Abstract- Amber Mooers

Narrator: Amber Mooers
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Interviewer: Tyler Edwards

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Amber Mooers was born in Walla Walla, Washington and grew up in central Massachusetts. She received her BFA in Ceramics from the Massachusetts College of Art and Design in 2020, and currently works as the Building Manager of the Duke Arts Annex. There, she is instrumental in the day-to-day operations of the building, including maintenance and the enforcement of COVID policies, as well as teaching ceramics and needle felting workshops for the DukeCreate program. In her interview, she confidently discusses the steps which landed her at Duke, the sense of camaraderie she feels with other employees, and the ways she used art to connect with her close friend Yve. During the coronavirus pandemic, she has most missed having feedback from her peers on her art throughout her creative process. Her ability to remain adaptable in her career and art practice throughout the pandemic has sustained her, and she is thankful for the ability to share accessible and gratifying art forms with Duke students through her workshops.
Tyler Edwards (TE)
Well, awesome. Thank you so much. If you could start by introducing yourself with your name and your pronouns and then also where you are right now. Okay,

Amber Mooers (AM)
My name is Amber Mooers. My pronouns are she/her and currently I am in my office at the Duke Arts in Durham, North Carolina.

TE
So, before we get into the part of the interview that is talking all about what you do here, the Arts Annex, I'd love to know a little bit more about you. Like where, where were you born and what was it like for you growing up?

AM
So I was born in Walla Walla, Washington. It is a real place, I promise. And I, but I grew up in central Massachusetts. My parents got divorced when I was very young. And my dad was a single dad and so I lived with my dad in Massachusetts. I have two other sisters. And then when I was in middle school, you know, we became kind of a blended family, with my dad's current partner and her children, which was very difficult for me being in middle school. But I was always a very good kid. And I knew that I was a good kid. So I was really stubborn, and like, knew that I was good enough to get away with a lot of stuff. So I would frequently ignore my parents and do whatever I wanted. Like I painted on the walls, because I was getting straight A's. So what are you gonna do, ground me? No. Much to the chagrin of my parents.

And I've always been connected to the arts. My grandfather was a painter after he retired. And my older sisters were both really invested in the arts. And so when I was trying to figure out what I was going to do after high school, I didn't have anything that I was particularly passionate about. In terms of academia, I was really good at science, but it wasn't something that I was jazzed about. And because I was 17 and given the option to decide my future without my frontal lobe being fully developed. I was like, “Yeah, I'll go spend a couple thousand dollars at art school and see what happens.” And it was an excellent decision.
I went to Massachusetts College of Art and Design in Boston. And I worked full time all through college, which was incredibly difficult. I paid for college entirely on my own. I was the first person in my family to go to or graduate college. So that was its own set of trials and tribulations and then to have art school on top of that, which is a very different dynamic than traditional academics. You're really putting your heart on your sleeve and then being graded on it. But I always knew that I wanted to go for ceramics. And so I was really lucky to have a really small ceramics program there, where you know, my major had five people in our graduating class. So it was a really tight knit community. I'm still in contact with a lot of my professors and the studio managers there. And I think it really set me up to have appropriate expectations for what it was going to be like to be a practicing artist.

And then the pandemic happened and I graduated during the pandemic, and that sucked. I had to switch my tragic senior thesis from ceramics entirely to fibers because I didn't have access to a studio, so I completely changed mediums. And then, I didn't know what I was gonna do, because we were in- this was May of 2020- and so I was having a little bit of a crisis emotionally and spiritually, and I could not get approved for housing, like I was applying to apartments and getting rejected because I was on unemployment because I’d been working in restaurants. So even though I was making obscene amounts of money on Massachusetts unemployment, they would not accept my lease applications. And so, somewhat on a whim, I decided to move down to Durham on my own. I had one friend who lives a couple towns over who we have been friends since high school, and he told me that Durham was kind of artsy and I kind of took that and ran. And I went to apply for an apartment and got it immediately. They were like, “Yeah, this is perfect. You have good credit, go for it.”

I moved down in a U-Haul with all my things and all my plants by myself to a city where I knew no one, I didn't have a job, didn't have a plan. I still feel like I was really stupid for that, but it worked out. And then I was nannying for a while just while I was trying to figure out what I wanted to do once I got down here because things were obviously still quite closed. It was there wasn't like a lot of opportunities in my field. So I was just floating, essentially not really making any artwork, not really applying to anything, just kind of like re-centering myself,
which was the first time I'd ever been able to do that ever. And then I started working with a local potter named Michelle Vanderwalker who owns Kingfisher bar downtown. And so she was really great because she let me work in her studio and fire work in her kiln and also got me a job at a bar. So I was able to do art and pay my bills.

And then from there, I was able to start doing craft fairs and, you know, still never got customers and I met Kevin Erixson. He doesn't work with Duke anymore. He led the DukeCreate program and he saw my work and he asked me if I would want to teach workshops at Duke, which of course I said yes, I was like, "that's not even a question. Yes, please." And then I, you know, was asking about like, what it was going to be like to teach ceramics at Duke you know, he introduced me to the concept of the Arts Annex, and that it wasn't being run by an arts person, that a lot of those tasks were delegated towards grad assistants, and so there wasn't a consistent leader. And so I finagled my way into an interview with Fran who also does not work here anymore, she works at in New York, but I finagled my way into an interview with her and was hired as like a facilities manager at the Annex, and then so that meant that I was able to fire all the kilns and maintain all the equipment and help out the front desk staff and then Fran left and suddenly I had like half of her job as well as my job. And that's where I am now.

TE
That is such a wonderful and serendipitous story. I'm sure that it feels that way for you too.

AM
I don't think so. I think it feels like I worked really hard for what I have, and it was finally like the fruits of my labor were paying off and I'm a very extroverted person, so I'm never afraid to ask for things. And I think it was my freshman year of college, I decided I was really going to take “ask and you shall receive” to heart. And so now, I cold email people all the time, I cold call people all the time, just asking for opportunities and asking for help. And generally people want to help you, and generally people are happy to help you. You just have to ask. And so I don't know if it's serendipitous as it is like actually seeing my work day off
Yep. No, you're totally right. That is what that is absolutely.

It feels really good.

Yeah. Like all of those opportunities, none of them just came to you, yeah, thank you for correcting me. Absolutely. That's not serendipity at all. That's fantastic. So you started working at Duke during the pandemic?

Correct.

Gotcha. What did you think that it was going to be like at that point? And what did you expect coming into the Duke space?

Um, I didn't really know what to expect because most of my experience in studio spaces were in university settings with like, fine arts programs that were quite flushed out. Whereas this is a extracurricular studio space. And so I knew I was walking into something where my expertise was going to be needed and that I was going to have to take leadership on a lot of the ways in which things have been running because, you know, you can walk into a studio and be like, "oh, yeah, I can handle this," but, do you do you really know how to fire a kiln? Do you really know what clay to buy and how to take care of screen printing materials, there's a lot of stuff in there that I knew probably wasn't being taken care of the way it was. And because the Annex had been closed through COVID, when I had gotten on it was gonna be our grand reopening and so, we really didn't know how many people were going to be in the space, you know, how we were going to have to deal with like COVID safety. This building doesn't have any windows, how many people can we feasibly let in here? And so it was a lot of just like, I don't know what to expect. I'm going to have to roll with the punches and trust that I know I'm doing and that if I don't know what I'm doing, I can ask for help.
Absolutely. Who did you go to for help?

Before Fran left, it was a lot of Fran. And now that Fran doesn't work here anymore, I work really closely with another employee, in the Student Involvement Department named Lynn. We are both currently contract temporary employees. So we bonded a lot over, you know, kind of the struggles of knowing that you’re a contract employee, knowing that you're only here for a temporary amount of time. There's a lot of bureaucratic frustrations that go on in that. And so we were able to kind of troubleshoot those things together. And Lynn, she had a lot of experience in administration. And so I can go to her about those kinds of things. And she can come to me with more art-space things. I also have a supervisor named Kevin, who has been really good at helping me manage the corporate side of things because that's not something I'm particularly comfortable with. And he's been really good with helping me explain myself in a way that was professional and helping me to better traverse those kinds of situations and meetings. Just in order to continue to move forward in a position here, in my career in general.

For just for bookkeeping, do you know Lynn, Kevin, and Fran's last names?

I do. Fran's last name is S-a-n-t-o-s, Lynn is Lynn Ghoebane G-h-o-e-b-a-n-e, and Kevin is D'a-r-c-o.

Yeah. A major part of this project is thinking about the arts community. I'm guessing that those people feel like a part of your community, who else feels like a part of that community?

Abby Shumar who runs The Rubenstein Center. She has been extremely helpful. She used to work in the Annex and she has seen both sides of being new at Duke,
and she definitely mentored for me at Duke specifically. Beyond that I have my best friend from college. Yve is amazing. We were frenemies for a really long time because they are just such an incredible artist, and I was so envious of the work that they were making and how much they were producing. And they are just also one of the kindest souls that I have ever met in my life and always willing to help and so I wanted to not like them, but you can't help but like them. And so, Yve and I have maintained a really, really close relationship post graduation and continuing into our careers. We talk on the phone every week and we have a sketchbook that we send back and forth. So for a month or two, one of us will draw and write in the sketchbook and then mail it to the other person, and back and forth like that. And we're like always looking out for opportunities for each other. We actually just got a group show at the Durham Arts Guild in June together. So that was a really exciting thing and it's an excuse to get to see them. So that was my first gallery acceptance that I've ever gotten. So that was the best news that I've had in like two years. Doing it with them also, it's just like, I wouldn't want it any other way.

TE
That is so fantastic. Congratulations!

AM
Thank you.

TE
Awesome. Cool. Nice. Okay, I think the next thing that we can kind of talk about is- I guess it feels like you may have experienced some sort of transition, the constantly changing COVID regulations and I'm curious about how that has impacted both your job and the way that you create art.

AM
I mean, COVID has been has made making art really difficult because I think it's important to have people look at your work when it's in progress and critique it and have other eyes on your art and so to make my artwork in a void has been really difficult for me, and I don't think I'm making the best work that I could be because I don't have as much input from other people as I would like. And in terms of working and existing, as an artist, as a professional artist. It's been really exciting
in some ways, because I think a lot of people are turning to art to cope with the world ending. And so there's so much joy in seeing somebody who hasn't done anything really artistic as an adult and giving them that gift of allowing themselves to be creative and allowing themselves to have this kind of release or distraction from the rest of the world and what is a really beautiful and worthwhile way has been really fulfilling to see people just understand what art means to me and to have a connection with other people is really, really great and to help them through this has been a really fulfilling part of like teaching and working here.

TE
That is so fantastic. That feeling is one that I definitely share. I have a wall over here with just a lot of little paintings and things that I created during COVID, and that has been such a refuge for me and that's why I wanted to do this project is to capture that sort of experience. So yeah, I'm so glad that you've been able to experience that too. I'm curious about what role that your workshops play in that.

AM
I mean, I think my workshops make accessible things that feel inaccessible. For example, one of my favorite workshops that I teach is a needle felting workshop, and most of the time people have not even heard of needle felting and don't know what they're walking into. And the barrier for entry for needle felting is so low. You literally stab things until they're cute. And so you're getting out aggression, but it's also really easy. An art form where it's really easy to make something look nice is hard to find. Like, you can sit down with pencil and paper and draw for 1000s of hours and still be shit at drawing. I know because that's what I am. That's what I've done. I went to art school, I'm still not good at drawing. But like needle felting just has it's easy and it's fast and it everything in needle felt ends up looking good. And so to have that kind of like instant gratification, I think makes art feel more accessible to people who have felt intimidated by art in the past.

TE
That totally makes sense. Yeah, I honestly had never heard of it until I was looking up you and the workshops that you've taught before. But there's a photo of a little banana guy. Those things are so cute, I can't believe I'd never heard of that before
AM
It's really fun. And you can also- in the workshops I bring catnip because you can felt catnip into your pieces. And then it's a cute little cat toy. It's really great. And I think it's so easy and it's so fun and it's not very expensive. Like you can buy a kit on Amazon for $15. And so I think accessibility to something like that is huge and being able to like show people that feels really good.

TE
Fantastic. I think accessibility in the arts in so many different ways has been a huge theme during COVID. I'm curious, did you- have you only taught classes in person or did you teach any over Zoom?

AM
I have not yet taught any classes over Zoom. I have taught classes in person. I have had to limit the number of people in my classes. For example, the wheel throwing classes. It's in a really small room. We only have four wheels, even though that class has a huge demand, I really have to be kind of a hard-ass and cap those classes at much smaller capacity. And so that's been really difficult to manage like okay, there's this huge demand for this because it is somewhat inaccessible because you have to take this workshop. But in order for me to feel safe, I cannot give it to the number of people that I wish I could.

TE
Absolutely, yes, that is very difficult to balance. Have you had conversations with other artists or other people that are teaching anywhere about how they're managing those issues?

AM
I have. Again, I'm going to refer to my friend Yve on this. They taught a summer workshop camp. And it's really hard to manage the changing restrictions because especially when it's like regarding cleaning tools or how having individualized tools, then it becomes a budgeting issue because previously where you have communal tools suddenly you can't, suddenly your budget is you know, five times as much as it was previously. You know if mask restrictions change in ways that make you uncomfortable, do you have to give up this job, do you have to somehow
make people wear masks for your class even if they don't have to for other things. And so managing the finances of it and managing the personal safety of it is a really challenging thing to do especially because teaching is so fulfilling and also it pays the bills.

TE
Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, that is a difficult thing to balance for sure. I can't imagine. Have there been any times of or a complaint or where you had to directly deal with or figure out an issue related to those issues?

AM
Yeah, especially at the Arts Annex where there's like a lot of little rooms where people can be kind of individually. I've kind of found myself having to be the mask police. I never want to have to take away somebody's access to a space, especially one as fruitful as the Annex, but I have to prioritize the health and safety of everyone and so I have had to tell people that if they don't put on their mask, they will lose access to the Annex. And that kind of conflict is one awkward because I have to get into their space while they're unmasked to tell them that they need to put on a mask. And then also because of the way I look and I tend to be pretty relaxed and I'm younger people don't recognize me as as much of an authority figure. So then it becomes this like, “Okay, no, you actually have to listen to me. I'm actually in charge” and putting my foot down. And as somebody who tends to be somewhat conflict averse. It has been a tough transition to morally do the correct thing and like to tell these people off even if I hate every second of it.

TE
That's very fair. Plus that it has to be your job specifically. Yeah, to do that. Okay, we're coming up on the 25 minute mark. So there's just a few more questions I want to ask. I think the next one is what has sustained you like during the last two years?

AM
I think my progress as an artist. The first year of 2020, I felt like I was treading water and I wasn't getting anywhere and everything was getting worse. And so now that I am, you know, two years past the initial stay at home order, I can
actually check off the things that I've done and be like this, like I was talking to one of my professors and she was like, even if it wasn't a pandemic, the things that you have done are impressive. And so being able to, like pat myself on the back and be like, okay, you know, all of this hard work that I put in, has been worth in the past and continues to be worth it. And like, moving down here, because it is so much cheaper than living in Boston, I've been able to really prioritize my self care and my mental health. And so, you know, having a work life balance, all of a sudden was crazy. Like, I'm not working 40 hours a week and in class all the time. I'm working 40 hours a week, and then I have the rest of the time to make art and have hobbies and exist just as a regular human. And so recognizing all of these things and holding them close to my heart and knowing that I can continue to hold these things close to my heart and prioritize them is really what keeps me from being completely hopeless for the future.

TE
That's fantastic. Yeah, yeah. Even just in this conversation, all the things that you told me that you've accomplished, I'm glad that you're proud of yourself. That's fantastic. Yeah, okay. Next question that I want to ask is after the pandemic, what do you hope to bring back into practice that you feel like you've lost and what do you think he will keep that you've learned during the pandemic?

AM
I want to surround myself with more conversations about the work that's being made. I think that I'm just not getting the community in the same way that I wanted, and that I've had in the past and it's really hard to do right now, while remaining safe and you know, keeping, like some kind of semblance of a pod, whatever it is, now that we're like two years out. And I think because the Annex was closed for a year, and because it's still kind of an undervalued resource at Duke, you know, whereas I maybe thought that I was going to get more of that and realize that we haven't rebuilt that community back up yet. And so I would love to be able to have that kind of artists and community and communal and conversational space at the Annex or within my life in some capacity. I think the thing that I would like to hold on to is probably my ability to just like, accept what I have and make do. Because a lot of my sculptural work retains fibers. And that wasn't like a medium that I was going intending on using in my main practice very
much at all. And now, I don't think I could make a sculpture without incorporating some kind of fibers into it. And so, I think, you know, that's like a big part of what I've taken away from quarantine is like, Okay, what do I have here? How can I use it? How can I move forward and like, keep on using that thing, even as things change?

TE
That's fantastic. Yeah, I think resilience and resourcefulness is something that I've really learned too and I think all of us came out of this experience scrappy and creative in a totally new way. Yeah, that's so wonderful. Trying to think. I honestly think that’s a really good closing question. I think this interview was fantastic. And, wow, thank you for sharing your story with me. This is really beautiful. Thirty minutes always feels like super, super fast. But I don't know, thank you for being willing to connect with me in this way and for sharing your words with me. This is beautiful.

AM
Of course, and I'm honored to be asked and to be able to share my story and you had really lovely questions that made it easy to speak eloquently.