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## Artist on the City

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Once a year, artist and New York resident Sara Garden Armstrong leaves home to come home. That is, to her first home here in Alabama—more specifically, the 21st Street Studios nestled on its namesake street in downtown Birmingham.

Work your way through either the downstairs hair salon or around the back entrance, up the stairs and through the heavy, painted wood door (affixed with a wrought iron gate Sara Garden Armstrong's mom insisted on installing when Armstrong bought the place in 1979), and you'll have arrived at one of Birmingham's funkier artist hot spots.

Stepping into the Studios is like entering a refuge away from the bustle of the city, a relaxed microcosm of aggregated artists where creativity is cultivated and works of art sprout. The two-story space houses the workspaces of 12 local artists of varied ages, backgrounds and styles. It is here, surrounded by the original hardwood floors that Armstrong hand-sanded herself, the wall-length windows that let in a cascade of natural light, and the rustic brick walls painted white and dressed smartly with diverse artworks — both finished and works in progress — that some of Birmingham's best art is crafted. The open yet cozy space allows the artists to inspire each other, creating a community of creativity among the artists of 21st Street.

"It's about having an energy," Armstrong explains, her pride in this studio clear in her tone. "To look over and see someone else working — that energizes me."

Armstrong has her own unique pathway that eventually led her to who she is today: an established New Yorker with Southern roots. After graduating from Birmingham-Southern College with a degree in education, she went back to school a few years later to get her undergraduate degree in art, followed by Master's in both fine art and education. When she first bought the space downtown, Armstrong immediately converted the rough-around-the-edges interior into a contemporary loft she happily called home. Once an old industrial building that housed X-ray equipment in its early days, the studio quickly became the birthplace of decades of local works of art.

Over the years, the space has continually transformed to meet the needs of those working within it. Says Armstrong, who is now the landlord of the entire space, "I've always loved working on this building." She explains that she regularly gathers with the artists to get a better feel for how the interior needs to adapt next to best suit the inspired minds of the Studios.

A few years of renovating the studio, creating art and teaching an assortment of art courses at the University of Alabama at Birmingham passed before the itch for a new adventure overtook Armstrong. An artist's journey is always changing and never rigid, after all.

"I wanted to figure out how to move to New York. And I couldn't figure that out," she jokes. Turns out, it was as simple as packing up a suitcase and catching the next flight up there.



Since her move to the big city, Armstrong has conceived beautiful pieces, with her most recent creation being a commissioned work for the United Therapeutics Corporation in Silver Spring, Md. The 40-foot-long sculpture, titled "Decem Aspirare," or "Ten to Breathe," is nestled in the atrium of the seven-story building. The large piece is meditative, according to Armstrong: "You'll walk by it, and you might see it, or you might not." If your eye does happen to catch the subtle presence of the sculpture's rendered bronchi and trachea, however, it is hard not to stay mesmerized by the organic, sinuous form. But this piece is more than just a static sculpture of metal tubing and stretched, hand-dyed fabric; it is a living,

breathing form. And, if the buzzing atrium catches a moment of stillness, you can hear the gentle whirring of the lung components inhaling and exhaling.

Much of Armstrong's inspiration draws from the meshing of her two, contrasting homes in Birmingham and New York. "It's been a gift to be a Southerner in New York," she says. "When you're a Southerner, you can make things happen."

Armstrong talks of the wonderful conversations afloat throughout the varied New York neighborhoods and how those unique interactions motivate her creative process. In fact, she says that in New York it seems that everyone is always at work. When it comes to creating her art, however, she admits that not much is different between the Big Apple and the Magic City.

"I find myself doing the same thing I do here [in Birmingham] — isolating myself so I can work," Armstrong says.

So when she gets the chance to come back down South during the summer to check on her studio, Armstrong is given the rare opportunity to integrate herself into an art scene entirely distinct from that of New York, one that takes her back to where it all started here in Birmingham. And while New York is the better known of the two cities, the art that is created in Birmingham has its own unmatched personality. She says that "a little bit of beauty [and] a little bit of edge" is what gives Southern art its stamp of originality.

When Armstrong made the move to New York, she was excited to experience the creative vibes that emanate throughout neighborhoods like Queens and Harlem. Yet, year after year, as she makes the trip back down to 21st Street Studios, she admits that she finds herself within a community just as inspiring — a collection of local artists as diverse as the residents that walk among the streets of New York.

21st Street Studios will always be the home that welcomes Armstrong back to Birmingham, a fusion of urban style and Southern charm. As she puts it, "This is my Queens melting pot."