

AMY C. EVANS :: ARTIST'S STATEMENT :: MY HOUSTON

Documenting My Hometown Through Art and Oral History | 2015 - 2018

A toy store sat next to an X-rated movie theater. Neighborhood kids played arcade games in the back of a beer joint while ladies shopped for hats and gloves down the street. A family-owned restaurant served Chinese spareribs next door to another family-owned business: a bakery beloved for its birthday cakes and petit fours. These were the three or so square blocks where my friends and I spent many hours—and lots of quarters—growing up. It was the early 1980s, and this was The Village—our Village.

Today, my old stomping ground is better known as The Rice Village, partly because of the area's proximity to Rice University but more and more, it's a reflection of the college's expanding real estate portfolio. My old Village is a thing of the past. The ragtag mom-and-pop stores are all but gone. In their place is what amounts to a high-end outdoor shopping mall filled with national chains: Banana Republic anchors a fancy strip where the X-rated movie theater used to be, the hats-and-gloves boutique is now an Urban Outfitters, and a branch of Compass Bank has taken over the corner where adults drank Lone Star longnecks and I tried to get the high score in Ms. Pac-Man.

As The Village began to change, so did I. Friends got their driver's licenses, and we went in search of adventures beyond the neighborhood. We chose drive-thrus over Chinese spareribs. Arcade games disappeared in favor of Atari consoles connected to home televisions. I left for art school.

Some years later, I found myself in Mississippi, working as the lead oral historian for the Southern Foodways Alliance, a job that kept me on the road, traveling the American South to collect interviews documenting the region's history and culture through the lens of food. I spent years visiting communities, talking to people, listening to stories about the way things used to be.

In 2014, I moved back to Houston and arrived in my hometown with a new perspective, my eyes fixed upon my own past and the way things used to be and, of course, the restaurants that sustained me. I remembered enjoying those Chinese spareribs at the Swan Den with my dad. Looking forward to my annual birthday cake from Moeller's Bakery. And later, in my twenties, having a few cold ones at the Aquarium Lounge after a long night of waiting tables.

I decided to start work on a group of paintings to document some of these places from my past—an effort to memorialize my youth perhaps, but also an important, albeit personal, collection of stories from my hometown that I fear might be on the verge of being forgotten. To borrow a phrase from the late Ethel Wright Mohammed, famed Mississippi Delta embroidery artist, I began creating memory pictures. It was while

making these first few paintings, digging for information to galvanize my visual memories, that I got lost in many an internet rabbit hole, realizing that what I had before me was the beginning of what could be a full-fledged documentary project.

For years my foodways fieldwork influenced my paintings. Now, my paintings were inspiring new fieldwork.

As a first step towards establishing my own sort of creative archive, I included the information associated with each business in the titles of the paintings: names of the proprietors, years in operation, physical address, as well as mention of what stands in its place today.

I continued making paintings and then, in 2017, I started conducting oral history interviews. Many original owners had long since passed, so I went in search of anyone who was in any way associated with the places depicted in my paintings: relatives and regular customers, employees and friends. To date, the project includes twenty-three paintings and five oral history interviews.

These are just a few of the stories from *My Houston*.

Amy C. Evans
Houston, TX
2017

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EXHIBITED

2017 "Paintings by Amy C. Evans" - RecRoom - Houston, TX
"Amy C. Evans: My Houston II" - Koelsch Gallery – Houston, TX
"UNBOUND: Documentary as Art" - The Carrack - Durham, NC

2015 "Amy C. Evans: My Houston" - Koelsch Gallery – Houston, TX

PUBLIC PRESENTATIONS

2018 "My Houston: Documenting My Hometown Through Art and Oral History" –
Center for Public History, University of Houston - Houston, TX

2017 "My Houston: Documenting My Hometown Through Art and Oral History" –
Oral History Association's Annual Meeting - Minneapolis, MN
"My Houston" - Looking at Art - Koelsch Haus - Houston, TX

ARTICLES

2018 Evans, Amy. "My Houston: Documenting My Hometown Through Art and Oral History" – *The Southern Quarterly*, forthcoming, March 2018

INTERVIEWS

2017 "Amy C. Evans and Houston Eats" - Open Journal - KPFT 90.1

PRESS

2017 Ansporn, Catherine D. "ART + BYGONE Dining," Paper City Magazine, February 2017, p. 52.

AWARDS

2017 Presenter's Scholarship – Oral History Association's Annual Meeting – Minneapolis, MN