

Amy Van Every, Painter and Dyer, San Francisco Opera Company
Madison Brito for Middlebury College Costume Shop, March 2021

Passion weaves together the career of painter/dyer Amy Van Every. She took a fascination that began in college and used that as a guide; “follow what you’re interested in, and be open to discovering that on the way,” she says. In her first years at the University of Oregon, Van Every took an off-loom weaving class. Enthralled with chemical dyeing, she began to take on projects and independent studies in the drama department as an art and textiles major. Her efforts culminated in an investigative project dyeing fibers, the swatch book from which is still in possession by the university. It is a constructive, generative sort of path she has taken, allowing spiked curiosities and niche interests to guide her. But her journey is far from a passive sway - the passion that creates her career is one that Van Every cultivated with intense focus and an intentionally open mind. She tells me how “it’s a lot like cooking, You have to stay present with each addition, you have to like the puzzle of it.”

Her craft itself is “part chemistry, part intuition,” requiring both immense knowledge and the ability to creatively extemporize. As a dyer, you need “remarkable color theory, an understanding of color mixing in many different mediums.” The work requires both an extensive education and a curiosity to explore within it. As a painter/dyer for the San Francisco Opera Company, Van Every takes on tasks as various as color specific dyeing yardage for shows, sculpting or changing the physical appearance of singers through shading the form once a garment is made, and using chemistry and tradecraft to add an illusion of age to modern pieces to express character. In this genre, she especially enjoys working with armor and leather. All of these tasks include a diversity of fibers and fabrics, ample dialogue with the designers and supervisors, and a tight work schedule. Van Every tackles an enormous puzzle with each new phase she encounters. She adores seeing “artistic resolves come together in the workroom,” and then on stage, balancing exploration with a focused finality. And in fact, Van Every sees the tight seasonal deadline and high-pressured nature of her work as a perk to working in her industry. “In fashion, you may never see the clothes once they move into production,” she says, but in opera and performing arts, there is a beginning and an end. You get the reward of seeing it right on the stage.

Van Every’s work requires present creativity in every step, involving “many hands that produce the final product.” There is play: Van Every has a spray booth, loves dry rubbing embossed leather to change the color, and has painted ballrooms, her work sounding undeniably romantic just from the passionate smile on her face as she describes these artistic endeavors. But there is also an extensive step-by-step rhythm that she must take part in: she starts by seeing renderings or with a supervisor bringing in fabric, she must go to the draper to find out what their needs are, then the designer comes in, she’ll receive a fitting schedule and must attend them all. In short, it is “dyeing in accordance with what is needed.” Van Every is constantly sorting out what is needed and where between these pieces, and with so much dependent on the needs of the supervisor or designer, she is constantly on her toes, “cooking up” these designs.

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“If you want to be a craftsperson, you need to know materials, you need to have multiple skills,” Van Every says. She tells me to “build your toolbox,” how you have to “determine where you want to be, but have dexterity.” It is stronger than mere interest, necessitating a precious combination of following passion and ambition with staying present and open to criticism at every step. It is drive towards perhaps one thing, but with dexterity and openness in many. “If you want to go into this field, go to plays, volunteer at a theater,” she says, imbuing the paragon of an eagerness to learn and explore that is perhaps the foundation of present passion.



Tales of Hoffman designed by Zack Brown for San Francisco Opera
Ombred silk velvet, iron sculpted, embroidered organza, appliqué and beaded

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Trojan Women designed by Alexander Bonds at University of Oregon
Color specific, ombre dyed and stencil painted

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Designed by Walter Mahoney
Stenciled with metallic flake and flex glue

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Macbeth designed by Bob Perdziola

Wet on wet treatment, transparent ageing on leather, organza and epaulets

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Mid Summer's Night Dream, designed by Michael Stennett for San Francisco Opera
Shading was applied to underskirt and top layer along bodice