

# A peek inside Amy Blakemore's world

Exhibit: The Texas Artist of the Year opens up

By Molly Glentzer

October 23, 2015 Updated: October 26, 2015



Photo: Courtesy Of The Artist

The elderly Miss Goodner, in her beehive hairdo and too-big camel coat, wears an impish grin. She's squinting in dappled sunlight on the Tulsa street where artist Amy Blakemore grew up in the 1960s.

Looking at the image, Blakemore recalls a day many years earlier: Miss Goodner was mowing her lawn in nothing but a tube top and panty hose, as if she'd forgotten to put on her shorts. Blakemore's mother, not wanting to embarrass Miss Goodner, whispered, "Let's don't say anything."

Blakemore tells this story as she sits in her driveway near the Heights, looking at catalogs of her photos from a 2009 show at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and her current exhibit at Art League Houston, where she's being honored as the 2015 Texas Artist of the Year.

Famously reclusive at 57, she has been tugged reluctantly into the spotlight, where people ask all sorts of pesky questions. She's already dreading August, when the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston will present more of her work.

"This has been so weird. I don't like attention at all. I've really had to step up and do this," she said.

Blakemore's pictures can leave viewers flummoxed. They defy rules about what makes a good photograph: They're blurry. The color's off. Shadows obscure faces. Her landscapes have woozy angles.

They can make your heart ache or creep you out, depending on what you bring to them. She knows explaining them would ruin that magic. She has always been dead serious when people ask her what her photographs mean, and she says, "I'm not telling."

Getting to know Blakemore is like unraveling a mystery, too. Endearingly deadpan and funny, she can be surprisingly open.

She apologizes about not inviting a visitor inside her house because it is messy. "The house is my biggest shame," she said. "People have said I was a hoarder, but I was like, 'No, it's good stuff!'"

Her collection of 1950s and '60s Stanford Pottery head vases neatly fills a wall at the Art League show.

She also saves rusty things, she said. And a jar of desiccated lizards. And a suitcase full of vintage cookie cutters. Oh, and state plates. Restaurant ware. Refrigerator ware, "like the old Westinghouse containers and pitchers." Other peoples' photo albums. Bauer and Catalina pottery. Paint-by-number paintings of dogs and horses. Vintage tablecloths.

After her mother died in 2009, her brothers dumped some of her parents' possessions in her living room. She still hasn't figured out what to do with all that. "This cured me of acquiring stuff," she said. "No more."

### *'Almost a scientist'*

Blakemore has made pictures almost as long as she can remember.

She got her first camera when she was a Girl Scout. She took photography in high school and again in college, at what's now Drury University in Missouri. She built a darkroom in her dorm because the school didn't have one.

She majored in psychology and sociology - "I wanted to be an advocate" - but a better world opened up after her mentor Mike Dickey came to teach at Drury. She took a graveyard shift job at an indigent hospital for several years after she graduated so she could work in the darkroom with Dickey and his friend Tom Parker.

"I used to call it the Mike and Tom Art School," she said.

She came to Texas to get a master of arts in Austin in the early '80s because it was cheap then, and she had a boyfriend there. A roommate introduced her to Rachel Hecker, who was helping with a new residency program at the Glassell School of Art. Hecker urged her to apply.

Blakemore submitted a portfolio of pictures she'd made on the streets of San Antonio but included two rolls of more experimental stuff she'd shot with a Diana camera, an inexpensive toy that art photographers were beginning to employ.

She was horrified to learn she was accepted into the Glassell's Core Program on the strength of

the Diana pictures.

Diana cameras are notoriously unpredictable. Made of plastic, they tend to leak light, creating a dark vignette effect. Their shutters break. Their flimsy plastic lenses create blurred images and sometimes fall off.

In Houston, with the Core program still in its infancy, Blakemore did whatever it took to hang on. She worked as a "terrible" secretary for an architect. She made medical photographs. She swept Texas Gallery once a week.

"The deal was, we'll give you space and a tiny bit of money, but you have to figure out the rest, how to live as an artist," she said. "It was a transition period between school and life. It was great. It totally changed my life into thinking I could do this."

She stayed at the Glassell to teach and never left.

"I guess I kind of found my people," she said.

Houston photographer Libbie Masterson, who had only worked digitally before she started taking Blakemore's classes six years ago, said Blakemore is fanatical about chemicals, toners and processes.

"She's almost a scientist, really. Photography is just the expression of it," Masterson said. Blakemore's darkroom mastery amazes her. "She'll say, 'It looks like you were in the stop bath two seconds too long and the chemicals two seconds too short. She's that skilled.'"

Natural approach

Blakemore kept shooting with Diana cameras because she liked solving the myriad problems they created. They also forced her to be spontaneous, not to care so much about every picture she took. "It's like, I really hope it comes out. But if it doesn't ... oh well, what are you going to do?" She also now uses a slightly less crude camera, a 35 mm Royal Robot, that allows her to shoot indoors.

Blakemore's images are full of technical wizardry: foregrounding - making something stand out from surrounding images - light; and shadows. Every detail counts: the way a hand grips a wheelchair handle, say, or the crazed expression on a figurine. She supplies just enough information to make mundane situations look like miracles of chance.

She knows a composition is good if an image "punches her in the stomach."

"It's all about emotion," said Blakemore's long-time dealer, Kerry Inman. "For so many years, the photography world didn't acknowledge her. But she's expanded what a good photograph is."

Because Blakemore might keep four images from a ton of negatives, she's produced only seven exhibitions at Inman during 23 years. The most recent one was in 2014.

Contemporary Arts Museum Houston curator Dean Daderko considers her a visionary artist. "The way she approaches her work is so natural," he said. "She's not out to make art. She's looking at the world and translating what she sees."

Much of that translation happens in the darkroom. No grain of a print escapes Blakemore's inspection. She might work a whole day on one to get it right.

"As messy as I am, and with all the junk I have, my prints are pretty pristine," she said.

She doesn't want to learn digital techniques. "I still like the way color prints look. There's a difference," she said. "And I've spent decades learning how to do this. You see your hand in it." About a decade ago, Blakemore began tinkering with ceramics because she wanted to be "totally incompetent" at something.

She didn't intend to show them. "I make stuff that I'd like to have," she said.

Her quirky bowls and vases, intentionally misshapen, impressively thin and meticulously painted with small patterns, ended up at Inman because the gallery had open shelf space. Several groupings are on view at the Art League and at CAMH.

They have random titles - "Cake," "Buttface" and "Marsha Brady" - whatever pops into her mind, including the names of friends and her cats.

Inman sees the ceramics as "an expanded view" of Blakemore. "The marks of the hand, the eccentricity and the tongue-in-cheek titles actually inform the photographs," she said. "She's not trying to wow anybody... but something makes you go, 'This is odd.' The work is endearing because of how she is. She's *so* the real deal."

Blakemore brings out her latest creations. She's learned to sew and tool leather because she needs camera cases. She's made an elegant walnut and cherry chopping block, and she's signed up for a class on making an Adirondack chair because she's thinking about buying a getaway near friends in New Mexico, and she might want it there.

Although she doesn't really need more chairs, she said.

Thumbing through the catalogs of her images, she lets stories flow. She takes pictures when she visits far-flung friends - Pam in New Zealand, Lana in Boston and Vienna, Debbie in Mexico. "That's my mom, a few months before she died. Where she's not having any of it," Blakemore said, pointing to the picture "Mom."

"She lived at home longer than she should have, really. She'd had some strokes. She had some dementia and wasn't taking care of herself," she continued. "One time when I visited, just before she went to assisted living, she was taking her shoes off and slipped off her bed, and I couldn't pick her up. I had to call my little brother... He's big. I have two older ones, too, but we're a year and a half apart. We hated each other all the way through high school and college, because I'd come out to go someplace and my car would be gone. Well, it was the car we shared. ..."

What about the stark shadows that blacken her mother's face?

"I guess I like pictures that distort, maybe," she offered.

The sky had gone evenly gray, softening the clutter around her. Many photographers would consider that a perfect shooting condition. Not Blakemore. She prefers it brighter. "Winter is the best, I think. And later in the day. In three hours, maybe. And after it rains, when the sky's cleaner, and there are clouds."