

The Personality of Reborn Sweaters

By Erin Abler



any awkward teenager suffering some fashion abnormalities. But just who are these people? Actually, they're peepwool, not people, and they are the fantastical creations of artist Amy Arnold. More than mere curiosities, each peepwool is one-of-a-kind, made sustainably from recycled material and lovingly imbued with a personality all its own.

Although wool hasn't always been Amy's preferred medium, she does have a helpful background in art. In fact, with a BA in Ceramics from the University of Minnesota, Amy has years of experience crafting intellect and emotion into physical forms. "I did clay sculpture when I was an undergraduate student," she says, explaining that once she started working with fibers by making clothing for her son, she found that sculpture simply reappeared in her work. "I didn't plan it, but as I kept sewing, suddenly I had doll-sized figures—it just kind of naturally occurred. I used to be a single mom and was going out to different art fairs. I was selling hand-dyed clothes and hats and started making these little sculptures from fabric." Without thinking too much of it, Amy introduced the little figures to her repertoire of art fair wares. "I was originally selling

them for something like \$32, and the people I'd meet at the craft fairs said, 'Are you kidding? You have to charge more for those!' Maybe I would've tried it anyway, but those people really encouraged me. What I make now is pretty different from what I started out making." In the six years since she first started experimenting with her fabric sculptures, Amy has continued to craft intensely original characters. These days, peepwools can be nearly two feet tall, and while they are soft and cushy enough for children to play with, they are also captivating enough to be put on display.



With an incredible variety of figures that alternate between quirky, endearing, alienating, and intriguing, I wonder aloud where Amy comes up with so many fresh new faces. "I don't know," she admits. "I just make 'em. Well, I draw before I sew. With drawing, I go to that kind of playful, no-brain place and play around in there and see what comes out. The act of sewing and hand-sewing is very tedious and takes a lot of time, but I do drawing to capture the spontaneous expression and use that outline to capture it in fiber form." That's right: not only does Amy sculpt and sew, she draws well, too, and not just for herself. She even designed the poster art for this year's Bucktown Arts Fest in Chicago. It's all par for the course for Amy, though, who relies on her continuing creative flow. "I love making things. I'm happiest when I'm putzing around working on something," she says, adding that experimentation is one of her greatest artistic joys. "I don't know that I'll always work in fiber." She laughs, adding, "Maybe someday, when my children will be away from home, I'll be working on welding!"

out of recycled fiber, I'm creating in a way that is giving something new life and sustaining my family. I often feel that I'm spinning something into gold. Not that I'd say my work is gold, but that I'm taking a pile of unwanted [material] and transforming it into something precious through my love and my hands." Although Amy takes pride in reusing fibers, she isn't ready to reveal where, exactly, she gets her materials. "I have a secret force," she says mysteriously. "I can't divulge it or someone else may go there. I actually drive quite a ways to pick up and get them cheap. But when I go, I buy like 600 sweaters at a dollar apiece. They don't all go into the dolls; I make hats, too." Indeed, she does. On her website (peepwool.com), a separate section titled "inspired millinery & more" takes you to a gallery of stylish pillbox toques. They're bright, cozy, and made with as much care as the smallest peepwool. (Selling for around \$40 each, they're also more affordable than peepwools, though not as expressive.)

Making peepwools and hats isn't all fun and games, of course. "It's like any kind

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For the time being, however, Amy is happy to spend time bringing more peepwools into the world. With regard to method and material, she says, her current projects are both sustainable and rewarding. "Worth mentioning is the recycling part of it," Amy says of her work with fibers. "I really like the fact that the material that I use is natural and also something that is recycled. I used to think, with sculpture, here I'm making something out of clay and firing it into eternity—and for what? For some egotistical reason. But by making things

of work; it takes time, and I love being with my family," says Amy. The resulting balance between family and work can be a strain, "especially in the summer, when I'm working to get ready for art fairs. I'd like to be spending time with my children, and instead I'm sitting in my studio, covered in bits of wool." Even when she's not itching to get away from her work, Amy finds it challenging to keep everything coordinated in the midst of work. "I'm always trying to organize all my piles of sweaters, but usually it's crazy in my studio. I



seriously think that one day I'll walk into someone else's studio or workshop and it'll all be clear to me what I need to do to put mine together. But in the meantime, it's not at all tidy."

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Tidy or no, reactions to Amy's peepwools would seem to indicate that she's doing something right. In fact, one of the things Amy enjoys most about her work is the opportunity to witness people-to-peepwool encounters. "I do love to do an art fair or a show where I just put up 40 peepwools. I get to talk to people or

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watch them respond to what I make." Amy says that while reactions range from amusement to curiosity to charm, people tend to find themselves drawn to one or two figures. "I guess people relate to them, or see people that they know in them," she says. "I think, like a childhood toy, sometimes someone will see them and it strikes a chord. It inspires that childhood feeling and that 'friend' feeling, and they want to have that friend, that precious thing." The unusual looks and expressive postures that peepwools embody help to foster a personal connection, whether it's in the identification of a hobby or a habit. Where once you might have seen only a doll, it seems peepwools have the ability to transform into a striking likeness of a sibling, friend, or coworker. For many, the appeal is justifiably irresistible.

Coy and clever, daft and darling, leave it to peepwools to reveal their marvelous strangeness over time. If ever wool had aspirations, it might hope to fall into Amy Arnold's hands. Whether it's through a toothy grin, a wide-eyed look of wonder, or a prim sidelong glance, peepwools express the unexpected, growing more endearing with each glance. Though before you might not have believed it, now you know: somewhere in Wisconsin, hiding in an old wool sweater, is a peepwool waiting to be born.



To catch a glimpse of some of the more recent peepwools, visit Amy's website, peepwool.com.

Erin Abler is a freelance writer. Photographs provided by Amy Arnold.



Farmers Don't Hibernate: CCLP Winter Farmers' Markets and Meals

By Erin Abler

If you shop summer farmers' markets for apple butter or stop by family-run food stands for corn and berries, you already know that buying produce directly from farmers can teach you a lot. Few venues offer a better opportunity to meet and understand the person who actually made your cheese, grew your spinach, or

gap, the Churches' Center for Land and People (CCLP) has begun to introduce winter farmers' markets throughout southern Wisconsin. Furthering the relationships fostered by these innovative sales, the CCLP also hosts benefit meals, drawing on the top-notch talent of regional chefs. Connecting farmers to consumers, farmers to chefs, and chefs to future restaurant clients, the winter markets work to make food systems visible, helping people understand the importance of their involvement in community economies.

According to Tony Ends, the Director of CCLP and founder of the winter farmers' markets, community relationships are the real force behind sustainable food systems. In fact,

Wisconsin to see if we could get a kiosk. They said we were welcome to do so, but the fee was \$8,000 for six weeks. Compare this to the \$13,600 or so of income we brought in during that period—and only about 12 percent of that money was actual farm income."



harvested your honey. But in winter, when outdoor markets are all packed up, the supermarket once again seems the only option for groceries. Local farmers, largely constrained to selling their products to consumers during the summer months, are left without the ability to reach their customers in the late fall and winter. To address the

it was in facing the lack of producer-consumer contact that Tony first came up with the idea of winter sales. "I came upon the idea as I tried to find ways to sustain my own family's farm through the winter," he remembers. "We'd been selling vegetables on a 20-week season and working on homestead products. We went to a mall in southeastern

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