

a place APART



by **Mary Heebner**
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For nearly 30 years, I had a marvelous studio at the Alhecama Arts Center (AAC), a complex in the heart of Santa Barbara's historic district. At its peak in the late 1980s, the AAC had 18 working artists, including painters, ceramicists, a glass blower, animator, screenwriter, architectural drafter, and framer/woodworker. The complex also had an on-site ensemble theater and an art gallery. After being deeply embedded in one place for so long, I then shuttled my studio through five moves in two and a half years, finally landing in my current space.

The photos in this article belie the short time I've had this studio, as it seems every nook and cranny is filled with stacks of flat files; shelves brimming with books, rolls and reams of paper, pigments and paint; and walls serving as work space and showplace. While the five moves involved a significant disruption to my workflow and impacted my concentration, the transitions also provided opportunity for me to examine my work habits—what was essential and what could be pared down or eliminated. I began to question the very definition of what a studio is to me.



I decided that there were three essential components to a well-functioning studio: First was an open, well-lit room for painting and drawing—a space where I can leave projects and materials on the table or floor, so they can “talk to one another,” and I can return to them another time. Secondly, I need a place for writing and reading. Reading and writing are soul food for me, giving ballast to my imagination and depth to my understanding. Thirdly, was a place to

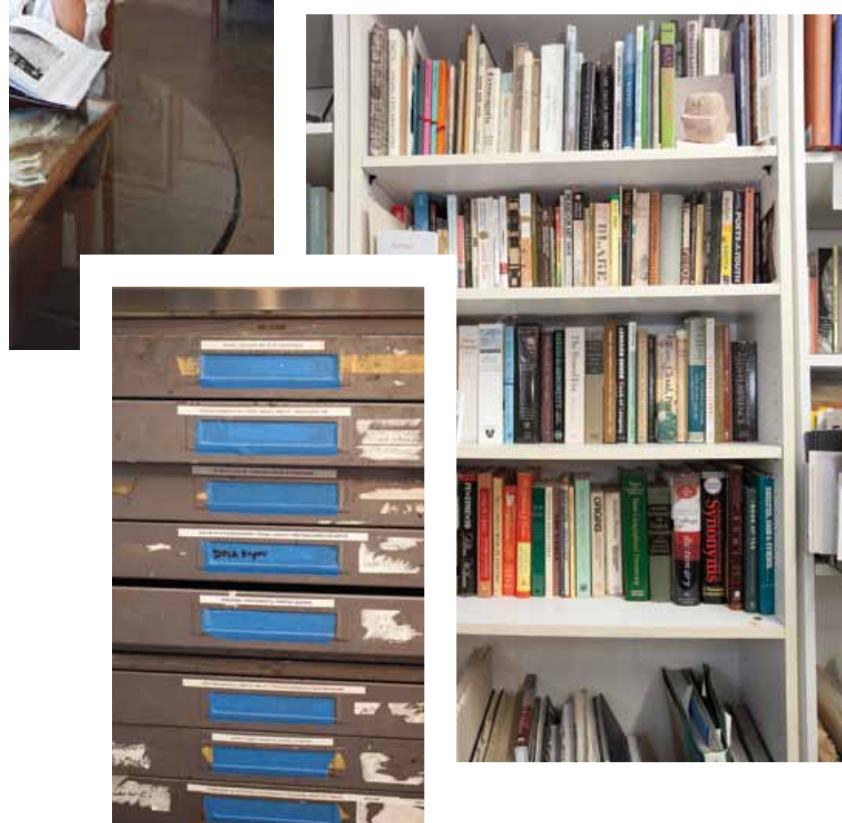
dream—largely in that numinous time between sleeping and waking.

My current studio—an old industrial building complex on Santa Barbara’s east side—meets these criteria. It has an entrance in front and a roll-up door at the rear, which when opened, offers an even, soft light. I often don’t even need to turn on the overhead lights when I am working.

My favorite piece of furniture is a long table made from four 50" x 38" flat

files that, in their 40 drawers, contain all of my unframed work from 1971 to the present. I configured the flat files into two stacked units, drawers facing outward, and capped them with a galvanized metal top that serves as a great surface to lay out work in progress or to display paintings and books.

On my desk in the front area of my studio, I have a computer with two monitors, so that I can have reference materials on one and my writing



documents or images on another. Opposite my desk is a wall with four bookcases filled with books related to art, general reference, poetry, and literature. Adjacent to that is my drawing table, where I make prototypes for books, read, map out ideas, and draw.

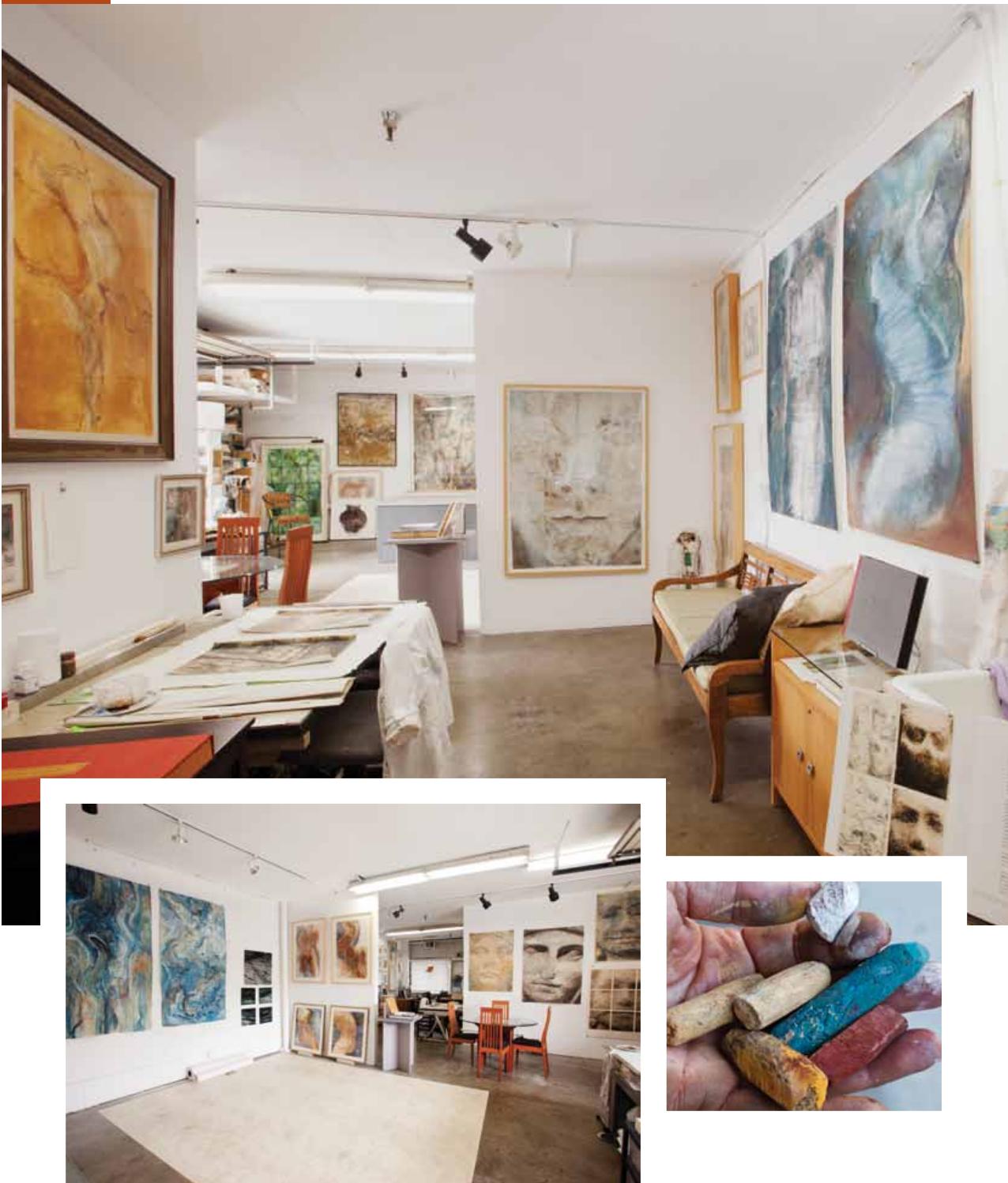
I have pared down my supplies and keep them in drawers of small plastic carts on wheels. I place a large sheet of industrial glass over one drafting table and use this as my palette. Using water-soluble powdered pigments and paint, I can spray and razor-scrape the glass surface easily.

Storage is an issue in most studios, and this space is no different. I rent additional space to store the framed work I have accumulated over 40-plus years.

For those 40 years, I have worked primarily on and with paper, some of which I make myself in Santa Barbara or in New York at Dieu Donne Papermill, and some of which I have acquired in my travels to Nepal, Thailand, Mexico, Sikkim, and Chile. I also buy from fine paper outlets, such as Hiromi International in Santa Monica.

After receiving my MFA from the University of California in Santa Barbara, in 1976, I worked exclusively in mixed-media collage. Collage for me is less about addition than elimination, paring down a composition to the absolute essentials. I continue to make collages as well as paintings and drawings, some of which incorporate photos, greatly altered through over painting. I am currently experimenting with some prototypes in a factory using anodized aluminum panels.

studios *featured studios*



I make grid collages, exemplified by my series "Geography of a Face." I use powdered pigment, binder, acrylic paint, and graphite. I usually work on the floor, from all four sides, aerially. I then pin the piece onto the wall, determining which way is up and what next to do. Tools range from fine brushes to roughened sticks, but my main tools are my fingers. One series of paintings, "Unearthed," based on ancient vessels, are large finger paintings. My most recent work includes a series of paintings called "The Blues," which are on long sheets of Japanese paper and evoke the feelings associated with music, water, and the flow common to both.

An extension of my studio work is the great outdoors. I have had the good fortune to travel extensively with my photographer husband, Macduff Everton, on assignments that have taken us to the high desert of Chile's Atacama and to the deepest gorge on earth, the Kali Gandaki in Nepal. I often write the accompanying magazine article to his photo assignment, and I have written books in concert with Macduff's photography. I always keep a detailed journal-sketchbook that often facilitates my re-entry into the studio after having been away. Travel increases my humanity, makes me take risks, reveals and undermines my prejudices, and stretches my conceptions about art. My work is deeply influenced by geographic travel as well as time travel, indebted as I am to the artists from the past.

My work explores the connection between figure and ground—emphasizing that we carry landscapes within us. I am animated by the exchanges between word and image. This is



satisfied in part by making limited edition letterpress artists' books under my imprint *simplemente maria press*. I am currently working on my 15th limited edition book, based on the "Geography of a Face: Khmer" series of paintings and journal notes.

My third requirement for a studio is the space and time to dream. I dream pictures—eyes closed, images of fluid beauty intermingle with mundane anxieties and sweet longings. This dream state is a cave each of us enters every night, if we are fortunate, and like a studio, it is a place apart, a space in which to assess, recapitulate, condense, edit, and improvise upon the buzz and clamor of the everyday world. Unlike a blank sheet of paper that contains only possibility, this inner cave is teeming with images, life, and action that is projected, erased, and refigured over and again. If I am lucky, a few fragments of words or images may stay with me and carry into the physical studio to become a new mark upon a blank sheet of paper.

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See "Resources" for information on Mary's books.