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– Amy Usdin

*Right page: **Anymore + Eventide**, 2020-2025, Animal and plant fibers on vintage horse fly nets
Anymore (on wall): 56 x 42 x 5.5 inches; **Eventide**: 72 x 28 x 15 inches*





Amy Usdin

On Weaving, Horse Fly Nets and the Dissonance of Nostalgia

Left page: U.S. artist Amy Usdin (Photo credit © Molly Nemer)

Hi Amy, it's a pleasure to have you. We start all our interviews with a little time travel—do you remember the first time you got in touch with visual art or created something?

Growing up, I was drawn to a variety of arts and crafts, copying the graphics from a rock poster in tempera paint or copying needlepoint designs from a catalog onto a canvas. The first tapestry I wove as a young teen was also a copy, this time of an Inuit design whose appropriation hasn't worn well over the years.

In 1970s Midwest suburbia, my influences were limited to whatever I could find at the library, and I eventually found my way to Larsen's and Constantine's newly published *Beyond Craft: The Art Fabric*, which opened my world to the now-iconic artists of the burgeoning fiber movement. Those pages provided endless inspiration as I repurposed the metal rings from fiber drum shippers to create circular weavings that provided a base for loom-woven extensions or knotting. For the first time, though inspired by those fiber greats, I was creating original art.

Later on, you studied Graphic Communications at Washington University, St. Louis, and worked as an art director for two decades. Then in 2018 you started your current visual art practice. How did that shift come about and what made you reconnect with fiber art?

I imagined college as a time for reinvention. With graphic communications offering a more certain path to financial independence, I threw myself completely into an all-consuming career in art direction, choosing client over per-

sonal voice. After twenty years, I was happy to leave the field behind to focus on raising a family. By that time, I hadn't thought about fiber art in decades.

It was nearly another twenty years before I reconnected to the medium through the 2018 Lifelines retrospective of Shelia Hicks, one of the artists I so admired as a teen. Surrounded by her monumental work, I knew with certainty that I was meant to reengage the fiber arts. Reaccessing what had been such a critical part of my early identity was, for me, a personal lifeline.

In your work you weave physical and psychological landscapes onto worn nets, your pieces speak to loss, longing, and the dissonance of nostalgia. Can you please tell us more about your work and about the inspiration for working with nets?

When I began my practice, I was facing the loss of both parents who were in steep decline; their care paralleled the gentle but imperfect tending of ragged nets that had become obsolete. My earlier work bookends their protracted and arduous journey, trapped in failing bodies, feeling keen loss of their ability to protect or soothe.

Understanding my parents were nearing the end of their lives spurred warm recollections of the hours spent weaving and knotting in my childhood basement. Returning to the form was a matter of muscle memory. It truly felt like coming home, albeit with different materials in the use of nets. The slow process of weaving within and across their fixed borders allowed me space to reconcile and reclaim my own layered history.

“The nets act as conduits of memory and with that comes the sometimes painful disconnect between wistful nostalgia and objective reality.”

The work becomes less about memories than memory itself and its fallacies. As I continue sculpting these discarded nets through a personal lens—that of compliance, erasure, renewal, motherhood, eldercare, and aging—I consider my own changing relevance, which involves loss of a different sort.

An aging fly net without a horse becomes a lonely object, a mirror of isolation. Emotional states—places of being that may be intuitively isolating—have become increasingly collective, with loss of all sorts rampant. Born of inner dialogues, my work is meant to give space for others to feel seen and heard, connected to the world and each other. Vaguely anthropomorphic, the work acknowledges human vulnerabilities and complexities, offering a point of shared humanity.

You work with two types of nets, horse fly nets and fishing nets. What do you treasure about them as materials, what do they offer you from an artistic point of view? And, following up on what you just spoke about in the last question, could you please tell us a bit more about your beginnings of using nets in your practice?

Nets have always been an integral part of my practice. When I began weaving, I didn't have any formal equipment but remembered a horse fly net I'd randomly purchased thirty some years earlier as a quirky artifact with interesting structure. I realized its horizontal ropes could stand in as warp, the foundational threads of woven fabric. At first, the net was a convenience, simply something on which to weave. It quickly took on meaning beyond armature as, looking back, I could trace a surprising number of formative moments to a handful of childhood trail rides. I remember experiencing specific states while riding a horse—joy, empowerment, and abandon but also trepidation, anxiety, and shame. As social creatures, horses are

capable of human-type feeling and their frayed nets hold that emotion, drawing out my stories.

Weaving on nets fills a need to document scars aesthetically, not just for the undignified end through which I shepherded my parents but for past experiences and traumas of my own that have clarified themselves through the act of weaving. They continue to provide empathetic bases on which to process histories and contemporary biography.

Beyond connections to the life of these ropes, I'm interested in their meaning as objects. I find the duality of nets poetic. A fly net, at its core, is a thing of comfort. Laid over the back of a horse, it shoos away insects as its peripheral fringes swish side to side as the horse moves about. When woven back into the body of the net, these fringes become unable to provide such comfort. Through this constriction, I explore the often-blurred boundaries between protection and entrapment, questioning our own conceptions of security.



*Still And Again, 2023, 9 x 24 x 21 inches
Animal, plant, and synthetic fibers on vintage fishing nets
(Photo credit © Amy Lamb, NativeHouse Photography)*

Horse fly nets protect; fishing nets entrap. By altering the threads that once supported their primary function, I challenge and subvert these constructs. During the early days of the pandemic, I moved from personal grief to a wider sense of mourning with my fly net sculptures carrying themes of collective frustration, loneliness, and separation. Conversely, explorations with fishing nets provided escape, even hope, as I thought about enduring landscapes. They continue to provide an alternate substrate for a greater variety of expression than the fly nets allow.

A project I'd like to know more about is "Still and Again." You describe it as a "mobius strip in which sea becomes sand becomes sea."

Still and Again is an elemental introduction to revolving histories. Woven on fishing nets that are reminiscent of those made and mended for thousands of years, the reconstructed object acts as metaphor for themes that weave past to present and each of us to another. The idea that what goes around comes around suggests a more considered regard of the land and of each other.

Another body of work I'm curious to know more about is "Picnic at Dead Horse Bay," which references Dead Horse Bay in Brooklyn, NY. How did the idea for this project come to life and can you please tell us more about it?

Picnic at Dead Horse Bay embodies the idea of revolving histories on a more human level. In the mid-1800s, the streets of New York were filled with overworked horses and eventually horse carcasses. Barren Island just off the coast became home to rendering plants that tossed the processed bones into the water—thus the name Dead Horse Bay. The plants eventually closed with the advent of the car. In the 1950s, in the name of urban renewal and eminent domain, Barren Island was connected to the Long Island through the use of landfill generated by razing entire neighborhoods of people who had neither time nor resources to move their belongings. This landfill was so poorly capped that it continually litters the beach with remnants of these disrupted lives— everything from plastic toys, china shards, architectural bits, and shoe leather to ubiquitous glass bottles and occasional bones from the long-shuttered rendering

plants. In its current form, the installation includes woven forms that echo the colors and shapes within the panels, giving dimension to the fragments of people's lives washed ashore. They are elevated on pedestals to return to them a sense of dignity.

Before its relatively recent closure due to radioactive contamination, visitors who scavenged Dead Horse for souvenirs might not have necessarily known its history. In the same way, without the backstory, this piece doesn't outwardly reveal its narrative, speaking to the tendency to gloss over histories.

"Dead Horse provides a cautionary tale that the past resurfaces, sometimes unexpectedly, often consequentially."

Is there any other project you'd like to talk about, something you've been working on recently?

I've spent the past couple years exploring loom-woven work than can sit in conversation with ongoing net sculptures. Staying true to my visual voice is my current challenge. Continuing the idea of revolving histories, the Passages series is handwoven on a digital TC2 loom. It depicts anthropomorphic imagery embedded in a concrete subfloor that had been stripped of carpeting during airport renovation. With tides of people washing through, airports as a human-built landscape offer an image-based point of shared humanity that complements my work with nets.

In a slight conceptual shift, recent work more consciously considers how physical and psychological landscapes coalesce—the correlation between bodies of land and bodies of flesh, the trauma they endure, what is inevitable versus imposed, how scars in the landscape mirror our own.

Speaking about work, a question we always ask is about the creative process. How do you usually approach a new piece and what does your process look like?

I know what I want to say long before I know what it will look like. I begin each piece with a specific impulse, but I work intuitively. Working with nets comes with inherent challenges, forcing constant renegotiation to coax their floppy grids into three-dimensions. Due to their fixed nature, one finished section often precludes the way I've envisioned the next, forcing me to pivot to accommodate the narrowing options as the work moves toward its final form.

The repetitive motion of weaving such warps inspires a meditative, nonlinear processing of past and present, conjuring often small yet significant moments, transforming the fiber form into a physical representation of those recollections.

Could you put into words how working with fiber, especially with nets, makes you feel?

I find great comfort surrounding myself with fiber. Though cakes and cones, they might as well be an enveloping quilt. I'm especially moved by the fly nets. They convey a life lived, a sense of intimacy like comfortable hand-me-down clothing. I'm drawn to the canvas and rope nets of the 1970s that beg for weft of vintage shades of orange and green, to the older frayed nets that so perfectly capture the ravages of pain.



And let's end our interview with four last questions. First, are there any future events you'd like to give a shout out?

I'm excited for two exhibitions opening toward the end of the year: a solo show at the Minneapolis Institute of Art through the Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program and a collaborative show with the 2024/2025 MCAD-Jerome Fellows.

Any advice you'd like to pass on to fellow artists, especially to those just starting out in their career?

Find your authentic voice, own your story, and cherish mentors.

Please complete the following sentence: What is truly important to me in my work, is...

... that viewers are able to locate themselves somewhere within it.

And last one, what are your hopes for the future?

I hope for hope, which seems ever-elusive.

*Get in touch with Amy: amyusdin.com
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Up: **Portrait of a Woman In Love**, 2021, Wool on vintage horse fly net, 54 x 17 x 6 inches

Down (left): From the **Object Series**, 2025, Wool, linen, wax (Photo credit © Amy Lamb, NativeHouse Photography)

Down (right): From the **Object Series**, 2025, Wool, linen, wax, 7 x 6 x 7 inches (Photo credit © Amy Lamb, NativeHouse Photography)

Left page: **Of Burden**, 2022, Animal and plant fibers on vintage horse fly nets with singletree, the wooden bar connecting horse to cart, 38 x 46 x 90 inches