

Hot Stuff: The Life and Art of Claudia Sisemore

By [Ann Poore](#) on [June 9, 2015](#)



Teacher, artist and filmmaker Claudia Sisemore was “hot stuff” when she was 21, says Layne Meacham of his former Hillside Junior High teacher. “All the guys would talk about her and her silver Jag XKE,” the Salt Lake City artist recalls. Local artist Trent Thursby Alvey, then an 8th-grade creative-writing student of Sisemore’s, agrees: “She was single, wore stiletto heels and cashmere sweaters and drove a hot car.”

More important than her style, however, was Sisemore’s creative influence. “She set the tone for my whole life of creativity in that class,” Alvey says.

“She was not uptight and could relate to all the students, and she was easy to talk to and just hip,” Meacham states. “The other teachers seemed to be about 20 years behind her in demeanor, dress and having an understanding of the current culture the kids were relating to . . . kids just kind of hung on her and she could connect better than all the other teachers at Hillside Junior High. She didn’t seem to judge me that I was a budding delinquent called down to the office daily . . . she just accepted me as another kid trying to figure out the screwy ‘60s.”

Her influence in Utah’s art world has extended far beyond that classroom and those young students (some of whom are now influential members of the art community in their own right). As a filmmaker, Sisemore captured some of Utah’s seminal figures, artists like LeConte Stewart, Denis Phillips, Alvin Gittins, Francis Zimbeaux, and Lee Deffebach, as well as dance teacher Virginia Tanner and Utah Symphony Maestro Maurice Abravanel. She’s also chronicled the artistry of organizations like Ririe-Woodbury Dance Company, Children’s Dance Theatre and Repertory Dance Theatre. She is working on a film about Phillips Gallery and near to completing one on sculptor Angelo Caravaglia. In total she has produced over 200 films.

Someone should have turned the camera on Sisemore during those years, as she, too, has been an inventive and prolific artist. You’ll find her abstract work at Phillips Gallery and regularly in the annuals, like the Springville Salon and the BDAC Statewide

Annual, and three years ago, Rio Gallery featured an exhibit of her work and those she has influenced, curated by Alvey. Her life in art is being further honored this year at the Utah Arts Festival, where she’ll receive a Mayor’s Award in the Arts.

Now 77, Sisemore is still stylin’ — minus the stilettos. She sits across my kitchen table all in black, a cheery red jacket thrown over her shoulders. (Note to self: maybe dress up a bit for interviews?) Sisemore says she was teaching English when artist David Chaplin (an equally popular and influential teacher at Hillside) was at Weber and initially got her into landscape painting. “Then he took me to a show at the Art Barn and Lee [Deffebach] was showing there [with Don Olsen and Larry Elsner]. It was when she was with [then-husband] Gordon Bailey, and my first impression of abstract was ‘anyone could do that.’ But David did abstract, too— figurative abstract.

“I took a class from Lee at the Art Barn and her approach was, of course, just do whatever you want to do. Lee was a fantastic Abstract Expressionist.” The two showed together at Westminster in 1974, Color Field and Abstract Expressionist work. “She came up to the house, we were good friends, and she said will you show me how you do [Color Field] painting. I used to paint on the ground outside. I’d go to Utah Tent and Awning to get the canvas because I didn’t have any money, and I think Lee taught me how to build stretcher bars and I’d get unprimed canvas, which she hadn’t done yet, and then acrylic and watered-down stain and rollers, not as big as some of her Alph series, but big, and then brushes and poured and she watched – we learned a lot from each other. We never had the same style, though we had the same technique. “

Sisemore wanted to go to graduate school in painting at the University of Utah, but because she had no undergraduate work in art (her bachelor’s from BYU was in English) she was offered a place in a new program, filmmaking, which would allow her to take art classes as well. And many of the greats were teaching there: Doug Snow, Roger DesRosiers, George Dibble, Ed Maryon, Don Shepherd.

“Down the line, Ed Maryon suggested I go out and film LeConte Stewart — and I was just learning to use 16mm. He said, ‘You can do that. Come out with me to Kaysville. And of course the two of them were very close.’ Stewart at first said no. And refused again. “Finally Ed said, ‘LeConte, let her go with you.’ And LeConte said, ‘OK, one time, no more. ‘So my sister and I went up there and he got into his work and in 3 seconds I snapped the film. I told Connie to go to Ogden and find some 16mm film somewhere. I played like I was filming him and somehow she found the film and I got some footage and he never noticed because he was so involved in his painting. I asked if I could come again and he said sure and we became the best of friends, we became very close. He loved the film.”

She was then asked to do a short film on Tony Rasmussen. “So I shot him. And then I had to do a master’s thesis and they said, ‘Do Alvin Gittins.’ I was scared of him, but I asked and he wanted to be

filmed and we became very good friends, too. I loved him. He used to come up and watch me edit.”

She started getting grants –never making any money, but usually getting enough to pay for the film she used. There were only three people in her film class, but Sisemore resents that the university sent out a book a couple of months ago that said the film department started in 1982 with Brian Patrick and Tom Sobchack. “It started in ’72 with Mort Rosenfeld [who was murdered in 1979 while visiting the Telluride Film Festival] and that’s the group I was in.”

After graduate school (she received an M.F.A. in filmmaking and painting in 1976), Sisemore went to work for the Utah State Office of Education as producer-director-writer for educational films and programs for classrooms, educational programming for KUED and National Satellite Broadcasting. There she met digital artist and U. assistant Professor Edward Bateman.

“I was fresh out of high school and working part-time as a graphic designer to put myself through art school,” he says. “Claudia was part of the talented crew that made movies and other educational media (that she would occasionally let me help out on). She had a sensitive and modest way of encouraging people and helping them to discover their talents.

“It was actually several years before I knew that besides being a filmmaker, she was also a gifted painter and artist — and for years had shown work at Phillips Gallery. Even after I left for new challenges, Claudia continued to play a supportive role in my life. She was always there for me and encouraging my explorations in art. In many ways, she was one of the first people to believe in me – and her example is perhaps one of the reasons that I, too, became a teacher,” Bateman says.

Born and raised in Salt Lake City, mostly in rural areas, Sisemore’s first artistic love was music. She was trained as a classical pianist and hopes to take up the instrument again. “I can’t play classical music now, but I can play other things.” She also enjoys writing poetry and is reportedly quite good at it.

Which medium does she prefer? “Painting. It’s relaxing and wonderful. I need a studio because I paint in the kitchen. I used to have a studio and I painted big and I loved it. Film can be demanding and I’m not physically as able to do it as I used to be. I was in a bad automobile accident and completely tore my rotator cuff and broke my sternum and my neck and I don’t have the energy to do it now and also I don’t have the patience. Painting is never upsetting.”

Entering Sisemore’s home, which she happily shares with her little cat Toby, you are immediately impressed by the productivity of this artist over many years. An Abstract Expressionist oil, from the show she shared with Deffebach in ’74, hangs in the kitchen, dark and moody and many-layered with a couple of slashes of red drawing the eye to the left side. Two small and excellent landscapes that Sisemore painted with Ed Maryon, his notes scribbled on the back, hang nearby. A long kitchen island is clearly perfect for painting even fairly large canvases – Sisemore simply walks around it. She shows me that, however, she recently has begun painting much smaller works, on linen in acrylic, which she says “gives the feeling of oil without the mess.”

In the living room Sisemore is surrounded by her friends – carefully selected and very fine paintings by Francis Zimbeaux, Randall Lake, Don Olsen, LeConte Stewart, a small Tuscarora landscape by Deffebach and works by favorite artist Denis Phillips hang along with her own. All of Sisemore’s work here is in the Color Field style

for which she is best known. An enormous canvas above the fireplace is done in stain with a roller — vertical bands in lovely soft colors, burgundy, green, and then, surprise – an ochre stripe containing a stack of patterns – then another band of color in Prussian blue. Beautiful. Another work has horizontal color bands and is more like a landscape, the colors earthy, muted and done with a brush – still the edges are crisp and well-defined. Standing on the floor nearby are what the artist simply calls her “wood pieces” – reminiscent of shamanistic paint sticks, these tall, narrow, square blocks are painted in multicolored stacks of patterns. Other works hang along the stairways; sometimes the colorways are appealingly divided by brown string. Many of Sisemore’s paintings are more free-form, some without her notable edges, but all address pure color.

Sisemore’s success as a filmmaker is likely because she’s working from within the community. She’s one of its members, knows the works and the artists intimately. “I never met an artist I didn’t like,” she says. They are fascinating people. There’s not one I haven’t gotten along with. “

The only artist who was reluctant to be filmed was her friend Lee Deffebach. That is, until she became gravely ill.

Sisemore says, “I didn’t know I was going anywhere and I had a camera but not a mike and I had one light with me when I stopped by so it wasn’t very good quality and I didn’t get a whole film of Lee, but after she walked out with me and said, ‘I’ll probably never see you again’ and she had big tears in her eyes.” The short film was shown at Deffebach’s memorial at Phillips Gallery but Sisemore hopes to make a longer film on the famed abstract artist one day. “Lee was such an inspiration to all of us.”

She says she doesn’t really have a favorite film, “but LeConte Stewart was my first film and I’m glad I have him but there were some mistakes. And then Ririe-Woodbury, my equipment broke in the middle and I had to work with digital and I could do razor sharp with Betacam but there are some things with Ririe-Woodbury that bother me – you know, I start picking everything apart. But as far as subjects, I like them all. I loved RDT. I’d love to do Mary Ann Lee.



Photo by Zoe Rodriguez
“But see, you know what’s going to happen: I’m going to retire. But I really want to do Trent, she does exciting work. And perhaps David Maestas, he’s a fantastic young painter. It’s going to go on like that, I know it. And why not?”

Claudia Sisemore will receive the Mayor’s Award in the Visual Arts, along with fellow recipient Tony Smith, at the Utah Arts Festival, Friday, June 26, 7:45-8 p.m. on the Festival Stage. Some of their work can be seen at [Phillips Gallery](#), 444 E. 200 South, Salt Lake City.