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In the Studio: Sarah Lamb

by Allison Malafronte



The artist Sarah Lamb outside her studio

Sarah Lamb has been a staple in the realist art community from the time *classical realism* had its golden moment in the late 1990s and early millennium through the economic downturn of 2008, subsequent closing of important realist galleries and a general period of questioning how traditional art was going to define itself in our thoroughly modern society. As one of the original eight artists to study with Jacob Collins—first in his Brooklyn studio, then at the Water Street Atelier—Lamb’s professional training and development were well timed and also involved a bit of serendipity. I enjoyed hearing stories about her early years as a college student in the South, her studies in France, her return to the States and discovery of a mentor and more during my visit to her studio in Chester County, Pennsylvania, in early July. Lamb and her husband David Larned—a professional portraitist, who at the time of my visit was on a photo shoot in Florida—spend the summer months on their 12-acre farm in Pennsylvania and the rest of the year at their home and studios in Houston, Texas.



Lamb and Larned's eighteenth-century home in Pennsylvania



The driveway entrance to their 12-acre farm

After traveling up a long, winding driveway that finally opened to acres of green, gorgeous farmland, I was warmly greeted outside by a smiling, waving Sarah and her six-year-old daughter Sadie. Lamb first showed me the many rooms of the historic house—once owned by the English actor Claude Rains and visited frequently by his friend and co-star Bette Davis—as well as paintings from her and her husband's personal collection. Artwork from Jacob Collins, Daniel Graves, Jura Bedic, Stephen Early, Ben Fenske, Kate Lehman, Edward Minoff, Carolyn Pyfrom, Ramiro, Peter Van Dyck, Toby Wright and more lined the walls, collected during Lamb's and Larned's student days at the Water Street Atelier and Florence Academy of Art respectively, as well as purchased from artists they admired in the years that followed. We next walked up the hill, past the small tenant house, and to Lamb and Larned's shared studio. The 1,200-square-foot space is split in half, with Lamb's 700-square-foot side fitting her easel, supplies, books, still life objects, background props, and sitting area perfectly.



The main window of Lamb's studio, built by Larned

The space was designed and built by Larned, who had experience with studio design from his years in Florence. The artist converted the former garage and retro-fit the north-facing wall into a row of windows, painting them a greenish gray to deter light reflection. During my visit the studio seemed a bit on the dark side, but Lamb explained that on most days the double window and sky light directly above let in just the right amount of light to paint by. She pointed out that on overcast days the light is consistently beautiful and soft, but when the weather is pleasant, for instance on a blue-sky day, the light becomes a silvery blue that makes it difficult to see shadows. For this reason Lamb puts either a privacy screen—found at most do-it-yourself home-construction stores—or parchment paper on stretcher boards over the windows, so that the light comes only from above. Although Lamb usually paints in the typical atelier manner, from life and from north light, she occasionally finds the need to use artificial light, especially in the month of September when the light is very blue, during the shorter winter months and/or when she wants to create dramatic lighting for certain subject matter.

As Lamb and I sat down for our interview, the 44-year-old artist talked about her life and work and the various steps along her journey.

Throughout the discussion, as she recounted early experiences and encounters, pulled out paintings to illustrate specific points or went in search of saved catalogues or keepsakes from earlier in her career, I learned that there were three distinct turning-point moments that strongly influenced her artistic path. The first was seeing the work of Andrew Wyeth in person at the age of 12, when the Helga images were just being discovered and publicized. Lamb grew up in Southern Georgia but spent her summers in Virginia with her grandparents. One day, they decided to take the young artist to Washington, D.C. to see Wyeth's Helga exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, and it changed her life. "I was already familiar with *Christina's World*, but this was such a different experience," she remembered. "All of those skillfully done portraits and nudes, they made such an impression on me. At that point I had only worked loosely with watercolor and colored pencil, so to see how realistically he was painting with tempera and watercolor was eye-opening." Lamb knew from that moment the type of art she wanted to create and the style in which she wanted to create it. Now the challenge was finding the training that would allow her to do so.

Like the four generations of women in her family before her, Lamb attended the Brenau Women's College in Georgia. Although her B.F.A. coursework included a range of subjects—graphic design, pottery, art history, silk screening—she knew she would need to seek technical training for realism elsewhere. During her senior year, while working on her thesis about how to make it as a studio painter (she always assumed she would paint children's portraits), Lamb saw an art magazine lying on the table and picked it up to discover an advertisement for a two-week workshop in Santa Fe with an artist by the name of Jacob Collins. It was around 1992, and Collins was one of the most well-known realist painters of the time. Lamb signed up for the workshop, and it ended up being the second pivotal experience of her career. "Everything about that workshop was life-changing," she recalled. "It was the first time I had painted from life with oil, and Jacob's way of teaching really resonated with me. I remember he was preparing for an upcoming solo exhibition at John Pence Gallery in San Francisco and I thought, wow, he has a successful career and he doesn't just paint portrait commissions—which I thought was the only way to make a living as a realist painter—but he also sells these beautiful still lifes and nudes and landscapes. It was a moment of affinity when I saw someone doing the exact thing I wanted to do, a living example that it could be done. I know Jacob was that figure for many young artists at the time. He paved the path and gave us a model to follow."

Before Lamb left the workshop and returned for her final months of college, she asked Collins' advice on where she should train. Because he did not yet have a school, he recommended she study with one of his former teachers Ted Seth Jacobs at the École Albert Defois in France. When Lamb returned home, she told her mother about Collins' suggestion and they made a plan for her to study in France once she graduated college. In the meantime, they took a trip to San Francisco, and Lamb was able to visit

John Pence Gallery. "I

remember walking in there so excited and green and confident," Lamb said with a laugh. "I marched up to John, introduced myself and told him I had just studied with Jacob and wanted to be a professional painter. He was so nice to me—he said something like, 'Well honey, when you're ready, just get your paintings together and bring them to me and we'll see what we can do.'"

Lamb spent the next two winters and a summer studying with Ted Seth Jacobs in France, and came home in between to work on commissions. She described what the atelier in France was like, what she learned and some of the differences in approach. "Ted was a precise, methodical painter, and we focused a lot on drawing," she said. "There were many, many hours of working from life and the figure. On weekends I would set up and paint still lifes, which were already becoming my favorite subject. As a student, though, I had limited choice of my still life subject matter. He didn't want us to paint 'pretty' things, so there were a lot of skulls and things of that nature." At this point Lamb took out one of her still lifes from that time and explained how she usually shows this painting to her students, as an example of the difference in finish times. "This painting took two months to complete back then," the artist said. "Now this painting would take me about three weeks. I have, however, held to the majority of the principles I learned, as well as the steps of the process, but now it's one week on the drawing, one week on the underpainting, and the final week painting."



Copper Pot and Onions, oil, 26 x 37 in
COLLECTION ANN KOROLOGOS GALLERY



A bloom from the magnolia tree outside the artists' studio



A magnolia painting currently on the artist's easel

The artist moved back to Atlanta in 1995 at the age of 22 after completing her training in France, but she still felt she had more to learn. She contacted Collins and asked him for further suggestions for education, and he explained that he actually just decided to open up his Brooklyn studio to a select group of students. He invited her to join the group—which at the time included Juliette Aristides, Michael Grimaldi, Kate Lehman, Edward Minoff, Timothy Stotz, Dan Thompson, and Patricia Watwood—and Lamb moved to New York to begin the next chapter. At first, the group was just drawing, so she also took painting classes at the Art Students League of New York at night. About two years later, Collins decided to teach painting to the students, and he moved his studio to DUMBO Brooklyn where he could expand. The studio was located on Water Street, and so Collins' first school became the Water Street Atelier. "It was such a great group of artists and a wonderful time," Lamb remembers. "Everyone was on the same path, learning together, sharing the cost of models and taking steps toward our future goals. We also had the benefit of sharing the studio with a few of Collins' established artist-friends, such as Rick Polocco and John Morra. It was always one of Jacob's goals to have young students working alongside professionals, and it was inspiring to be in that kind of environment."

By this time, Collins had been a successful artist for several years, with representation at multiple galleries. To give his students an entrée into the professional art world, he coordinated a Water Street Atelier student exhibition with Meredith Long at her gallery in Houston. The show was a success, and the four still-life paintings that Lamb exhibited sold on the opening night. About six months later, Long called Lamb and offered her a solo exhibition.

"This is when things really started taking off and when I transitioned from student to professional," Lamb said. "I owe my career to Jacob, not only for teaching me to paint but also getting my foot in the door. He didn't need to take us all under his wing the way he did, but he chose to share what he knew and open up his studio and the art world to us in such generous ways." After the success of the Water Street Atelier show and her first solo

exhibition at Meredith Long Fine Art, Lamb put together a package with

her slides and a summary of the two shows and sent them to John Pence in 2000. "Remember me?" she asked him. Pence called Lamb a few weeks later and offered her a solo exhibition. "I got off the phone and cried," the artist admitted. "I couldn't believe he was offering me such an incredible opportunity."

These, of course, were the glory days for artists at the top of the atelier movement or realism in general. Opportunities and interest for the type of work they were doing were growing, and even some of the mainstream dealers were acknowledging the appeal of artists such as Jacob Collins, Jeremy Lipking and Odd Nerdrum and were eager to get in on the action. Unfortunately that moment didn't last, and the recent changes in our culture and ways of consuming content, including artwork, have not always swung in favor of artists choosing a skill-based, slower process and recognizable imagery. Still, many of the classical realists and other realists soldiered on, concentrating first on their artwork and learning along the way how to adapt to the changing environment. Lamb was one of those artists, and we discussed some of the ways in which her thoughts have changed recently about her artwork itself and the way in which it is being sold. "When I look at these promotional postcards from my first show at Meredith Long or show you a painting from when I was a student, I see that my style and even my motivation has changed," she said. "I was painting looser and was so eager about everything I painted. I have become a much tighter painter. I notice that has happened with a lot of us, tightening up as we get older. In some ways, I want to get back to that excitement and energy that I first had for the subject matter and to loosen up a little bit stylistically."



Three Eggs, oil, 6 x 8 inches
PRIVATE COLLECTION



Pomegranates and Earthenware, oil 17 x 26 inches
PRIVATE COLLECTION

“I’ve also become caught up in producing certain subject matter year after year without pausing to reflect if this is still what I want to paint,” she continued. “Every year I paint the first bloom of peonies in May, that was always something I loved, and it is very popular among clients. This year I only painted two. I said, I’m going to give this a rest for a while, and I’m not going to paint peonies until I’m excited to paint them again. I want to go back to that original feeling of, ‘Oh my gosh! How beautiful are these? I

can’t wait to paint them,’ rather than, ‘How many of these can I paint and how fast can I paint and frame them?’” Related to the pressure she sometimes feels or concerns she has about the business, the artist explained how she enjoys painting commissions and the change of mindset they require. “I know a lot of artists dislike commissions, they feel it compromises their integrity, but I really enjoy them,” she said. “People have commissioned me to paint subjects I never would have dreamed of painting, and in most instances I learn something and grow. It’s a good way to break up the monotony and think outside of the box.” Lamb gave an example of how last year Laura Grenning [owner of Grenning Gallery in Sag Harbor, New York] coordinated a commission for Lamb from a client who wanted a painting of a battered clam basket. It had to be 19 x 30 inches and also include certain summer mementos that held special meaning, including sea glass, a dog leash and sea shells. The fact that the painting had to fit specific criteria made it challenging for the artist. “It was also one of the most satisfying paintings I did that year,” she said.



A few of Lamb’s still life items, including the copper pot



The artist collects antique doors to use as backdrops in her paintings

Lamb shared that, in addition to working on a commission to break out of a creative rut, she relies on two other means for finding inspiration: leafing through the large collection of art books she shares with Larned or visiting one of the nearby museums, particularly the Brandywine River Museum. There she studies the work of not only Andrew Wyeth but also his son Jamie and especially his father N.C.—and it is not his illustrations she is mesmerized by, as you might think, but rather his still lifes, which are probably some of the most impressive and underappreciated still lifes of the twentieth century. Lamb first encountered the paintings when she moved to Pennsylvania 12 years ago, and she now realizes that discovering them was the third major life-changing moment of her art journey. “At that time still lifes were already my specialty,” the artist explained. “But I was still painting relatively small because I had just spent six years living in a tiny studio in New York City. But seeing the still lifes of N.C. Wyeth for the first time—how large and beautiful they were and how much color and space he used—it was like a light bulb went off, and I realized I could think big and approach the still life in a new way.”

Also inspiring to her were the objects the Wyeths chose for their paintings and the character and history they conveyed. Lamb showed me a large copper pot sitting on the floor of her studio—a beautiful robin’s egg blue with a distressed patina—that she has used in a few paintings and that she purchased because it reminded her of an object that would appear in a Wyeth painting. I next saw her collection of old shutters and barn doors—some antique, with weathered woods and intricate knobs and hinges—that the artist uses as backdrops in her paintings. As a still life painter, this is probably Lamb’s favorite part of the process and where she gets to show her personal style. She told a story of the first time her high-school art teacher allowed her to set up her own still life and asked her to choose items that meant something to her or brought back a special memory. “I think I chose a Coke can and some Mardi Gras beads,” she laughed, “but I distinctly remember that being very liberating. I love paying attention to what catches my eye, collecting special or meaningful objects, and putting down in paint what I find beautiful and unique.”



Hanging Pheasant, oil, 37 x 30 inches
PRIVATE COLLECTION

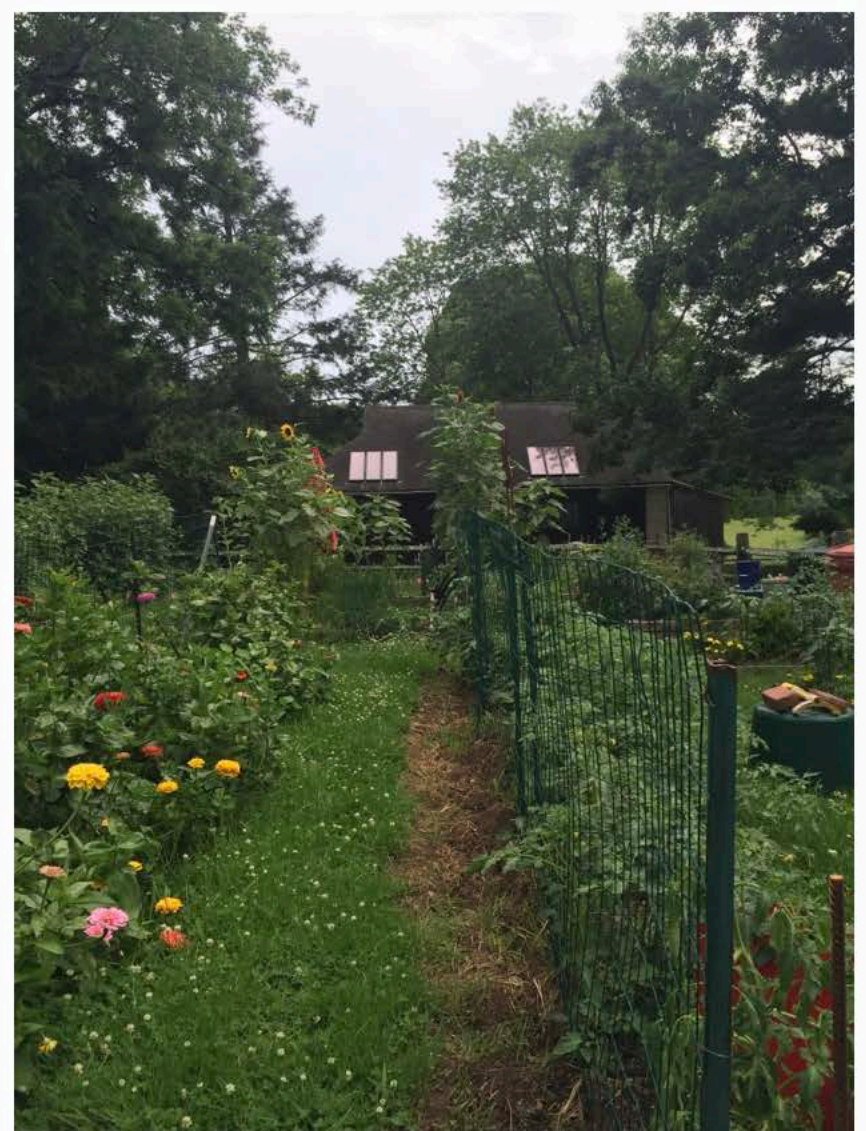


The chickens and roosters on Lamb and Larned’s farm

What catches Lamb’s eye has varied over the years, but certain subject matter are her signature—such as the antique weather veins and sailboats she has been painting for more than seven years, or her popular peonies. Other items that have figured prominently in her work include wild game—her husband is an avid hunter, and quail, pheasants and partridges have made appearances in her work—and visual inspiration from around the farm. At the end of our visit, we went outside to see some of these sights, including a garden full of fresh flowers, fruits and vegetables in a kaleidoscope of colors. Lamb’s exuberance and generosity began bursting forth as we walked around the property, and I could see how much pride she takes in her home and part-time artistic haven. “You must take one of these back with you,” she said, as she reached up and selected a heavenly scented bloom from the massive magnolia tree on the side of the house. “Aren’t these eggs such a beautiful color?” she asked, as she handed me two still-warm, pale-pink eggs from the chicken coup inside the barn. “Smell this cilantro,” the artist beckoned, as we walked through aisles of thistle, basil, sage and mint in her herb garden. “Have you ever smelled anything so fresh?” Carrying an armful of bounty back from our short stroll around the farm, I concluded that if ever the artist finds herself having a particularly uninspired day in the studio, all she has to do is walk out her front door—where she is clearly surrounded by more than a few of her favorite things.



The artist picking a sunflower



Some of the flowers and herbs in Lamb's garden

All photography in this article is courtesy of Allison Malafronte

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