

The Studio OF WILLIAM MATTHEWS

By Sara Gilbert Frederick



During the peak of the COVID-19 crisis in the spring, William Matthews was spending a lot of time in his studio, and he didn't mind it a bit. His custom-built studio, which sits behind his home in Denver, Colorado, has always been his sanctuary. It's his personal space, a place where he can be completely alone and paint in peace.

Usually, however, Matthews has appointments to keep at his gallery and office in Denver's RiNo Art District. That 12,000-foot space includes a woodshop, a frame shop, meeting areas, a public gallery, and his office space. He almost always has projects to work on and people to meet there, but that changed several months ago.

At 70, Matthews knows that he's in the more vulnerable age for contracting the virus, so the usually active artist was in his studio more often than he previously had been. "These days, I'm much more reluctant to go anywhere," he says. "I do still go downtown, but not every day—and I spend less than an hour when I go. I



check in with everyone—we all wear masks and stay six feet apart—and then I skedaddle."

Matthews doesn't have to worry about social distancing in his studio; it's always been a protected space. His wife, Laura, visits on occasion,

but she understands how he works and respects his space. "I don't let anyone in there," he says. "Painting, for me, is a very private thing. I need to be able to do it with no one else around. I like dead silence so I can concentrate. That's why I sepa-



rate my two worlds; I need to have a place to meet people and a place to paint."

Matthews has been finding places to do both in Denver since 1972, when he moved from Los Angeles, California, where he had been painting album covers, to Colorado. Initially, he rented a studio in the LoDo (lower downtown) neighborhood and is still in the area. "I've had a presence there for the past 48 years," he says. "I've had studios in a number of different buildings in Denver."

About 10 years ago, Matthews bought an old, brick-faced warehouse space in RiNo. Originally two warehouses connected by walkways and passages, he consolidated them into one large building that he renovated to fit his needs.

There's a spacious public gallery at the front, which Matthews and Laura often use to host events and fundraisers. Along with his paintings, Matthews uses the space to display some of his collections, which include several guitars that hang around the upper level. Housed in



a special display case is one of the guitars he designed for the Martin Guitar company. The space also includes an antique display case that came from the Kelvingrove Museum in Glasgow, Scotland, and that is full of what Matthews calls “curiosities.” Another case is full of old artistic materials, including watercolor boxes he has collected from around the world.

Behind the gallery is a woodshop where Brien McDonald, Matthews’ friend and colleague of 25 years, makes frames, furniture, and more to match Matthews’ designs. “He’s an amazing craftsman,” Matthews says. “He’s been my perfect foil for all these years. He’s just extremely smart and talented.”

Just beyond that area is a frame shop where paintings are photographed and the frames are assembled. The space also includes a storage area and a sitting room where Matthews assembles his team to tackle big projects.

Matthews’ office is located above the gallery. “We popped the top off the building and built a giant pyramid on top,” he says. “From my office, I look out across the street at a giant clock tower; I look right at the clock itself. It’s amazing and completely operatic.”

The view from the studio behind Matthews’ home is no less grand, although it’s certainly less urban. That studio was built to sit within a triangle of spruce trees that are each at least 100 years old, with one of them located no more than a foot away from the studio itself. Matthews factored the trees and their continued prosperity into the design of the studio. So that the structure doesn’t infringe on the root systems of those trees, it sits above ground, supported by 17 helical piers that are threaded into the ground.

Matthews included several windows in the building, which provide a lovely view as well as abundant natural light. They are augmented by skylights built into the roof that he can control as needed. A large, slanted window lets in the north light, and two sets of doors—an 8’ by 8’ arched door and a set of French



Hard Candy, watercolor, 22" by 29 1/4"

doors—allow immediate access to the yard and garden.

This studio is filled with many of Matthews’ favorite things, including old books and new guitars. He’s been collecting books for years, es-

pecially those related to art and design. Bookcases throughout the studio are full of primers on lettering, color theory, and more. He has so many books that the bookcases can’t house them all. “I love old books,”

he says. “There are stacks of them everywhere.”

The guitars have a special space on what Matthews refers to as the mezzanine—a platform built over the heating and mechanical units that is accessible from the studio by seven stairs. He’s been collecting guitars for years and often plays them. When he’s painting, however, he prefers quiet.

“I put music on sometimes but, if I’m really focusing on something, I’d rather it be completely quiet,” he says. “I need to be able to listen to myself, to hear my thoughts. When I’m working, I get into a meditative state and don’t want to be interrupted—not even by Johnny Cash.”

The studio includes several workstations. A large wall easel is built just around the corner from the arched door that leads out to the yard. That area, Matthew says, is constantly in use. Nearby is a large, flat painting table where he likes to work with watercolors. In the center of the space are standing easels and flat easels, each one on castors, so he can move them around the room as needed. Also sharing space in the studio are an old chalkboard—a turn-of-the-century antique—and a mirror that comes in handy when Matthews wants to view his paintings backwards, which helps him identify any imperfections.

The studio walls are filled with drawings and sketches that Matthews is using for his current work. In late April, many of those drawings depicted furniture that he and McDonald were working on together. Also on the wall was a poster he had been working on for the Telluride Bluegrass Festival in June—which had just been cancelled. “They still want to do the posters,” he says, “but now we’re having a hard time finding someone who can print them.”

Many of Matthews’ supplies are stored in antique cabinets and cases. One holds a collection of old dividers, T-squares, rulers, and other tools that he employs regularly while he works. Brushes are lined up along a table, and paper is stored in a series of long, deep drawers in a cupboard he had made in the Shaker



Western Changes, watercolor, 30" by 50"



Trio, watercolor, 22" by 22"

tradition.

Matthews’ studio, he says, is exactly the way he wants it to be—and that is by design. He began his undergraduate studies at Carnegie Mellon, intending to major in both architecture and art. “I ended up going with painting,” he says, “but I still carry a torch for architecture and spaces.”

Matthews drafted the design for

his studio and was involved in every step of the building process. “I drove everything,” he says. “I was there for every detail, every step of the way.”



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