactful or memorable art experience you've had in the last year?

A project many years in the works, I was able to see the completion of *DE|MARCATION: A Survey of Contemporary Photography In Utah*, a limited edition portfolio co-curated by myself and Edward Bateman, and published by Red Butte Press. Originally inspired by a visit to the archives of the Center for Creative Photography in Tucson, I began to think about how the portfolio format, popular in the 1970s, could be used in contemporary practice. There were multiple goals: build the photographic community, provide a platform for Utah voices, support the working careers of artists, and place the work of Utah photographers, as a group, on the national radar. The project took three years, dozens of collaborators, and thousands of hours to create.

The collection surveys the contemporary photographic landscape of creative practice by artists in the state of Utah as they navigate new territory in the global dialogue of imagemaking. The works delineate new boundaries and 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. Intended to serve as a record of a historical moment, the collection reflects the dynamics of shifting cultural narratives and our relationship to place in a richly interconnected world.

When you are working a project do you have a specific audience in mind?

In curating programming at Granary Arts, I map out an 18-24 month trajectory. Within that timeframe I create a narrative arc for exploring a cross-section of ideas, voices, and perspectives that will resonate with our audience. It's a wholistic approach recognizing the spectrum of the art ecosystem, and the interesting challenge of building real connections with those who may have limited experience with contemporary art.

What questions do you feel aren't being asked of or by creative people in your community?

How do we communicate the value of creative labor to audiences, and ultimately increase monetary compensation for creative work? Artists, writers, curators, and other creative collaborators contribute significant time and energy to cultural programming. Yet, most art labor is unrecognized, undervalued, and underpaid. As a small non-profit we feel this burden and would like to contribute to a change in the system. We've been collecting data to quantify the amount of work involved in our programming for many years, and recently have launched an internal initiative to map how we can share this data most effectively with the public, and then share the template with other arts organizations. Stay tuned...

How do you engage with and consume culture?

My remote location certainly dictates much of this. I stay engaged via the more traditional forms of publications, journals, and conferences. However, online formats are critical at this juncture, particularly as we are all now working from home, and in the era of coronavirus. Online content is my initial means of accessing exhibitions, artists, critical content, etc. I really love being able to follow artists' work in progress on Instagram and Facebook. And of course, doing studio visits, visiting museums, galleries... the best part of my job is supporting and connecting creatives. There are so many ways in which we can engage with one another, and I approach it as participating in culture rather than consuming — active rather than passive. It's a larger question of how do we support our community, and keep this art ecosystem alive, fed, and thriving.

What are you currently working on?

We recently launched Critical Ground, an initiative exploring how the dialogue of art critique might shift towards communities and artists working outside the frameworks of NYC and LA. It explores the impact of art criticism and the democratization of art critique through the sharing of ideas and experiences with the intention of mapping an alternate way forward that is more inclusive of the spectrum of work created across the country. In practice, it's a series of conversations and brainstorms between visiting critics and artists, curators, writers, and other stakeholders from the region. The conversations are roving: they are studio visits, site visits, and formal and informal discussions. It is a space where strategic thinking meets creative action with the intention to shift the current framework of art critique hierarchy to highlight work outside metro-centered locales. An experimental venture, the intention is to create a platform and space for this conversation in Utah, and to serve as a model for other places in the country with like-minded vision.

Who in your community of artists, curators, archivists, organizers, directors, etc. is inspiring you right now?

I'm a huge fan of the ACME initiative at the Utah Museum of Fine Arts in Salt Lake City. It's a hybrid working model using Art, Community, Museum, and Education to explore themes and issues under the umbrella of activism and engagement.

Where are the centers for creative community in your region?

I live in a region called Sanpete Valley, defined by classic basin and range geography. Artists have been moving to this area for decades, as it's a haven and home to several artist-run collectives and nonprofits. Casino Star Foundation, Spring City Arts, Hub City Gallery, Summer Snow, and The Fairview Museum all host exhibitions, open studios, festivals, workshops, lectures, and performances.

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