Spaces:
Carl Rainey in Bethlehem, Georgia

by Brendan Carroll / July 15, 2015

Artist Carl Rainey's studio on his 15-acre property in Bethlehem, Georgia.

As a co-organizer of SEEK ATL, a roving crit group for artists that visits a different studio every month, Brendan Carroll has seen a lot of solutions for some artists' most pressing concerns: Where to find a good, cheap place to make work? In a series of articles called "Spaces," he is evaluating the pros and cons of the many places and means by which artists make their work, which models are most beneficial to various working styles, and the unique benefits and amenities offered by different working environments.

Quitting a day job and supporting oneself as an artist represents a form of success akin to "making it" as an actor. Simply having the opportunity to work all day, every day, in one's studio marks the beginning of some kind of insane dream that doubles as every parent's nightmare. It's the dream we have as children when we say, "I want to be an artist."

Carl Rainey took an ancillary route to achieve the aforementioned dream. But, in so doing, he found himself vexed by another problem: finding a supportive space to show his large-scale art and, furthermore, garnering recognition.

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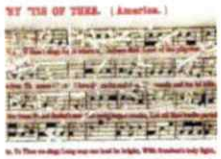

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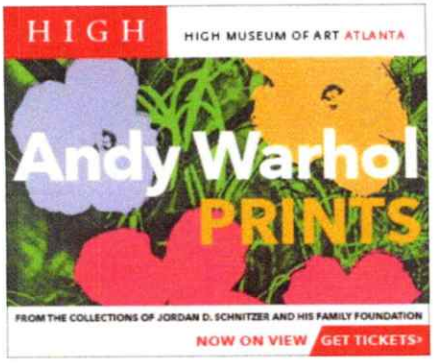

stables are empty of their equine residents and stand unused. Instead, Rainey built two new structures, a mammoth 4,800-square-foot dream studio, and the other, a modest modular home roughly one-quarter the size of his workspace.

Inside Carl Rainey's studio.

Rainey has always been a maker, good with his hands and critically astute. He had wanted to be an artist as a young man but practicality got the better of him, and he put his skills to use during a 29-year career for CISCO Systems as an electrical engineer. Years of steady pay, and finally retirement, provided Rainey the opportunity to create the large-scale artistic projects he had previously imaged. The studio he built has 16-foot-high walls, huge garage doors, a full arsenal of power tools, and vast outdoor spaces for sculpture. Rainey uses all these amenities to build and display sculptural paintings made of wood, steel, canvas, and acrylic paint. The finished pieces often extend 10 feet in every direction. Rainey's latest work included motorized swiveling panels illuminated by multicolor LEDs.

I asked Carl if he had explored using an industrial space in downtown Atlanta rather than working so far from the city. "I did look downtown, but it was expensive. I wanted an outdoor space, and the city was too noisy. I wanted peace and quiet." Certainly, Rainey's environment is now quiet, but he acknowledges that finding an audience, or even a viewer of his work, can be difficult when living so far from the city. "Sometimes the only person that sees my work for weeks is the delivery guy, or the plumber." And it hasn't been much easier convincing gallerists, collectors, or other artists to make the 50-mile trek either.

Inside Carl Rainey's studio.

Rainey's work is ambitious, but opportunities are limited and challenges abound for an artist making public-scale works in a rural outpost of a state ranked 50th (dead last) in the country for funding the arts. And that is the conundrum that Rainey's studio engenders. Many artists seek quiet studio spaces that allow for maximum attention to their work. Yet, the isolated locations where this is possible can make it difficult to show, sell, or receive recognition. So perhaps an important question to ask oneself before choosing a studio is: how important is recognition? An idealist might argue that making art is fulfilling in and of itself. But I know few artists who never want their work to be seen. Rainey himself acknowledges that his studio represents the freedom and privileges many artists long for. And yet the works produced in this isolated space seem unfulfilled until recognized in a public environment so different from their making.

It's a trade-off really. Urban spaces are typically more expensive, crowded, noisy, and include other artists and personalities with which one might find loathsome objection. The rural studio mitigates these negatives but separates the artist from the city centers so vital to their livelihood. The artist must ask: Is it more untenable to deal with the pressure and struggles of cutthroat urban art shenanigans or to be separated from opportunities for public recognition? This question could be relative to individual circumstance and perhaps it's a bit hyperbolic. But, I think it's prudent.

Brendan Carroll is a painter living in Atlanta.

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