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Carefree living doesn't
mean scrimping on style



Micro Becomes Macro

A devastating personal loss changed Amy Genser’s approach to life—and with it, her artistic career.

✿ In 1996, when Amy Genser was just about to graduate from college, she learned a terrorist bomb in Jerusalem had killed her older brother. Anyone who has lost a loved one suddenly and too soon understands how this slap from fate can make life feel arbitrary and short and cause us to question our purpose.

Genser, the daughter of a neonatal doctor and a jewelry artist, grew up outside of Hartford and was interested in history, social activism, and her father’s creepy, alluring medical textbooks. She had always loved making things with her hands and ran a

craft business in high school, but she never felt she could be a fine artist because she had “nothing to say.” She graduated from college intending to become a graphic designer, which seemed to her practical and steady. Working at design firms in Boston, however, along with the trauma of her brother’s death, left her feeling unfulfilled. “I dreaded waking up to go to work,” she says. “My universe was spinning.”

Thinking that life as a professor of graphic design would fit her better, Genser went to the Rhode Island School of Design for an MFA. She liked the critical thinking her professors taught her, and the way “they



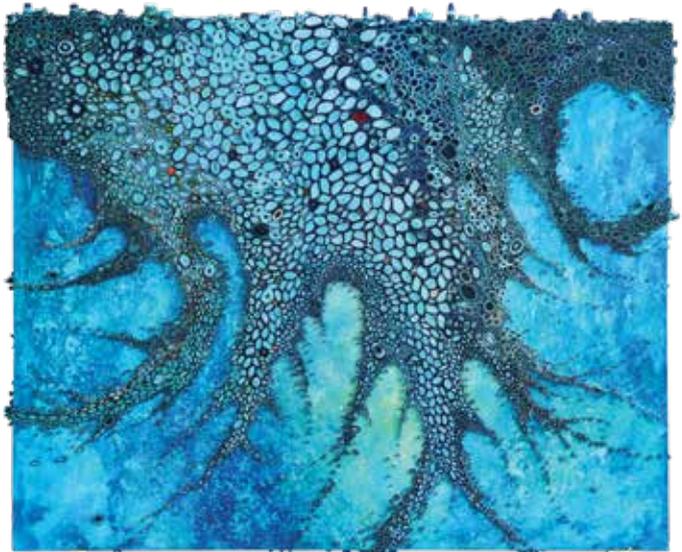
TOP: *CaliCoast* (2016), paper and acrylic on canvas, 45”H × 60”W × 4”D.

ABOVE: Detail from *Intercoastal Blue* (2017), paper and acrylic on canvas, full work is 84”H × 84”W × 6”D.

| BY NATHANIEL READE |

Artistry

CLOCKWISE FROM NEAR RIGHT: *She Met Her Match* (2017), paper and acrylic on canvas, 60"H x 30"W x 4"D; *Material Girl* (2019), paper, acrylic, pyrite, glass, mirror, and sand on canvas, 65"H x 95"W x 4"D; *Water Web* (2019), paper and acrylic on canvas, 50"H x 60"W x 4"D; the artist at work. **FACING PAGE:** *Grow Your Tree* (2016), paper and acrylic on Masonite board, 45"H x 23"W x 1.5"D.



“WE’RE ONE LITTLE SPECK, ONE LITTLE LIFE COMBINING WITH OTHER LITTLE LIVES, AND THERE IS STRENGTH IN NUMBERS,” SAYS AMY GENSER.

scramble your brain.” The theory, the computers, and the rigid structure of graphic design, however, also failed to fill the void. Her universe continued to spin.

She happened to take a paper-making elective with RISD “guru” Jan Baker, and it felt therapeutic.

“I would spend hours in the paper lab. I had been so traumatized by my brother being randomly killed, and using my hands again made my brain quiet. I felt less anxious.”

She took the class a second time, and Baker helped her let go of the burden of “saying something.” It felt like taking off a belt that was too small. “I have always loved artwork that was very textural and patterned,” Genser says, “so I began to follow

the patterns and textures of the material and didn’t worry so much about why or what it had to say.”

She graduated, got married, and kept playing with paper in new ways. She folded it. She rolled it. She covered acorns with paper, removed the acorns, painted the resulting “weird pods,” and combined them into rainbow-colored masses. One day she rolled up a thick tube of paper and cut it into slices. “When I put the slices next to each other,” she says, “I really liked what it created.”

Genser had seen microscopic close-ups of blood vessels and organs in her father’s textbooks. She had loved drawing cells in her science classes. Her mother arranged precious stones into intricate patterns. That might be why those paper cells spoke to her. “They felt so organic. I like things on that micro level. I didn’t think about it. I just responded,” she says. She began gluing her paper cells onto painted backgrounds and ended up creating an entirely new art form.

Genser brought this new work to a craft show her mother frequented, and it sold well. Today, her much larger compositions hang in homes, museums, and public spaces on every continent except Antarctica.

In her Hartford studio, she rolls up sheets of col-



orful paper made in Japan from mulberry leaves, slices them in an electric cutter she calls Xena (“because she’s a badass”), and glues them to large canvases or flexible sheets of PVC. She is currently working on a series of fourteen five-by-nine-foot pieces that will represent different layers of Earth and its atmosphere. Arranging those paper cells into compositions and gluing them in place, she says, “is meditative. My brain quiets down. I’m just doing.”

“Your whole perspective changes when you’ve experienced profound loss,” Genser says. “You realize that in the end all we have is our relationships.” Her little paper cells, when interconnected with other paper cells, make up a flow and a feeling. The micro, when united, becomes something beautifully macro, whether it’s an art work, a person, or a community.

“That’s what it’s all about,” the art-



ist says. “The beauty in the world, the interconnections, the moments of peace we feel. We’re one little speck, one little life combining with other little lives, and there is strength in numbers.” ■■■

EDITOR’S NOTE: Amy Genser is represented in Connecticut by Amy Simon Fine Art, Westport, amysimonfineart.com, and EBK Gallery, Hartford, ebkgallery.com. To see more of her work, visit amygenser.com.