

Where Inspiration Lives

A Hill Country artist's studio that was built for creativity

BY CHRIS WARREN



PHOTO BY DROR BALDINGER

Patzy Halliday has never been an artist who required awe-inspiring surroundings to produce good work. In fact, the ceramic artist fondly recalls her favorite former workplace: a small, non-air-conditioned wood hut surrounded by bamboo that was plopped behind her midcentury San Antonio home. “That was probably the best mojo I’ve had to work in,” she says.

That is, until Halliday enlisted the help of local architect Tobin Smith to build a small studio amid the natural splendor of Box Canyon in Vanderpool—a place where the rolling hills, cedar trees and starlit sky can’t help but fortify and focus an artist. For Smith, though, Halliday was a different kind of client than usual. Along with a beautiful place, she needed space for practical features like a working kiln to buttress her artistic vision. Still, while Halliday clearly has her own strong visual sense, she had just one requirement of her architect. “I told Tobin that I was looking for the feeling of working outdoors,” she says. “He’s the artist on this one. I’m the tenant.”

Which is why it’s appropriate that Smith began his work designing the studio, which is set apart from a main house that was built in 2006, by spending lots of time sketching ideas in the canyon. “It was critical to be on-site to find the perfect spot to nestle this little structure in relation to the man-made and God-made context,” Smith says. “On those early visits to the property, I was locating trees, gauging distance to the main house, considering possible floor elevations and calibrating the view angle down the canyon while creating the initial sketches.”

The resulting studio reflects that carefully chosen sense of place. With large glass sliding doors—which Halliday has pushed her worktable up against—the primary view down the canyon is both sweeping and ever-present as Halliday paints or molds clay. Its positioning set into a hillside also provides the studio with a southeastern breeze sufficient to cool the space during the Hill Country’s hot summers, a task made easier by an angled overhang that protects the glass façade from the harsh afternoon sun.

Other design elements and materials choices were driven by pure practicality. A large wood pile along the northwestern façade simultaneously provides shade and fuel for an outdoor fire pit. The concrete floor, hot-rolled steel and composite panels on the interior are a nod to the messy realities of Halliday’s work and can easily be hosed down when it’s time to clean up. Halliday also has easy access to an outdoor kiln, which is surrounded by concrete, corrugated metal and an overhang.

Since she started working in her new studio last year, Halliday has noticed some obvious changes in her work. Though largely a ceramic artist, she has found herself pulled to painting, an evolution she credits to her stunning location. “I have painted a lot more landscapes than I ever have before,” she says. Ever more impactful, Halliday says her new location has profoundly changed her mindset. “I feel free in this new space to do art that makes me happy. Before I was into pleasing and creating what someone would want to buy,” she says. “Now I just make things because I like it, and more people are interested in my work now.”