

# CLIMBING TO

NELLIE KING SOLOMON BRIDGES ARCHITECTURE AND ART

## ARTSPEAK

ANNE CRUMP

**Name:** Nellie King Solomon

**Age:** 30

**Neighborhood:** Hunters Point

*Nellie King Solomon grew up in San Francisco, the daughter of an architect father and landscape architect/painter/writer mother. As a result, art was part of her life from an early age.*

*She studied architecture at The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in New York City, and worked in that field in Barcelona and New York before returning to San Francisco and shifting her attention to fine art. She received her master of fine arts degree from the California College of Arts and Crafts last spring.*

*Her paintings will be featured in a show at Julie Baker Fine Art in Grass Valley in May; call (530) 273-0910 or visit [www.juliebakerfineart.com](http://www.juliebakerfineart.com).*

### GETTING STARTED

Thanks to her parents' connections in the art world, Nellie King Solomon grew up with some pretty enviable artistic opportunities. For example, as a child, she spent time in the studios of artists like Lawrence Ferlinghetti; as a teenager, she attended classes at the Art Institute.

These experiences not only gave her a jump on her formal instruction, but they helped get her

### Ebb and flow:

This detail from one of Solomon's smaller works — which still measures 2 feet by 5 feet — illustrates her use of stamped shapes and free flowing paint.



thinking like an artist before she officially heeded the call.

She admits that while she realized early on art was more than just a hobby, she didn't intend art-making to be her career. Instead, she pursued architecture.

But Solomon wasn't like her colleagues at the architecture firms where she worked — at the end of the day, they were ready to kick back, but she was ready to go home and get working on her art.

### FOLLOW YOUR BLISS

"I wanted to be something else," she says, "but I can't help it. Art chooses you, you don't choose it."

And her impulse to create art was not satisfied in the day-to-day work at an architecture firm, where she rarely had the opportunity to be really creative.

When she made the decision to go back to school for her master's, California seemed like the right place to do it. It was home, which meant she had a built-in support network, and it could serve as the platform for self-reflection and exploration.

Specifically, she wanted to examine the Great West (which became the title of a series of paintings) — the wilderness, the environment, the Western lifestyle and, ultimately, the values that lifestyle reflects.

### ON MEDIUM

Solomon says drawing always has been a core activity — and it was central to her architectural work — but she also appreciates being able to work on a large scale, literally crawling in and around the work.

Plaster was her medium of choice for a while because it allowed her to challenge the formal dictates of architecture in three dimensions. She built pieces she describes as "misbehaving architecture," like buckling walls.

Later she shifted to paint, but she avoided traditional canvas and brushes. Instead, she opted for various types of plasticky paper and objects she could use as stamps with paint and ink. Her first stamping object was the lid to a gesso jar, which made large, round "dots" on the paper, but she now uses more official tools created by cutting large wooden dowels so they leave large, oval prints.

The printing technique makes it possible for her to remove herself from the mark, she says; the shape left by the stamp doesn't reveal a gesture the way a brush stroke does: "Then it lets me build wilder things."

She also likes to experiment with a variety of inks and paints, making as many as she can herself.

"I want materials that do magic things," she says — materials that react with each other, that contain impurities, that blend to other colors, that bleed on the paper.

# NEW HEIGHTS

## ON PROCESS

At the center of Solomon's studio is a large table, covered in spongy layers of carpet padding, and two free-standing ladders. She rolls out large sheets of paper on the tables, then crawls across them to stamp shapes on the surface, creating colorful designs in her wake.

Working flat allows the paint to form puddles, and pressing the paper into the foam near these puddles allows the paint to spill and flow freely across the paper's surface.

"I let myself lose control," she says. "I want to get it out of my own hands."

From time to time, she perches on top of a ladder to survey a piece as a whole and contemplate her next move.

She works on one piece at a time because once she finds a rhythm, it gives her momentum.

"It's physically taxing, but it's fun," she says.

## ON STYLE

By working on a large scale, Solomon can create atmospheric pieces: "I want to charge empty space," she says. The scale is also a form of rebellion against the small-scale projects and controlled, disciplined practices in architecture.

Western landscape and the environment continue to be sources of inspiration, she says, but their influence is less apparent now — both to the viewer and in her consciousness.

For her "Great West" series, she limited herself to black ink and the shape of the gesso-lid dots. She explains that it was partly because she likes to give herself assignments (a holdover from her architecture background), and partly to allow herself to discover a rhythm in making each piece.

"I wanted to use the simplest shape possible," she says, adding that the dot forced her to focus on the specific spot where she was applying paint. "I'm always thinking about each mark and its relationship to the others."

Now she more often uses ovals, which connote a sense of speed, "like a bullet," and she works in rich color — sometimes capturing bright, electric hues.

## ON IDEAS

Solomon says when she's working, she wants to generate feelings that "transcend the everyday." She wants to capture the sensation she gets from skiing, or climbing out of the water after surfing, or even from driving.



KAREN VIBERT-KENNEDY/Examiner

**On top of the world:** "Whenever you give yourself limitations, you gain freedoms," says Nellie King Solomon, who uses printing techniques to create large-scale, atmospheric paintings.

And, hopefully, it's a feeling that can be passed on to the viewer.

The finished product is less important to her than the process of making the piece because that's where she makes discoveries — whether about how to answer formal, technical questions related to materials or her composition, or something on a more personal, emotional level. The richness of that experience is what resonates with her, no matter what the finished piece may look like.

"There's an honesty in the work, but it's also coded," she admits. "Working abstractly allows you to show the strength of what you're doing without revealing the subject."