



Installation view of Amy Blakemore *Three Photographs*, November 13 – December 20, 2020

AMY BLAKEMORE Why are you interviewing me?

ADAM MARNIE Why?

AB Yeah.

AM That's an amazing question. Why am I interviewing you. Because you are a great artist and I like you. Can I start now?

AB Sure.

AM Tell me a little bit about Oklahoma.

AB Well. I've tried to decide if it's a more stupid state than Texas, and it is. It's worse. But, hmm. Oklahoma.

AM You grew up there.

AB Yeah, 'til I was, until I went to college. All my family is still there.

AM I've come to realize that Oklahoma and Texas are very intertwined.

AB Oh yeah, I think so. 'Cause when I, so I went to school in Missouri and then grad school in Austin, and then I came here to Houston for the Core Program, and I was so jealous of all these people that came down for the Core Program from New York, 'cause it was such a culture shock to them. "People eat catfish are you kidding me?" They had a culture shock and I didn't have any of that.

AM You moved to Houston for the Core Program?

AB Yes, when I lived in Austin I thought, why would anyone live in Houston? Now I've been here for 35 years. That's the longest I've lived anywhere. It's not bad, I've met really great people here, really good friends. The shitty part is they all move away. It's a pretty transient city.

AM How was the Core when you were there?

AB It was a lot better than it is now, from what I hear. Um, well, I just applied

because, my old housemate from Missouri is from here, she came up with a friend of hers, Rachel Hecker, to pick up some artwork at UT, and I met Hecker, and she said, “Oh, you should apply to the Core Program” and I said, Ok, and I did because it was free. I was going to go to school for social work. At Washington University in St. Louis there is a dual Social Work/Law program, and I was thinking about doing that. But I thought, What’s another couple of years without working? And so I moved here. It was in the middle of a recession, and oil was like phhheww down the drain. Rents were super cheap and it felt wide open. People renting warehouses and making alternative spaces. It was really kind of fun. I felt like a big imposter the whole time especially when I first got here.

AM Were you already shooting pictures?

AB I had just gotten my MFA from UT in Photography. I came here right after I graduated. I stayed in Austin for a couple months to earn money to move here. I couldn’t believe how cheap housing was compared to Austin. I found an apartment for \$300 a month down the street from the museum and I thought I struck gold. I met artists, I didn’t really know any in Austin. We were in Photo, we were at the end of the hall and no one really talked to us. And I guess the focus of my graduate program, which I didn’t really know at the time, was documentary photography, which I was interested in, but there wasn’t really art stuff happening. I was a TA in Serigraphy, so I knew some people who were doing other things but not very many.

AM What’s Serigraphy?

AB Silkscreen. So I did the photo stuff for silkscreen people.

AM What was the first photograph you made that really said something to you, that convinced you that you were onto something?

AB It was when I was in college, and my roommate and some of her friends had done some acid, and that night I went to the sorority formal, and they were tripping and went to see Reverend Schambach at the Shrine Auditorium across the street from where the formal was, and then, maybe they crashed the formal I can’t remember. Anyway, I went home, and they came back and they were flipped out. One of them had run off because they were still tripping, and they were talking about this faith healer Reverend Scham-

bach, and so I tried to put it in the context of a Flannery O'Connor story, and then they asked if I would go back with them, the next day, and did I have a bible. And I was like, No, I don't know you got to go find some I guess. So I went with them and they had bibles and they were ready to give their souls to Jesus or their life or whatever, so he was down there hitting people on the head and healing them, and they were falling on the ground and so I took pictures. And then the Public Library was having, it must have been a photo show, Life in Southwest Missouri, so I entered one of those pictures and won first place. It was published in the newspaper. I was doing a social work practicum in northern Missouri, and someone was staying at my house, and they said someone kept calling me, and I think it might have been the person in that picture, being healed. Kat, my housemate then, and I, we used to do battle of the healers, like, "Heal devil!" And actually I think I was doing that during rush, outside of the sorority suites, with people looking out the windows, you could hear these sorority pledges, or whatever they are called, rushies, so I'd be out there, "Heal!" So what you do is you hit someone with the heel of your hand in the forehead, "Heal nicotine devil!" I remember Kat doing that, though I'm sure she doesn't want to be reminded of this, after a benefit, and she grabbed this older teacher there and swung him around, she was pretty drunk, and she kept hitting him, saying, "God will make your dick hard!" So I guess that was it, but I was still taking my major in Sociology. I had to take a couple art classes to graduate, so I took Weaving and I was really bad at it but I made an A 'cause I did my projects as bad as they were. I still have the first thing I made which was a scarf. And then Photography but we didn't have a facility or darkroom, but I had a darkroom in the dorm. I broke into the dorm room right next to my room, it was right around on the roof over the porch, so I could walk out and I could break into that room, and I set up a darkroom, but I didn't really know what I was doing. So, that was the first picture. It remains one of my more favorite ones I think. That night plays like a video even after all these years later. At the time when I told Kat about the faith healing at the Glassell benefit 'cause she was really drunk she didn't remember it, she was really pissed off that I said something to her about it 'cause she was maybe a little horrified. Now I think she would just laugh. I'm going to call her up and remind her about it. I think I will. She grabbed a couple men like that. They were big guys. It was great, she swung them in a circle, like a cat.

AM Most of the photographs of yours I know are the ones published in the catalogs that accompanied your institutional survey exhibitions, which, from



Drapes, 2013
Chromogenic print
12 x 12 inches
(30.5 x 30.5 cm)

over more than three decades, is actually a very finite number of images.

AB There are a lot of repeats between the catalogs too.

AM And in your gallery exhibitions you install in groups of pictures.

AB Well, they install them that way.

AM This is a two part question, first: how limited is the number of your exposures that make it to print, is it really that finite, that few that make it to print? And second: do you conceive of the photographs as being dependent on the others in the group, or as single images?

AB Oh, they're single images. I just kind of walk around and take pictures. Well, I used to. I don't really take pictures so much anymore. I want to, I still think about it. I just walk around, and I might only take one picture of whatever it is. What was the first part? How many make it to print?

AM Yes, are there many, many photographs?

AB No, there are not so many. The cameras that I use are kind of fucked up and create their own problems so I have to figure out how to get around those problems, technical problems. So, not so many, I couldn't tell you. I don't know when this was. I think it was a travel grant I got from the Dallas Museum. I went to Europe for a month on a pilgrimage tour that I took with a bunch of Catholics. We started in London and went through France and Portugal. And on that trip I didn't get so many pictures at all that I liked. I would say I maybe got three out of 40 rolls that I liked. But it has to be something that I like, something that hits me in the gut. I don't really look at them compositionally or whatever it's just what hits me. It might be the light. Usually it is the light. When I was doing black and white, when I would take out and hang the film when it was wet I could look at the negatives and it would go pow! Pow! I don't know that's just how I pick stuff out.

AM You don't think of them as groups?

AB You mean like as a project?

AM Yes.



Pool, 2012
Chromogenic print
12 x 12 inches
(30.5 x 30.5 cm)

AB Yeah, no. When I was at the Leipzig residency, the woman there wanted to put this picture into the show of these geese I took at my friend's place in New Mexico over Christmas, and you can really tell that was not taken in the summer in Germany. These are geese. This is a winter sky. That didn't fit with the other German pictures.

AM The photos I'm exhibiting at 4225 Gibson are *Drapes*, 2013, *Pool*, 2012, and *Edgar*, 2018. The first two date from the same period more or less and seem thematically very related to one another.

AB They were both taken in Mexico when I went to visit my friend Debby. She used to live down the street from here. They weren't taken in the same town but they were taken in the same area.

AM Can you tell me the story of both of those?

AB *Pool* was taken at, I don't think it was a convent, but Debby was helping girls at this school learn English. They were really poor kids who boarded there during the week and went home on the weekend. So, Debby was in there doing her thing and I was looking around and there was this pool in their courtyard. So I just took a picture of it. And *Drapes*, that was in a church in some little town around where Debby lives, in Michoacán, a little church around there. We would drive around and go to places. So a bunch of these pictures were taken around that time in these little churches. There's one picture where Jesus was on the cross and he was wearing a sequined aqua skirt that came down mid-calf and it had an elastic waistband. I wanted so much for that to come out but it was too dark. She lives about a half an hour outside of Pátzcuaro, and about 45 minutes from Uruapan, which is big, I mean they have a Burger King and a Costco and a national park. That's where one of the cartels beheaded about 8 guys? And rolled their heads onto the floor of a disco just to announce their arrival. So she's in kind of a sketchy part. But they leave her alone. Like we got stopped by the Federales, and we just played stupid old lady tourists and they let us go. She's been down there over ten years I guess. She's an artist friend who lived down the street. There used to be a lot of artists who lived around here.

AM Can you tell me the story about *Edgar*?

AB About the photograph or about Edgar?



Edgar, 2018
Chromogenic print
15 x 15 inches
(52.1 x 52.1 cm)

AM The photograph.

AB We did this exchange through the sister cities of Houston and Leipzig, which I knew nothing about. Kerry Inman had emailed me, and she said, “Ok, you’ve got to talk to this person, and don’t say no. This is a good opportunity.” And that was about going on this exchange. So Edgar Leciejewski came over here, he was here for about three months. And then they asked him to propose an artist from here. So he submitted five names and they chose me. So I went over for about seven weeks altogether, all expenses paid, it was amazing, everything. Absolutely everything. Plus a trip back for the show at the museum [the Museum der bildenden Künste Leipzig] a few months later. So anyway that picture was taken at the museum, that was at the front doors and we were just coming out to do something after a meeting, and I just snapped it. And when I saw it, I was like, Aw shit. It didn’t look like it would be printable, it was a really bad looking negative. And then Dean Daderko saw it on a contact sheet and said, “You should print that.” So I did, and I really like it. That was in the show in Leipzig and I left it there for Edgar. He’s a sweetheart.

AM When did you buy this house that we rent from you?

AB 1997.

AM Why did you buy it?

AB Well, it was just stupid dumb luck.

AM Were you already living down the street?

AB Yeah, I think I bought that house in 1990. People were starting to come in and tear down the houses and put up these ugly ass poorly built townhouses and my neighbors who used to live across the street would go around, they saved a lot of houses in the neighborhood, they would go around and renovate them. Even ones that were condemned. And I thought, I should do my part to try to save the neighborhood. So I practically begged this guy to sell it to me, he didn’t want to because I was a woman. I had this good friend of mine, Steven, he lives in New York and he used to work down here four months out of the year and he happened to be down here and he knows a lot about construction so he came with



Street view
4225 Gibson Street,
Houston TX 77007

me and looked at the house and pretended to be my boyfriend so this guy would sell it to me. He didn't want to sell it to a single woman. So anyway that's why I bought the house. I talked to my dad and brothers about buying it and they said, "Oh, that's too much." It turns out it was a good investment, but I didn't save the neighborhood. You know you look around and this is one of the few houses left.

AM On the block between our house and your house there is a lot of new construction. But there are streets around here that are still real housey.

AB On my block, we probably have to renew this, we had to measure from the porch to the street. There aren't deed restrictions and there isn't zoning in Houston, it is neighborhood by neighborhood, or street by street even. But my side of the street down there has a restriction, the front of the house has to be x number of feet from the sidewalk, and only single family.

AM So they couldn't put one of the new things in there?

AB Not right now. The people who live in the house on the corner did their

due diligence. This one guy lived in a place where they built those really tall ones over there? I think he was a drug dealer. He had a lot of money. He had a drawing of what he was going to build and it looked like a crematorium. And he was real proud of the stainless steel smokestack. Like a concentration camp. So yeah, he was a dumb ass. And they said, No sorry, you can't do that. One house. And the house on the other end, the realtor didn't know all the things wrong with that one, they built into the alley, and that's going to be a real problem. You know I get solicitations several times a week for this house. Now they are texting me.

AM You've said that you like that we are using the property to host exhibitions, as it reminds you of how the neighborhood used to be. Can you tell me about the old neighborhood?

AB It was diverse. Both racially and economically. People knew each other, they had parties together. Karen and Stan, who lived across the street from me where Devin and Robert live in that big house, would have big parties. What was this one called, White Trash Party or something. There were a lot of drag queens. I remember coming down to this house with a plumber, and he was driving back to my house and he saw a couple of drag queens walking down the street and he said, "Oh my, oh my goodness, what is that?" He was really upset. The party was to raise money for the food bank or something. And they'd block off the street and have parties. Yeah just like different people. We did have a pedophile that had this six-foot tall gold painted Jesus in his front yard. He was really scary. I can't remember what his name was, but he was creepy. He never washed his hair. I remember him walking up to my car one time, I was getting ready to back out, I don't know what he wanted but I could smell his hair from the street. Anyway he finally left. He stole a neighbor's dog, and what else did he do. He had a listening device set up for the people next door, and wanted to come in and see their baby at the hospital. So yeah so there were characters in the neighborhood. I guess that was it you know there were characters. No one knew about this neighborhood. When I first came here it felt like my grandmother's place in the country in Arkansas. And across the street where those townhouses are there were these pretty crappy houses and a boarding house. And the boarding houses in Texas, they used to not be licensed really. So people were living in these really deplorable conditions, mentally ill people or disabled people. There used to be someone who would walk around squawking like a chicken. And there were cops living in the neighborhood, yeah it

was just really diverse. I don't remember this guy's name, the paint hacker who lived on Dickson. And some woman punched him out and knocked him into the ditch. She lived up that way. And then Debby, she lived down Gibson over on Snover, the city dug a big hole over there for some kind of drainage thing, and someone woke her up one night who had gone in there, swimming and singing in this hole in the street. There used to be packs of dogs running around. No one knew about this neighborhood really. You know where those apartments are, and H-E-B? That was a neighborhood like this used to be. And this guy bought it all, that must have been in the mid 90s, no, late 80s. All these houses were abandoned, all these giant trees, and he was going to turn it into something. And yeah this is cool, down the street where United Way is used to be a motel that was really scary, like too scary to even explore. And then during Rodeo Week, when they had the rodeo parade down here, the Black Cowboys would camp around here. I remember coming out of my house one morning to get the newspaper and hearing a horse galloping down the street. 'Cause you know we are just three miles from downtown. I used to love it. And now it's all these people in all these houses without front doors.

AM The garage door closes and the people disappear.

AB The people across the street from me often, for whatever reason, their garage door will be open, and I'll go out to feed the cats maybe at midnight and it's open, so I have to go over there, 'cause they don't have a front door, I guess there's a doorbell somewhere so I have to ring that, and then run out to the street, and wave and point. They have a bunch of good stuff in there to steal. The guy who used to live there would do that, he'd leave the garage door open, and he had a bunch of guns in there, so I'd go over and hit the button to close it and run out and jump over the sensor, but I'm not, you know, that athletic now.

AM This is actually my last question, you've set up a good leeway. You have a bunch of stuff stored here in the garage at 4225 Gibson.

AB Ha, yeah I do.

AM My favorite is the mass of cameras you've collected, stored in these big Tupperware bins. What types of cameras do you collect? How many do you have?



Kodak Brownie
Hawkeye, c. 1949-1961

AB Hundreds. I don't know. There was a particular Brownie that I wanted to get a whole wall full, I wanted to get a whole wall full of these cameras. But there are things that I think about that I never do. I used to teach like 59 hours a week in the summers. So I'd be real wound up. This was about the same time I bought this house I guess. I'd have to go buy paint for the house at midnight. Only Walmart was open. If I wasn't going to Walmart, I was on eBay buying stuff. One summer I bought cameras. One summer I bought other people's photo albums. Anyway that was the idea I had about those cameras. But much like other ideas I have that will not happen.

AM What's the idea, is it all the same type of camera, only?

AB No—

AM Do they touch? Is it a cluster? What's the deal?

AB No, they're just in a box, in boxes.

AM No, in the artwork you were going to make.

AB Oh, it wasn't an artwork. I guess some people might call it an installation.

AM But that's what you're thinking.

AB I guess so, but that's not what I would call it. I was just going to put some cameras on the wall.

AM You called it something. I'll go back and listen, you called it a piece or something.

AB Not in that way! Not in that art way. Were they touching, no, they weren't touching because some of them would have flashes, more like a grid, there would have to be space for that flash that hooks on. But it was the camera that my mom had when I was growing up. It's a really specific Brownie, the Hawkeye, there are tons of Brownies. This is a square one. I have like 65 of those, I would guess, and other ones. They had to be plastic or Bakelite, no folders, and no box ones from the 1920s and 30s. So I would say from the 1940s to 1965, in that year range. You know I don't know. I like taking pictures, sometimes. I buy cameras, I like to play around and figure out the problems. Some of those cameras do present problems that now I just don't want to deal with. Like finding the right film, finding the right spool, or spindle. I have a lot of stuff. What's in this garage is nothing. Over the break I'm going to try to get the stuff out of my house and get my house fixed. I have to put my books some place, but I don't want to put them in cardboard boxes. I don't know what I'm going to do I haven't figured it out yet. I have to clear the house out. It's not something I want to do.

AM Over the break, like Thanksgiving break? This week?

AB No, over Winter Break.

AM I'll help you do that.

AB It's horrible. I have to sort through the shit.



AM Well, I won't help you do that but maybe I will I don't care. But you know, I'd like to help you realize your camera wall. I'd love to do that.

AB The thing about having a camera wall is that somebody is going to have to dust it. And that probably wouldn't be me. So, in that Art League catalog, it had an installation picture of those heads, do you know what I'm talking about? I don't know where it would be here. Anyway the cameras would look like the heads. I could send you a picture. I think I've got it on my computer. I don't even know how I'd find it. But that's how it would look.

AM I think I'm going to stop the recording. Is that cool?

AB Yes.

Installation view of Amy Blakemore's collection of 1950s Jean & Sandy Headvases by Stanford Pottery, in Blakemore's survey exhibition *I'm Not Tellin'*, Art League Houston, September 25 – November 7, 2015

This interview was recorded on November 24, 2020 in the backyard of 4225 Gibson Street, the house we rent from Amy Blakemore, for the occasion of Blakemore's *Three Photographs*, on view in the dining room, November 13 – December 20, 2020

Amy Blakemore (b. 1958, Tulsa, OK) received a BS in Psychology (1980) and a BA in Art (1982) from Drury College (now Drury University), Springfield, MO, and an MFA from the University of Texas, Austin (1985). From 1985-87 she was an artist resident at the Core Program, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. She has exhibited her photographs nationally and internationally for more than three decades, including the 2006 Whitney Biennial, *Day for Night*, curated by Chrissie Iles and Philippe Vergne, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, and *Encounter*, a two person exhibition with Edgar Leciejewski, at the Museum der bildenden Künste Leipzig (2018). A twenty-year survey of her work, *Amy Blakemore: Photographs 1988-2008*, was organized by Alison de Lima Greene at the MFAH (2009), and traveled to the Seattle Art Museum (2010) and the Oklahoma City Museum of Art (2011). She was the subject of two recent survey exhibitions: *I'm Not Tellin'*, Art League Houston (2015) and *People, Cars and Buildings, Sculptures, Flowers, and Junk*, Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (2016). She is Chair of the Photography Department at the Glassell School of Art, MFAH. Blakemore is represented by Inman Gallery, Houston.

Photo credits:

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AMY BLAKEMORE

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4225 Gibson Street
Houston, TX 77007

All inquiries:

office@fmagazine.info

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