

Portraits in Creativity

Let the artistic journeys of four Madison-area women inspire your own.

BY KATIE VAUGHN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY HILLARY SCHAVE

When you hear of a “creative person,” does an image of a painter toiling over a canvas or a sculptor shaping clay on a potter’s wheel come to mind? Yet leading an artistic life is so much broader than that — and it’s not just for *some* people or certain types of work, say four local creatives who have paved their own unique paths in art.

Maria Amalia: Stitching Connections



“For me, there’s a difference between a skill and a talent, and creativity is neither. Creativity is a way of thinking, a way of exploring a solution to a problem.”

Years ago when her son was very young, Maria Amalia would drive the streets of Madison until he fell asleep in his car seat. She spent hours looking into horizons, noticing the colors of sunsets and the patterns of birds. It got her thinking about migrations and connections, sparking ideas for a new collaborative project and nudging her to dig deeper into her own story.

Amalia was born and raised in Honduras, with time spent in Madison, where she took her first art class. After studying art at Judson University in Illinois, she returned to Madison and worked for fair-trade nonprofit SERRV International, which sent her to Latin America to visit with artisans. Eventually, she earned her MFA in textile art and design from UW–Madison.

Along the way, she cultivated passions for working with women, sharing stories and experimenting with papermaking and fiber. And while she has showcased her art in exhibitions, Amalia prefers to bring others into the creative process. She has collaborated with children — such as at Lighthouse Christian School, where she teaches art — and created an incredible community with Latina immigrants.

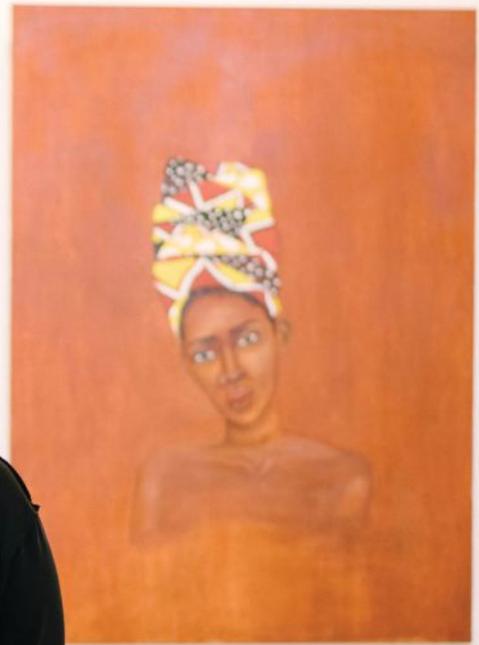
One special project was the piece “Viajes del Horizonte,” inspired by those evening drives and carried out in a residency stint at the Madison Public Library’s Pinney branch. Children made paper by hand, Amalia collaged the pieces into a dynamic 5-foot work and then she invited 10 Latina immigrants to join her in embroidering it while sharing their life stories.

“They stitched their own journeys creating a textured surface where all paths of life were welcomed,” Amalia explains on her website.

This year, in addition to having her work featured in “Hand Papermaking’s” annual portfolio, Amalia is leading “Bordando Memorias,” or “Embroidering Memories,” in a community art residency at Synergy Coworking. She sets up tables with embroidery hoops and invites Latina immigrants to sit, share stories and embroider flowers native to their countries as well as Wisconsin. Later, she’ll open up conversations to the broader community, with the goal of fostering connection and understanding.

“I’m hoping that sharing stories is what breaks down the walls, those invisible borders that create division,” she says. “That’s what art can do; it can facilitate those conversations.”

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“Creativity is a part of life. It’s how we ascend as humans.”

Sharon L. Bjyrd: Painting a Bigger Picture

Art had always held a place in Sharon L. Bjyrd’s life, but it wasn’t until she was diagnosed with a chronic illness in 2012 that there was space for it to take on a more prominent role.

Since moving from Chicago to Madison, Bjyrd has been working toward degrees in social work and Afro American studies from UW–Madison and worked as an advocate for women at the YWCA of Madison and the Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence. But learning how to live with lupus, in addition to sickle cell disease, forced her to pause.

“I was in a weird, quiet, isolated space trying to reevaluate what my life could be,” she says. “I had some paints and picked them up, and I just kept painting and painting and painting.”

While Bjyrd had taken art classes over the years, now she got to choose her subject matter.

“I started painting Black women’s portraits,” she says. “What I found myself with was a room of Black women.”

And she’s continued to paint them. Sometimes she features women with vibrant African print headwraps, and other times she deconstructs those patterns and uses them

as backdrops. Or she lets the woman’s natural hair hold the spotlight.

“I want to introduce a new iconography — the African woman as her true self,” she says. “It’s about living in a society where you’re told your natural state is unappealing — and the amount of strength it takes to embrace it anyway.”

Through her portraits, Bjyrd seeks to celebrate the beauty and the diversity of the Black experience.

“Black art is sometimes accepted more when it’s about pain,” she says. “I want to give some humanity and dignity, and show that whatever we go through, we’re going to do it beautifully.”

Following her show, “Heavy is the Crown,” held last year at the Arts + Literature Laboratory, Bjyrd plans to continue exhibiting. She also has a contract with the brand Ashro to print her art onto clothing, and hopes to paint a mural.

As she reflects on her path, she feels gratitude for having to change directions years ago.

“I believe life leads you to where you need to be,” she says. “My art career has been a series of serendipitous moments, and I’m grateful for every single one of them.”

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“There’s an artist in everybody, you just may not have discovered it yet.”

Angela Johnson: Finding Meaning in Memory

Years ago while she was a graduate student, Angela Johnson helped her aunt organize family photos. Seeing images of her dad as a child, great-grandparents she never met and relatives who looked like her struck a chord — one that would carry through her work as an artist, educator and creativity coach.

Johnson grew up in Madison, leaving the city to attend Coe College and work as an art teacher in Houston, before returning to earn a master’s degree in art education and an MFA with a focus on photography at UW–Madison.

In a job at the Madison’s Children’s Museum, the concept of memory grew in significance, especially when Johnson led SPARK!, an innovative program that provides art workshops for adults with memory loss and their care partners. And it continued with “Inherent Legacy,” her MFA exhibition at the Madison Public Library’s Central branch. Featuring family photographs and artifacts alongside her own photography, the show explored “what we carry with us through the objects we inherit from previous generations, including genetic, physical and emotional traits.”

More recently, Johnson’s work has included gratitude journal kits for the library, as well as legacy boxes and memory books,

highly personal objects she helps others create to honor loved ones and experiences.

And the pandemic years offered opportunity for further growth. Johnson held a residency at the Peninsula School of Art in Door County, served as an artist-in-residence at the Madison Public Library’s Pinney Branch and created “Nature is Healing” at Olbrich Botanical Gardens, with 75 cyanotype panels allowing viewers to contemplate life cycles and impermanence.

Johnson also became a certified creativity coach, and now works with individuals and organizations to help them access their artistic sides and get unstuck. “I’m working with a forward focus to assist and enable others to find creativity in themselves,” she says.

She’s excited to continue this work, along with teaching courses in the UW-Madison Art Department and Edgewood College, hosting workshops at the Madison Public Library (including a book club on creativity at the Central branch) and leading workshops at the Peninsula School of Art this summer. She has her own projects in the works too, and it all adds up to a creative mix she enjoys.

“I 1,000% feel like I’ve carved my own space,” she says. “It’s taken years of thoughtful practice — and also the pandemic.” angelajohnsonartist.com, [@angelajohnsonartist](https://www.instagram.com/angelajohnsonartist)



Sarah Krajewski: Empowering Expression



“I can’t tell you how many times I tell people I’m an art teacher and they say they can’t even draw a stick figure ... Own who you are! You are a human who can create something. Lean into who you are and what you’re drawn to.”

At the beginning of each art class she teaches at Cambridge Elementary School, Sarah Krajewski leads her students in reciting a mantra: “I am positive. I am creative. I am mindful. I am amazing. I am an artist.”

Those simple but powerful words set the tone both for the day’s lesson and for students’ lives outside the classroom.

“I really try to encourage weirdness and fun and acceptance of who I am so they can be their most authentic selves,” says Krajewski, who often dons a tiara and glittery wings.

Krajewski’s colorful approach earned her the Wisconsin Art Education Association’s Teacher of the Year in 2019 and more than 37,000 followers on her Instagram account, @artroomglitterfairy.

While Krajewski dreamed of being an art teacher when she was a second grader, the quiet yet creative girl she was back then couldn’t have known the confident leader she would become. Today, she teaches 430 students, runs the school’s art club and organizes its annual Creativity Expo.

The UW–Eau Claire alum is also a regular keynote speaker at arts education conferences, hosts weekly Instagram Live art-making sessions through the Art of Education University, and in 2020 published a children’s book. “Exactly You: The Shape of Your Feelings” helps explore and normalize big feelings and topics like self-esteem, anxiety and depression.

And Krajewski maintains her own art practice, using paints, inks and more to create abstract works.

“I just love colors and seeing how they interact with each other,” she says. “I like playing and experimenting and overlapping materials.”

But the teaching component remains essential, whether it’s leading kids in a classroom or adults on social media to try a new technique, express themselves or appreciate the art all around them.

“My brain just sees things in a way that’s artful and creative,” she says. “And I get an immense amount of joy in seeing others get excited about getting to create.”

artroomglitterfairy.com, @artroomglitterfairy ✨

Katie Vaughn is a Madison-area freelance writer.