

AURORA

Exploring a public pattern: Somer Hahm '08

By Elizabeth Talbot



*Above: **Somer Hahm '08** sits in front of some of her barn quilt tiles on her woodshed. Photo by Grace Wilson.*

A painted piece of plywood at a Goldstream Valley yard sale caught Somer Hahm's eye in summer 2018. She recognized the plywood's image as a quilt block pattern, but she didn't yet see where it would lead her within just a few years.

“It was a design called the Ohio star, just red and white on a piece of plywood,” she said. “It was old, weathered and cracking paint, and I was very drawn to it.”

Today, Hahm leads The Far North Quilt Trail Project, through which she and others create large quilt-pattern images on public walls around Alaska. They’ve installed 30 “barn quilts” to date.

Hahm found her plywood Ohio star around the same time that she began painting after a six-year hiatus following the birth of her two children. She recalled that she had been feeling pressure, instead of freedom and creativity.

“I thought, how do I take that away?” she said. “I’m just going to paint something simple. I’m going to paint a quilt block, and that is what started me on the motion of painting my first quilt patterns.”

“I found painting the quilt blocks to be very meditative. I was making connections conceptually between quilting and motherhood, that unseen domestic labor,” she said. “For me, I was linking the idea of perpetuating women’s work, the work of these past quilters, to who I was. The patterns were rich in authentic female creativity, and in terms of abstraction the designs were like a roadmap to me.”

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The roadmap soon brought her to a trail — one made of barn quilts.

The practice had been rejuvenated in Ohio in the early 2000s by Donna Sue Groves, who wanted to highlight architecture, honor families and connect communities.

“I started to ask myself a lot of questions. Why not me? Why can’t I start a quilt trail here?” Hahm said. “Once I started thinking about Fairbanks itself as an art gallery, I couldn’t stop imagining all of the places that could be enhanced visually by a barn quilt.”

Since then, Hahm has created 14 barn quilts, most of them in Fairbanks, including at the Fairbanks Community Garden, Pioneer Park, Creamer’s Field and Goldie’s. In May 2021, she installed three barn quilts in the Anchorage area for the Cook Inlet Housing Authority. Her goal for summer 2022 is to paint a quilt at the Georgeson Botanical Garden’s barn at UAF’s Fairbanks Experiment Farm.





Hahm's "Flying Geese" barn quilt, installed in February 2020 on the historic dairy barn at Creamer's Field Migratory Waterfowl Refuge in Fairbanks, is a cornerstone piece in the Far North Quilt Trail. Photo by Sarah Manriquez.

"I designed the trail to ignite the eyes and minds of the public around vibrant artworks," said Hahm, who will return to UAF in 2022 as an adjunct professor of art. "I wanted to gain experience in creating and installing public art. My objective was to create something bigger than myself through the visual language of painting."

Her timing turned out to be fortuitous.

"The quilt trail resonated during the pandemic!" she said. "No one had to go inside to enjoy these public works, and their locations highlighted areas of our city that may be overlooked by some."

The Pioneer Park quilt, for example, adorns the outside of a cabin occupied by The Folk School of Fairbanks, facing the mini-golf course and playground. The school's director, Kerri Hamos, said she and Somer organized workshops where kids aged 8-18 each painted a quilt square in summer 2021, with funding from the Alaska State Council

on the Arts. Somer and a team of volunteers then hung the pieces on the cabin.

The quilt “is a beautiful and eye-catching piece for all to enjoy,” Hamos said. “It will be especially appreciated during the winter.”



Students gather with Hahm beneath “The Folk Quilt,” which they created in summer 2021. Students made individual quilt tiles and Hahm arranged them on The Folk School of Fairbanks’ cabin wall in Pioneer Park. Photo by Sarah Manriquez.

A working artist

Hahm’s “why not me?” philosophy has helped her flourish as an artist in Interior Alaska, along with hard work and perseverance.

Originally from Missoula, Montana, Hahm moved to Fairbanks, sight unseen, in 2005 to seek a Master of Fine Arts degree from UAF.

“I’ve always felt drawn to the North, and was excited about the idea of coming to Alaska,” she said. “I had no idea the adventure that awaited, or that I would put down roots here in Fairbanks and call it home.”

At UAF, she worked as a teaching assistant. “Instructing college-level courses, on top of the 12-credit graduate load for my own academics, was pretty intense,” she said.

She supplemented that income by bartending and serving on weekends. Before buying a car, she rode her mountain bike in the winter — “before fat bikes were cool.”

Her last year in the graduate program, art faculty awarded her a full-ride scholarship. That allowed her to complete her M.F.A. thesis exhibition, a display of 15 large acrylic paintings and 500 small drawings in a grid format.

Friends introduced her to **Ben Dobrovolsky** '03, a UAF civil engineering graduate, who became her partner and eventually her husband.

After graduating, she found that her original goal of becoming a professor would be more challenging than anticipated, especially since she no longer wanted to leave Fairbanks.

So she kept making art but branched off in completely different directions. During the next seven years, Hahm would do a great many things, while nourishing her roots as an artist.



Boreal Sun Charter School, on South Barnette Street in Fairbanks, and the Friends of Boreal Sun Charter School commissioned Hahm to paint the “Rising Sun” barn quilt in July 2020. Photo by Sarah Manriquez.

“I took a farm apprenticeship position at Calypso Farm and Ecology Center and learned how to farm in the interior of Alaska,” she said. “The following year, I got married, and Ben and I traveled around the United States together. I was working as a bartender and as a gallery assistant at Well Street Art Co.”

In 2012, shortly after finishing their cabin, Hahm and her husband were surprised by the news that they were pregnant with their daughter. While pregnant, Hahm created a solo exhibition of paintings, titled “Birds of Paradise.” After the exhibition at Well Street, she moved

out of her studio space and ended her tenure at the gallery.

Well Street's owner, UAF art professor David Mollett, said Hahm not only handled the gallery operations well but also succeeded as an artist during that time.

"She held her first solo exhibitions at the gallery and they were phenomenally successful, especially for a relatively new artist on the scene," Mollett said. "Her paintings were so sought after that I believe she sold out the first show."

Hahm created another exhibition at home during her second pregnancy, this time a son. "Flock," exhibited at Keller Allied Architecture and Arts in 2014, consisted of 350 drawings of birds in a vintage style mounted on magnetic metal panels. During the one-night show, purchasers could pull and purchase the original drawing right off of the wall.

In 2017, the Folk School invited Somer to teach a children's class, Nature Journaling for the Very Young. "This opportunity flowed into the creation of a small series of educational botanical posters for a Forest School that my children attended, eventually leading to some private commission work," she said.

A pivot in focus

In 2018, Hahm began as the exhibition technician for the Fairbanks Arts Association's Bear Gallery. The same month, the association teamed up with the state arts council to host a conference in Fairbanks. The conference was filled with working artists who had wisdom to share. Hahm soaked in every detail.

"I took a session from Anchorage artist Maria Shell. She is an internationally known quilter. The session that she gave was all about writing a winning grant proposal," Hahm said. "It was the moment I began to change my focus from exhibition opportunities to awards and grant-funding opportunities. That conference gave me the tools that I didn't even know I needed, and the inspiration to do something important with my artwork."

Hahm learned to ask for help, solicit donations, seek funding and garner support from local businesses and organizations. Her grants have come from the Alaska State Council on the Arts, the Rasmuson Foundation, the Awesome Foundation's Alaska chapter and Our2Cents. Other partners and sponsors include Design Alaska, Johnson River Enterprises, Sherwin-Williams, Calypso Farm and Ecology Center, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, and Boreal Sun Charter School.

Megan Olsen-Saville, interim director for the Fairbanks Arts Association, is excited to see what Hahm's project will produce next.

"It is such a natural fit for Somer to unite Alaska communities and be the motivation and force behind the Far North Quilt Trail Project," Olsen-Saville said. "It has been incredible working with her and watching the quilt trail grow."



*Hahm poses in front of the “Flying Geese” barn quilt at Creamer’s Field.
Photo by Steph Barney.*

[Read more about the Far North Quilt Trail project.](#)

