

A Studio Built Around Curiosity

BY CATHY CAREY

Creativity lives everywhere in my home, but my studio is like a spaceship waiting to take off. When I'm in there, I surround myself with art supplies, interesting things to look at, neat colors and textures that inspire me, my journals and sketchbooks, my yearly printed portfolios, and art books on every subject you can imagine! That environment launches me into the highest realms of creativity.

My painting studio may have its own room, but my creative life extends far beyond it; it moves into the garden, settles onto the patio with a watercolor box, fills journals and sketchbooks, and appears in paintings throughout my home. Usually, my dog, Pookie, is somewhere nearby.

I have lived here for only about a year-and-a-half, and yet the whole house has already become my studio. I like to have different stations of activity: an oil painting easel area, a watercolor drafting table, a journal-writing library, and a space by the fireplace for fiber works. I also like to keep all of my supplies and creations organized. When my materials have a place and my studio feels orderly, my mind is free to wander.

As a child growing up near Mount Vernon, Virginia, I spent much of my time outside. I made tiny moss gardens, built forts from sticks and leaves, drew, painted, and invented worlds from whatever I could find. It was my way of exploring and making sense of the world. I still explore and investigate as part of my creative process.



I have been self-employed as an artist and have worked within creative fields all my life. I ran my own graphic design studio for 25 years, worked as an instructor at an art institute, and wrote a workbook on color theory; throughout it all, I have always exhibited my paintings. I've been represented by galleries in the Southwest for more than 15 years. The Ranch at Taos Gallery is a great place to see my work, and my newest location is Hugo Rivera Gallery in Laguna Beach.

Being a woman in the art world has not always been easy. I sometimes feel that I have not been seen or heard at the same rate as some of my male counterparts. It has made me work harder and hopefully smarter. But there has also been an unexpected gift in not being taken as seriously as others: It has given me the freedom to develop on my own, without worrying as much about conforming to what others expected. My creative path has been an organic, self-driven process, following the questions, discoveries, and ideas that interested me.

Today, I am a full-time painter living in Southern California. My studio is part painting space, part library, and part laboratory for ideas. The space is primarily designed around oil painting. I keep my brushes, paints, and palettes close to the easels, and when I pull up my chair to begin, I imagine I am getting into the cockpit of a spacecraft. I have drying shelves and painting racks to hold my work after painting and varnishing, and I designed a storage rack that safely contains many sizes of canvases. Finished pieces, works in progress, and older paintings remain around me in an ongoing visual conversation.







My computer occupies another area in my studio. I scan my filled sketchbooks and journals, enabling me to combine sketches and change the size of elements to quickly explore new compositions without redrawing everything. I also photograph and catalog work my work. This area is where I communicate with galleries and collectors, write, research, teach, and manage the business side of being an artist.

If my studio is my spaceship of inspiration, then my journals and sketchbooks are the rocket fuel. I journal almost every day. Some pages contain writing, some watercolor sketches, and others observations, questions, or ideas that may not become paintings for months or even years. Watercolor allows for flexibility, as it is portable and immediate. I love the way it feels to work with watercolor, to follow the lead of the water like a dancer.



When I want a change of perspective, I take my watercolors outside, where I am visually invigorated! My studio looks out into a lush garden filled with palms, flowers, succulents, birds, insects, and the occasional visiting creature. I sit at the red table with a small watercolor set, my little spray bottle, and my journal. Sometimes I deliberately study the details, while other times I simply pay attention to the whole.

My recent "Systems of Awareness" paintings explore perception and the relationships between ourselves and the natural world. I am interested in how awareness changes what we experience. Once you begin looking closely at a garden, you notice pollinators moving between flowers, birds appearing and disappearing, shadows changing, plants competing and cooperating. You begin to see relationships. Those observations find their way into my paintings as visible forms representing relationships or states of awareness that can't otherwise be seen.



5 Ways I Keep Creativity Moving

1. Change your point of view. If an idea isn't moving at the easel, go outside with your watercolors, open your journal, or take a walk.

2. Keep a journal nearby. Write, draw, paint, and record what catches your attention. It doesn't need to become anything.

3. Give your tools a home. An organized studio means you can spend your energy creating rather than searching for supplies.

4. Live with your work. Sometimes you suddenly understand what a painting needs simply because you've been looking at it.

5. Ask questions before changing something. What part is working and why? What isn't working and why? Don't do anything until you know the answer; otherwise, you may mess up the parts that are already working!



My oil paintings often begin with a gold-toned ground and a loose drawing. I apply the paint so the gold shows through. Years ago, a teacher told me I needed to "tighten up"; instead, I discovered blind contour drawing, which helped me perfect my looseness! I learned to trust my eye and hand, allowing lines to wander and forms to emerge. I seek to cultivate a curious sense of mystery, and I want a painting to surprise me. In fact, I intentionally create situations in which I don't already know the solution. After painting professionally for decades, there are many things I know how to do, but knowing exactly what I'm doing isn't necessarily the same as being creative.

To me, creativity begins when I encounter a problem I don't know how to solve. Sometimes I deliberately start with something difficult; other times, a color isn't working, a shape feels wrong, or I've made a mark I immediately want to change, and there's a little flash of panic: Oh no, I need to fix this! But that's when I become most creatively engaged. Now I have a problem to solve and need to find an answer I didn't already know. When an idea isn't moving, I change what I'm doing. I might work in watercolor, write in my journal, stroll through the garden, or take Pookie for a walk. Changing activities changes what I notice.







I've come to think of my studio not simply as a room but rather as part of a creative ecosystem. It starts with blind contour sketchbooks, then watercolor sketches for color surprises, followed by writing about my ideas in journals. Throughout the process, I am curious about how things work and the deeper truths in life. The questions become themes for my paintings. Encountering my paintings throughout my home reinforces the visual language I've been developing over a lifetime.

I believe that life is an exciting, surprising adventure to be discovered. Color is the emotional vocabulary of a painting; it brings the feeling of the piece to the story. After all these years of painting, I am still fascinated by the direction a painting takes when I have lost the story and have to make up a new one to solve the problem. That is when I feel fully creative, exploring my internal universe. Curiosity is what keeps me walking back into the studio.







Cathy Carey is a contemporary color expressionist painter whose work explores nature, perception, creativity, and the invisible relationships connecting living systems. A graduate of Virginia Commonwealth University, with a BFA in painting and printmaking, she has maintained a professional studio practice in Southern California for decades. Her recent "Systems of Awareness" series investigates how perception participates in the reality we experience. Carey also teaches, mentors artists, and serves as Chair of the Oceanside Museum of Art Artist Alliance Planning Council. Her work can be found at *artstudiosandiego.com* and on Instagram (@careyartstudio). She welcomes email at *cathy@artstudiosandiego.com*.

Photography by Robin Barrett and Cathy Carey.