



AMY RUSCH

*100,000 Years  
of Layered Time*

**Art Talk Magazine:** Good afternoon Amy! Thank you for taking the time to speak with us. We always start with asking our interviewees what brought them to art, and who they think they would have become had they not chosen art as a path and career.

**Amy Rusch:** I've always been a maker and worked with my hands.

The process of making takes time. What gets made reflects time in the detail and I have appreciated that process since I was a child. I love what happens when one gives time.

When I dance, the movement allows direct energetic expression. Perhaps I would be a dancer, if I wasn't an artist. Or an archaeologist because time is involved there too, deep time.

**ATM:** If we may, we did some research on your body of work, and your technique is described as: "Amy explores an expression of mark-making, using stitched thread into layers of found plastic bags. The layered plastic, connected by the motion and soundscape produced by the machine, communicate aural and material aspects of our modern culture. The threads are an attempt to link and comprehend millions of years of layered stratigraphic time. Her current body of work is informed by ocean crossings, archaeological excavations and microscopic studies of the living world. The works can be seen as tracings, translations or mappings of sensory lived - body experiences, becoming multi-sensory coalescences of sound, vibration, line and colour." Cutting, stitching, heating, pulling, binding, gathering, layering - these practices demanding their own rhythm. The motions enacted provides a retrospective link to the embodied experiences, transmuted in the process. The machine stitching into plastic is not about repli-

cating an experience, an object, or anything formally understood. It's about sitting with the remnants of man-made materials; human time in contrast to the elemental and deep time." Could you tell us what this means? What machines are referenced? What is it that you would like the viewer to see, to understand?

**AR:** The machine referenced above is the sewing machine that I use. I stitch into layers of found plastic bags. The process is vibrational. It creates sound and allows layers of material to come together. A microscopic cross-section of the work would reveal layers of plastic bound together by thread looping up and down. I'm interested in the unseen that the process reveals. What gets brought to the surface from beneath is like stratigraphic time, layer upon layer of sediment. Each particle holds something. Each stitch holds something. I thread the bobbin beneath with different colour to that above and then change the tensioning of the threads. Tiny dots of thread colour from below are brought to the surface. It can be controlled to an extent, but things also just happen. There is wonder and awe in the unknown happenings.

I don't mind what the viewer sees when looking at what I've made, but it's always amazing to hear when someone feels something. The making process allows me to spend time with questions. Sometimes there are answers but most often space opens up in which moments in time can be honoured. This can be expansive passages of time on the ocean. It can be time captured in stratigraphic deposits at archaeological sites. Or, it's honouring a moments interaction with a praying mantis when it allows me to get close.



Amy Rusch, An attempt at moving a little faster I, 2018



**ATM:** Your works of art are beautiful in their intricacy and colors, and reminded us of the work of artist Emma Talbot whom we interviewed last year. Some reminded us of maps, some of the plates with cultures under a microscope, some even of a heart (as an organ). Tell us about your connection to nature from a micro and macro viewpoint, and to science.

**AR:** It's wonderful to hear some of what you've seen in the pieces. This perspective shift between macro and micro is certainly present. I use a little magnifying loupe, which enlarges by x10 what I look at. It's an amazing tool for slowing down. Each time I look through the loupe I am awed by what I can so easily pass by and not see. These details are always present but they disappear when I move too quickly. Whether one zooms in to the tiny details or views things from far above, this planet is extraordinary.

I have worked for 8 years on the periphery of a scientific project at The Centre for Early Sapiens Behaviour (SapienCe), which is a Centre of Excellence (CoE) located at the University of Bergen. There has been a multitude of learning. I make museum display copies of archaeological artefacts. This has afforded me the opportunity to observe attentively. Looking at and holding these artefacts has been an exceptional privilege. For me it has been an attempt to comprehend over 100 000 years of layered time. I am awed and can but acknowledge the makers of these early marks and artefacts. I feel a natural wish to honour the connections through space and time between modern humans and early Homo sapiens, remembering our ancient past and our common African origins and humanities urge to create and make marks.

**ATM:** Your work uses threads and plastic bags. You have twice completed the crossing of the South Atlantic Ocean crossing between Rio and Cape Town. As an accomplished sailor, and an awe inspired lover of nature is the use of plastic bags a commentary on our soiling of the seas and oceans?

**AR:** I wouldn't call myself an accomplished sailor. The ocean is humbling and a place for continued learning, always.

Of course, like we all do, I have the deep concern around the state of the living world and what, as humans, we are doing to this planet. But there is also hope. My initial impulse to work with found discarded materials comes from a place in which I see potential for what something can become. It is a transformative process, to rematerialize something from one state into another. The excitement comes with using my hands and wondering; can I shift something enough so that others are able to see the potential too.

Plastic is a material of our time - something that we are leaving behind in massive excess as a part of contemporary existence. It's something so very present in our day-to-day. I find myself overlooking this sometimes but working with this mass consumption facilitates and instills a thought process around our human time on the planet. I hope, in some way, that my work allows this to sink in (for myself and others).

Everyone knows a plastic bag and we share a common knowing of what the plastic bag is as an object. The fact that it's been used to carry or wrap something prior to me using it is somehow meaningful - a connection point to other humans and processes. Each bag has a history and a story. They exist in abundance. This allows me to approach making without being too precious about the outcome. When I stitch into the plastic the hole stays (according to the size of

needle I'm using). The hole made allows threads from below to move through and surface above. There is something in this movement from below to above that feels really good to be working with for now. From the archaeological perspective I can think through stone age technologies and creativity - having spent time with some extraordinary and incredibly old artefacts. I am faced with our layer of time in the stratigraphic build up. It is startling to realize that our age may be the plastic age.

**ATM:** On the Untitled website, you are described as: "Amy keeps getting lost in repetitive and rhythmic processes." which sounds very meditative. The description of your body of work titled 'LINEATIONS and Times Pathway' for SESSIONS 2022 states: "Lines contained in the works are isomorphic markings like the lines on a nautical chart, or lines plotted on a map that represent motion and movement across the earth's surface. She thinks too of the invisible "thinking strings", the lines that empathetically extend and connect us with all - human and more than human." Is this part of your deep connection to, your communion with, nature? Is there a universalism between your contemplation of our planet from the microscopic to the gigantic and how you translate it, share it, How would you describe your connection to spirituality?

**AR:** I hope that a level of spirituality is always present, that living prayers can extend outward both during meditative time, or while active in the day to day moments waiting in a long queue or stuck in traffic. Walking alone as a practice allows something to stir, as too is time spent in, or on, the ocean as a connection to this life-force energy that pervades the

the world. I do hope that my attempts to translate these feelings can be sensed in some way. Through what I do, I attempt to express experiences like being in the desert when rain falls - large drops marking the ground, spaced far apart, that sound and the smell and the resultant life force that follows a big rain. The knowledge that Homo sapiens experienced something similar many hundreds of thousands of years before connects me to something far greater than myself and beyond anything that I am able to control. Looking up into the night sky and being attentive I connect with millions of beings looking up at the sky and who have looked to the sky to find their pathways.

**ATM:** If you could curate a group show, with living or deceased artists' creations, which ones would you like to be shown next to your artworks? What would the title of the exhibition be? Where would we see it?

**AR:** I am deeply awed by the rock art that we have here in South Africa. I've been working with my father at an archaeological site in the northern Cape with very many extraordinary rock engravings. Spending time with some of these engravings has made me want to spend even more time. My experience of the engravings changes moment to moment. The sunlight shifts and changes what one is able to see. Approaching the "koppie" (little mountain) of engravings in the darkness and experiencing the ancient depictions as the sun rises grants special insight. There is a 'window of light' in the early morning just as the sun lifts above the horizon. At that time one can see each impact mark distinctly. It becomes possible to visualise the processes of rock engraving and to understand the labour that has resulted in the engraved depictions. As the sun moves higher in



Amy Rusch\_Wind Transcriptions, Tracing 3, 2023  
Found Plastic Bags and Thread\_50 x 37 x 4.5cm



Amy Rusch\_Wind Transcriptions, Tracing 5, 2023  
Found Plastic Bags and Thread, 40.5 x 33 x 4.5cm

the sky the shadows become shorter and the way one sees changes. When rain falls on these dolerite rocks, when clouds cross the sun... these images in the landscape are so incredibly dynamic because they are exposed to the elements. For me, these are the works I would love to see more of. We don't know the names of the makers of these marks and who would dare to put words down as title to these works in the landscape. They should be experienced exactly as they are, in the vast landscapes of their making, many many hundreds of years ago.

**ATM: The world is devoured by technology, and Artificial Intelligence is on everyone's lips! Have you explored AI in your creations? It feels like AI could help understand: "The threads are an attempt to link and comprehend millions of years of layered stratigraphic time." Or make thinking strings visible: "She thinks too of the invisible "thinking strings", the lines that empathetically extend and connect us with all – human and more than human.". AI, yes, no, maybe?**

**AR:** I haven't explored AI in my making. For now, I feel there is still so much I'm able to explore in the tangible and tactile aspects of my practice. It's not a clear yes or no, but for now, I am content working in the ways that I have been.

**ATM: For this special edition of our magazine, entitled "Falling in Love with Africa" we are interviewing artists from all over the continent, and a common theme is urbanization. How has the urbanization materialized in Cape Town? What has been the impact on the local population? What was done right, and what could have been done better?**

**AR:** Urbanization is a big question. I can't claim to have the answers. We are all too often blinkered to issues like increasing

wealth disparity, inadequate housing, health care and education, massive unemployment and food insecurity which is the reality for far too many people in our country.

In Cape Town, urbanization can also be directly linked to issues of water, electricity and climate shifts globally. In 2018, Cape Town faced "Day Zero", a water crisis that will have cut across all social groups regardless. Movement, be it wind, people and weather patterns affect all of us. Loadshedding and the rolling blackouts also make us deeply aware of the resources which are not infinite.

The city does also hold many possibilities and I'm deeply aware of my privilege in the context of Cape Town, South Africa and Africa more broadly. The art work, film work and archaeological work I participate in, allows me to experience time in wild nature and then a return to the city for all it holds.

**ATM: Navigating the oceans can be very solitary, what books do you read? What music do you listen to?**

**AR:** I haven't found the longer ocean passages to be solitary. Undertaking an ocean crossing you are starting at one point and are navigating toward another. Movement is constant, variable and nuanced and the seascape is always changing. You are with the ocean and the wind, connected to these elements. I experience the heightened awareness that comes with knowing that every shift and change in the weather affects how you make decisions and move with it.

I've never listened to music while sailing. The sound of the ocean itself is really quite something. During the last ocean passage, I made sound recordings as we made the crossing. I was interested in how these sounds might act as portholes to memory. I expected sound to become mnemonic, different to writing down

**ATM: How important do you think art is in bringing awareness nearer people's consciousness? How would you like your work to touch, and shift people and their views?**

**AR:** I work on myself trusting that my efforts are not wasted; that ultimately what I do and how I conduct myself will project into the world. I notice that I experience a difference during periods of time when I am not making, and then when I return to my work, I realise how much my practice helps me. I become more aware of life around me and my responses are different. Practice also allows both self-reflection and outward questioning. I have come to know that slowing down and refocussing is important to my making practices. I return with greater sincerity, asking myself why I do what I do. Subtle perspective shifts on a personal level can and do filter outward. One's actions and way of being in the world can speak loudly and reverberate outward. I hope something of this is contained in my work and that it will touch and shift people and their views, even subconsciously.

**ATM: We are at the beginning of 2024! Can you share some of your resolutions for the year to come?**

**AR:** Each year my hope is to spend more present time in wild places; the ocean, mountains or desert landscapes, and to really listen, look and feel. I wish also to remain cognisant of how much life-force there is all around, whether that be in an urbanised or "wild" places.

