

Create a Space That You Won't Want to Leave

Returning to art after more than 30 years, **Betsy Ashton** finds that working in a studio surrounded by other serious artists helps her stay focused while working on commissioned portraits.

BY DANEYAL MAHMOOD



OPPOSITE PAGE: Ashton's studio provides ample natural light through large windows. To make sure her tools are easily accessible, she keeps her palette on a makeshift stand that reaches hip height. "I use what was a rolling computer stand," she says. "I place my large palette on top of the stand and have a roll of paper towels and brushes spread out beside it. The stand also has a niche for legroom that perfectly holds my lidded garbage can—very handy for tossing paint-filled paper towels."

Photo: Ben Berlin

Photo: Bo Zaunders



Before becoming a full-time artist, Betsy Ashton was a radio and television news reporter and anchor in Washington, DC, and later in New York City. “That was an insatiable, lucrative, and fun career that lasted 20 years,” Ashton says. “I returned to painting in 2006, and after two years of ‘tuning up’ my dormant skills at the National Academy School of Fine Arts and the Art Students League of New York, I went out on my own.”

Ashton first rented a small studio space at the Women’s Studio Center, in Long Island City, New York, but she mostly used it as a storage space for her old art supplies and canvases. When the center dissolved three years ago, “I moved across the street into Reis Studios. Reis Studios is a community of artists located in an old factory building in what used to be a manufacturing district. Last spring I moved to a slightly larger space with north light, brought in some of my old home-office furniture, rigged up a very portable stand for models, and I

couldn’t be happier.”

As with many artists, the layout of Ashton’s studio evolved organically. Through another painter, she bought old easels, a file cabinet, a rolling computer stand that she uses as a taboret, a desk and chair, a book case, some wonderful art books, a small refrigerator, and other useful items at “fire-sale prices,” she says. She was able to create an office area, a painting area, and a storage area. “My first real purchase was a metal rack of

warehouse shelving for the canvases, and I got a handyman to help me put it up. Planning was mainly a question of what would fit along the wall space and away from the old radiator that runs full-length under glass brick windows. Gradually, I replaced the desk, files, and bookcases with solid cherry pieces from my old home office and put the old stuff out in the hall for someone else to make use of.”

Every year Ashton participates in the Long Island City Arts Open Festival,



Photo: Ben Berlin (left); Bo Zaunders (below)

RIGHT AND BELOW

For her portrait of U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Pike Jr., Ashton took several reference photographs and created detailed drawings to help her determine the best composition for the finished piece. “I interview my subjects extensively, watching their natural gestures and poses, and listening to what they say about spaces and places that have special meaning for them,” the artist explains. “Then we go to that location and I do an extensive photo shoot on-site. These were taken at the 7th Regiment Armory.”

Photo: Bo Zaunders (right); Ben Berlin (below)



LEFT
Sunrise in the South of France
2009, oil on linen, 30 x 36. Private collection.

TOP
Ashton has several racks for storing canvases.
ABOVE
The artist stores her paints in the freezer in pill containers in between sessions.





Portrait of Susan Tweekrem
2010, oil, 48 x 36.
Private collection.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Connie Shaland Rabinowitz
2010, oil on linen,
24 x 18. Private
collection.

during which she opens her studio to the public for a weekend. “I send email invitations to a long list of friends, family, clients, and potential clients and then I clean up the studio for the event,” she says. “This involves picking up the model platform, arranging recent paintings on easels, and placing my portfolio and guest book on stands where visitors can peruse all of my work, procedures, and prices and leave comments and their contact information for future events. And, of course, my partner Jim comes in and

sets up a wine bar and serves nuts, cheese, and nibbles—we all have a great time.”

“I love the time I spend in my studio,” she continues. “It is my space alone, not shared with anyone else or for any other purposes. I feel wonderfully peaceful and productive there, even when a painting needs a lot of work.” For many artists, having a home studio is the ideal setup to foster creativity and prevent procrastination. Ashton, on the other hand, has found that distance makes the heart grow fonder—even if it is only a four-block commute. “I think the fact that my studio is outside my home is very important,” she says. “I have to get up in the morning and go somewhere to work, just as I used to do when I worked in television news. There are three floors of studios in my building, filled with working artists of all ages. It’s great to be in a totally quiet space near other artists who are working behind closed doors. It’s not a place for dabblers, and the atmospheric energy, aspirations, and professionalism rub off on all of us and keep us going on those otherwise uninspired days.” ■

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Photos: Bo Zauders



About the Artist

Betsy Ashton studied art at the American University, in Washington, DC before becoming a television news reporter and anchor. After 20 years in the industry—during which she was the first reporter to draw her own courtroom sketches while covering trials—she returned to art full-time in 2006. Ashton resumed painting portraits at the urging of renowned painter Everett Raymond Kinstler, whose workshops she attended at the National Academy School of Fine Arts, and the Art Students League of New York. She has also studied with Mary Beth McKenzie, Sharon Sprung, Wolf Kahn, Peter Cox, and others. She is a member of such organizations as the Portrait Society of America, the National Arts Club, and the Cecilia Beaux Forum. For more on the artist, visit www.betsyashton.com.

ABOVE

“These are my favorite brushes, by the Silver Brush Company,” Ashton says of the tools in her hand. “Everett Raymond Kinstler recommended them, and they’ve made a huge difference.”

LEFT

“I learned that brushes last longer if they are laid flat, not stored standing on their wooden shafts,” the artist explains of her storage system. “Since I buy fine brushes, extending their life is very important.”