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THE ARTIST'S SPACE

FIND THE PERFECT STUDIO TO MAXIMIZE
YOUR CREATIVE OUTPUT.

BY BETHANY MURRAY

“WHERE DO YOU WORK?”

Artists don't always have a clear answer to this often-asked question. A studio is not just a place of business; it's a home, a lifestyle and a creative environment. Yet many artists, consumed with supporting their work, fail to evaluate where they work best.

Lennie Mullaney, an award-winning plein air oil painter in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, found a place where she could dedicate her life to her passion, learn how to manage her time and relationships, and create rules for her work. Artists can glean valuable lessons from her experience, as well as the experience of other artists in various work environments.

Before launching her painting career, Mullaney earned multiple advanced degrees and worked as an art teacher as she raised a family. During that time, the self-taught artist treated her own painting as an indulgence. But when her husband passed away in 2009, Mullaney came to a crossroads.

“Although I had a great art-teaching job, a house with a beautiful ocean view and many plein air painting friends, I wanted to immerse myself in the total study of painting,” she says.

So she sold her house and relocated to the University of New Hampshire, where she completed her MFA in painting.

“[I was] doing nothing other than going to school and painting full time,” she says. “It was the greatest gift I have ever given myself. I was deliriously happy working myself to the bone.”

A year after graduation, she landed a studio space at the Button Factory in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. With high ceilings, old brick walls, large windows and exposed beams, Mullaney's studio is an artist's dream. But if you ask her where she works, she responds simply, “Outside.”

LEFT TO RIGHT: Lennie Mullaney's studio in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. “Pierce Island Bridge,” Lennie Mullaney. Bethany Murray's studio in Glover, Vermont.

Mullaney develops an intimate understanding of her subject's space and environment. While painting her “Bridges of Portsmouth” series, Mullaney woke up early to enjoy the morning light and observe the work crews moving cranes across the skyline. She also constantly changed her vantage point and now uses the entire world as her studio: sketching furtively to disguise her work from curious human subjects; working from a kayak in the Piscataqua River; or setting up on top of buildings in Kittery, Maine.

An artist studio can be anywhere. Although some places might be more convenient than others, an artist should beware of looking like an artist rather than working like one. It took Mullaney years before she found the perfect rhythm and setup for her indoor and outdoor studios. As an artist, you should put energy into establishing a proper workspace. Finding the perfect studio setup will not only help you create the best work, but also enable you to produce more work.

A HOME AWAY FROM HOME

Being self-aware is a challenge in and of itself, but knowing how and when you get distracted is an essential question in your studio search.

Charity Malin, an abstract and minimalist artist working almost exclusively with found textiles, says that having an audience and a deadline aids her artistic process.

“I can work anytime in whatever space I have, but I am much more productive when I have an audience,” she says. “I need a deadline. Without a deadline,

my studio time is spent with my mind wandering and distracted. On the other hand, if I must produce something, I do.”

Malin says that the artist-run gallery MOCA DC, formerly located in Washington, D.C., gave her opportunities to show her work and provided the pressure she needed.

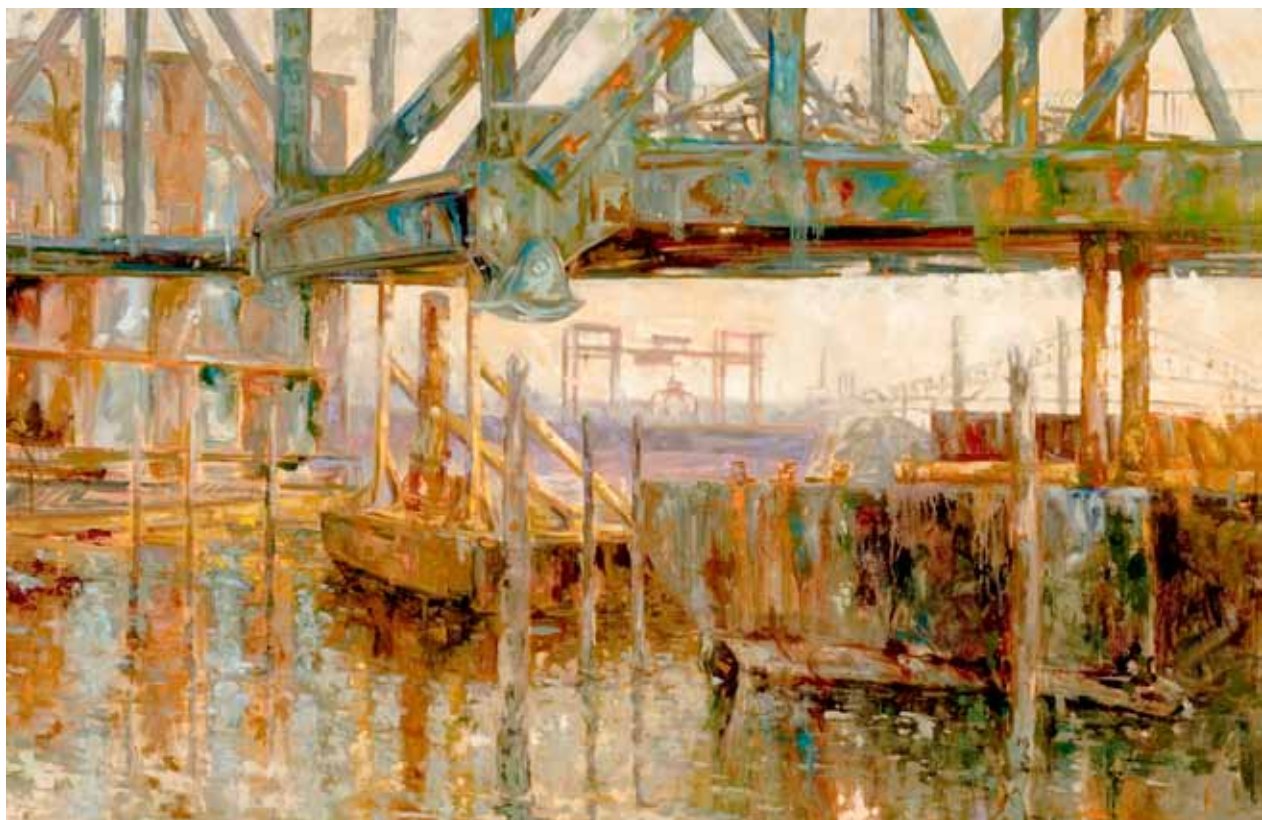
“[MOCA DC] ran monthly, unjuried exhibitions, so I would give myself the challenge of creating something new for as many of the shows as possible,” she says.

With high ceilings, old brick walls, large windows and exposed beams, LENNIE MULLANEY'S studio is an artist's dream. But if you ask her where she works, she responds simply, “Outside.”

She always remembers to keep an open mind, despite the multitude of opinions in her workspace. Malin says that she is selective about whose critique she listens to. “Art is very subjective, and everyone has an opinion. I am careful to take advice from people who understand what I am trying to achieve.”

Some artists thrive in a studio space with their peers. Connecting with the energy of others can help artists focus on their own work. Peer pressure, in this case, can be a positive force. With critique or technical advice always on hand, an artist can break through a creative block among a built-in artist community making risky, beautiful and creative pieces. For some artists, however, the biggest distraction comes externally in the guise of socializing.

Mullaney knows that she works best when she's alone. Although advice and critiques are valuable, they can also be problematic. It's often too easy to check in on a neighbor a white wall away when frustrated or “uninspired.” Knowing whether you would take advantage of that proximity should factor into your decisions regarding workspace.



LEFT TO RIGHT:
 "Scrap Metal," Lennie Mullaney. "White Pants," Charity Malin. "The Place," Steve Sangapore. "Topiramate," Bethany Murray.

A live-work studio space can be a good solution for those easily distracted by others, eliminating commute time and allowing you to passively observe your work in progress. However, artists with a live-work studio must be disciplined and internally motivated. Solitude can support concentrated work, but it can also lead to complacency. With the rest of life so close to work, an artist must exert self-control to stay in the art space.

For Steve Sangapore, a Boston-based

The artists

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Charity Malin

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Steven Sangapore

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Bethany Murray

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painter and graphic designer, owning a home studio is a financially viable solution that allows him to immediately act on a burst of creativity.

"I need and thrive on solitude and comfort when embracing visual creativity—an

atmosphere which allows my conscious forefront to mellow into a state of visceral creativity," he says. "A peeling back of the metaphoric scab to a place that is both vulnerable and highly empowering."

But Sangapore also sees the value of an external or group studio.

"Many artists find that a rugged, outside home environment like a studio complex or rented space is more auspicious to creativity," he says. "The disconnection between the home and creative space is important to many artists. It's where they can turn off daily life and be truly expressive."

MOVING IN

Before looking for the ideal studio space, learn what time you work best. If you are a night owl, consider paying more for a studio that allows 24-hour access and a shower. If you work best in the morning, you might look for large, full windows to maximize early-



morning light. Mullaney doesn't wear a watch when working, but lets time unfold organically.

"I don't feel young or old or awake or asleep," she says. "I'm in a totally different place to exist for a while."

Finding studio space is difficult, especially in many metropolitan areas. Government agencies can be good starting points, but expect to do some legwork. Some large cities offer artist-certification programs. The Boston Resident Artist (BRA)-certification program qualifies artists for live-work studios and work-only studio spaces. Living in an artist building offers amenities such as open studios, gallery shows and proximity to other artists and art buyers. However, these places are frequently expensive and have long waiting lists. Artspace.org also offers a network of live-work units and studio spaces, with 35 affordable arts facilities across the United States. But as with the BRA, expect waiting lists for these hot spots.

When searching for other options, Craigslist is still king, especially if you need a place with running water, 24-hour access, bathrooms and other amenities. You can also find gorgeous studio spaces by reaching out to your network on LinkedIn and other social-media sites. There's often no substitute for pounding the pavement and making phone calls.

Perhaps you're not a plein air painter. Perhaps you hate working in the mornings. Perhaps you work best with the hum of other artists around you. Maybe your studio, like mine, becomes a hurricane with the painting as the eye of the storm. Regardless of the where, when and how you work, always go to the studio.

For Mullaney, the rules of art are simple:

"Discipline. I tell my family, 'I'm going to work,' and I go every day. I don't wait to be inspired. I don't say, 'What am I going to do today?' No. You work every day." **ABN**

Inside the author's studio

"The live-work studio has been a salvation for my work as an artist. I cannot work in a shared studio space for many reasons, including the frustration I feel when someone's Katy Perry album blasts throughout the space. I work best in the early morning and late at night, so the live-work scenario has always been ideal. Plus I like having my dog hang out in the studio. This setup allows me to work in two- to three-hour bursts, and I can focus the time entirely on painting, rather than commuting to and from a separate studio space. Plus, I work in Boston, where finding studio space is akin to finding the Holy Grail, even if you can afford the cost. Live-work situations are best when the artist is independently motivated, works unusual hours and can compartmentalize the living space from the artistic space."—*Bethany Murray*