

# Moving & Shaping



Avy Claire's art work is influenced by her environment—whether it's the peaceful Blue Hill Peninsula or the streets of New York City. BY ANNALIESE JAKIMIDES

Painter and installation artist Avy Claire, and her work, are rooted in, and informed by, the land. She works in her Blue Hill studio, which is attached to her small home just a couple of miles outside of the center of town, and in an old 1800s firehouse in Jersey City, New Jersey. Both have a visceral connection to the environment, an essential quality for Claire, and both have light cascading onto expansive walls through large skylights.

Claire grew up in a New Jersey suburb, in a neighborhood with woods and very little through-traffic. She moved to Maine full-time in the '80s, where she says "people actually do what they say they are—fish-

ermen fish and carpenters bang nails." A few years ago, however, the opportunity to live part-time in New York City surfaced, which, she says, has opened up other ways of looking at harmony and disorder, and how man makes his mark on the land.

Although printmaking has been part of her background, she can no longer be in a printmaking studio due to chemical allergies, and so she now has a digital relationship to that medium. Her computer is a primary tool. Layering of painted and printed surfaces plays strongly in her current work—on Mylar, Dibond, silk, and sometimes still on canvas. The work can be three inches by three inches, four feet by seven feet, or 24 feet long. It may include

photographic imagery, random or methodical marks, scribbles, words, or the text of an entire book.

She continues to operate a landscape business, "moving and shaping land." And she continues to explore the possibilities of installation art, often moving and shaping a vision of land. One of her first installations was a collaboration with Brad White—more, TideLine, for a Mt. Desert Island symposium called LandEscapes, in which a row of boxes planted with grass was laid out in a saltwater estuary, to explore, she says, "the relationship to our human inclination to draw a straight line, to create this domesticated tamed thing, and then witness how nature will impact that." Installations with



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a social, political, or environmental focus are increasingly part of her work.

Claire's *BigWater* installation, dye sublimation on silk, is 15 feet by 21 feet by 10 feet. It includes her photographs of water with 600,000 words she copied from the book *The Blue Covenant* by Maude Barlow. Pixelated water images hang in the shape of a room, allowing movement through the panels. For the *Trees*, originally created



From *For the Trees*, 2009, variable sizes, polyester film, rapidograph.

for an exhibit at Waterfall Arts in Belfast, allows similar movement, but through a forest of nine trees eight feet tall, created on a transparent film with miniscule handwritten words. It is included in the 2011 Portland Museum of Art Biennial.

Recently she has been involved in a "sweeping project," a kind of performance piece in which she and others, including residents who respond to signs posted in the neighborhood, handcraft brooms and then take to the streets to sweep.

Logic, geometry, the cycle of nature, its needs, our human needs, and time all contribute to the construct of how Avy Claire sees the world. Working in four or five hour chunks, she may listen to jazz or hip-hop—something "with an edge"—to launch her into a new piece, but once she's in, she "goes quietly."

A graduate of Carnegie-Mellon University and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, she has exhibited work from Maine to California and is represented in private and corporate collections across the country.

#### How would you describe your work?

Right now, I'd say I'm a project person—an installation person. I get engaged in an idea and I make that happen.

#### Installations can be very temporary. Why do you make something that will be unmade?

Part of it has to do with it being that nature's always changing and in flux, and so it's like a performance. It's there, and it's not there. For me, the process is more important than the product in a way. And installations are talked about and documented and even exist beyond their time.

#### Much of your recent work involves what you call "marks."

Yes, and I actually have journals where every day I sit and make some kind of mark—just marks. Sometimes I scribble or write actual words. This marking is also a marking of time, and this huge underlying political/social yearning I have. It's all interconnected. Out of this kind of exploration came *For the Trees*.

#### Exactly how did that happen?

While I was trying to figure out how I was going to create this installation about trees. I'd been listening to the news, and I was pretty despondent. I was scribbling marks in my journal, like I do. Suddenly, it became clear that I had to write the words and the trees could carry them for me and transform the story that these words have into something better. It took months to figure out what materials could work—the film I could use, the right pen technology so that the film would almost disappear and leave only the tiny writing. The technical part of your brain has to work through all of that while, the whole time, you're also processing the basic tenet of survival and life and philosophy.

#### You work in layers a lot, physically and conceptually.

Even when I just painted on straight canvas, I thought of this atmosphere as kind of an ethereal thing that connected to a larger cosmic landscape.

#### After so many years in a rural setting, did living part-time in a big city change your work?

It changed not the work but my relationship to the working space. My studio was no longer attached to my living space, as it is here in Blue Hill, and I became a commuter, riding the subway every day to "work." And so, now, whether I am here or there, I see myself as going to work. I am no longer distracted by the soup on the stove.



*LaForesta* 10.03.21, 2010, 48" x 84", acrylic on aluminum.

#### Is there anything from your childhood that seems as if it still influences your work?

One of my favorite activities to do when I was young was sitting quietly in the corner of a room counting numbers. I would just count multiples. I was a math whiz in high school, too. I loved to count and equate patterns of things. Much of that really has informed my work. The patterns and relationships, the measurements and spatial aspects. The problem solving. And, really, I just like...thinking [laughs].

#### How do you choose what material you work on?

It's really project to project. I do a lot with Mylar, and that's because it has that translucent quality that relates back to the ethereal atmosphere I talked about. That's what attracted me to it. Plus I can layer it. I draw on it. I paint on it. I have a special Mylar that I can print on with my computer, and I often collage sheets together. I feel in some way that I am taking apart the landscape and reassembling it in a new way.

#### Why would you choose something else?

Well, Dibond, I like the hardness, the slickness. I use these large plaster knives—the blades are like two feet or more long—to put the gesso on. I might do as many as 10 layers until the surface is like really absorbent but really smooth. No tooth at all. I can wash it off with a hose. *BigWater* is on silk. I could run that through the washing machine if I wanted to. I love the durability.

#### You also have a landscape business. How does that relate to or impact your artwork?

With the landscape work, I realized I can think bigger than my studio. It really enlarged my sense of scale and gave me the confidence to go large in my art. In my landscape work, I need excavators and haul tons of rock, build cliffs. Time is really critical with nature, and you can't control everything.