

THE STUDIO READER

ON THE SPACE OF ARTISTS

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Thomas Lawson

I have a straightforward relationship with my studio; it is the place where I make my work. I have two skylit rooms, the larger and brighter of which is where I work on the paintings. This room is minimally furnished, with a worktable, a rolling cart for paint and brushes, and a couple of chairs. At any given time there will be one or two works in progress, and a number of recently finished pieces stacked against the walls. This is a resolutely practical space. When I am there I am either sitting down, looking closely at a surface, considering a next move, or I am standing in front of the work, making that move. On occasion I invite someone over to take a look at what I've done. The other room is more intimate; if the larger space is dedicated to the act, this is a space of memory and consideration, the central nervous system mapping and guiding decisions over a span of thirty-plus years. This archive is dynamic—information is added and rearranged all the time. Older ideas resurface to enrich new ones, which grow in the shelter of experience.

These rooms are in a building on a busy thoroughfare in a complex and thriving city. Art is made of the noise and distraction of the street, the passing signs, multiple voices, the endless cacophony of the city. But it can only be brought to fruition at some remove from all that, and my workspace is in the back of the building, withdrawn from the hurly-burly. Back there I reflect, make notes, begin to order my thoughts, and in time bring things into shape, give them form and color.

I stress the everyday quality of this space because the idea of the studio is too easily inflated past recognition. Gustave Courbet painted a version of this mythic space, a grand theater for the display of his talent, his model, and his fans and collectors; that the model stands naked while all the rest wear coats and hats only underscores the cruelty of the fantasy. But why shouldn't artists celebrate their hard-won successes? Thus, the gaudy trophies of financial success, the castles and palaces collected and built by artists as various as Frederic Church and Pablo Picasso, find an ascetic counterweight in the strict modesties of Mondrian's room or Pollock's shack. The great stand-off between



Thomas Lawson studio,
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ostentation and authenticity blinds an avid public eager to visit (through on-site restoration, re-creation within a museum, or the vicarious snooping made possible by real estate websites and blogs), to the daily reality that artists find in the spaces they feel most comfortable in—and need to produce art. In some cases, the appearance of such places, the elements of design consciously brought forth, may throw some light on what they make, but for most artists the best studio is neutral and practical, no more and no less than a place to get away and work.