

MICHAEL DUDASH

The Studio

By Mary Nelson



Michael Dudash's 2,100-square-foot studio is nestled on a scenic, five-acre lot in the small Irish city of Rathdrum, Idaho, a small town just north of Coeur d'Alene. Working with a contractor, he designed and built a beautiful studio, one that would stand out and have a certain "je ne sais quoi." The interesting shape resembles a church from the outside and could easily be remodeled someday to accommodate a large RV by taking out two interior walls and adding a larger garage door.

"That's the way I designed it—a big main room," Dudash says. "At its core, it's a large pole barn structure. On the sides, it's stick-framed, using two-by-sixes that frame the office and bathroom and workshop. I wanted to make the building look a little more interesting than just a box." With the help of his builder and friend, Dudash built the one-story building with the main paint-

ing space at one end. It's tall, with 12- to 14-foot ceilings in the middle and sloped on the sides, giving the studio interesting eye appeal.

"It's a little deceiving when people walk in here through that red door on the side of the building," Dudash says. "They [walk into] a great big room and go 'Whoa!'"—surprised at the size of the 832-square-foot main room where he paints. The other 1,300 or so square feet has a small garage centered on the other end and a large storage room in the middle of the structure. Those areas are flanked by a full bathroom, an office, and a workshop, all surrounded by windows.

LED lights simulate the north light that Dudash prefers. The rest of the space is divided into workspace and storage space. His office houses two comfortable chairs and a computer that he uses for painting design and photo editing. He has another computer set up for book-



keeping, correspondence, finances, business, and writing.

"There is a wow factor when gallery and museum reps] come," he says. "I can fit a lot of people in here. Everyone's impressed. It's well organized and flows really well—a serious work space. I've worked in basements and garages and everything you can imagine. I feel almost guilty having this great space to work in."

Although the studio is large enough to have a kitchen, that wasn't part of the design. "I put a utility sink in the main room," Dudash says. "Right next to it is a small, portable refrigerator on the counter and on top of that is a small microwave."



Books are everywhere in the main room and in his office. A big easy chair on the north side of the main room provides a comfortable spot for Dudash to sit and read—or to take a nap. The adjacent cherry drawing table is one he made in art school. “I’ve been carrying that around for 47 years,” he says. “It’s an adjustable, handmade table.”

The painting area includes a networked computer with a large monitor that Dudash can use to look at his digital painting designs or to pull up reference material for whatever he is painting. A small TV is conveniently

mounted, allowing him to watch internet content and, occasionally, an old movie. Because of the number of reenactments and photo shoots he’s attended over the years, Dudash has approximately 200,000 digital photographs that he can call up immediately to include in a painting.

Dudash’s studio space also includes a small music room. “I’ve been a lifelong musician,” he says. “That came within a hair’s breadth of being my career.”

Born in a small southern Minnesota town, he began playing music in high school and eventu-

ally ended up pursuing a career as a country blues guitar player, ending up on the East Coast. After six years of making music, Dudash decided to leave that business and pursue a career as an artist. He briefly settled in Vermont, where he met Valerie, and the two later married and moved to Minneapolis, Minnesota, where he enrolled in an art school. That was short lived, however, because McGraw Hill Publishing division hired him as a staff illustrator after he had completed just one semester.

“I always had the sensibilities of a drawer and a painter,” Dudash



A World With No Fences, oil, 28" by 38"



Misty Trails: Native Nomads of the Tetons, oil, 36" by 36"

says. "I didn't really want to be an illustrator but, needing the income, I took the job with McGraw Hill and won several national awards in the first year."

After a year in Minneapolis, the couple moved to Vermont, where they could raise their family and Dudash could work as a freelance illustrator. He quickly found an agent in New York and began to illustrate magazines, movie posters, book covers, and more. "I did a little bit of everything," he says. "What I thought was going to be a couple of years in the illustration world turned out to be 23."

As computers took over illustration in the late '90s, the need for traditional illustrations, using oil paint, rapidly declined, and the time was ripe for Dudash to follow his heart. While freelancing, he had also been selling his personal still life and landscape paintings through a gallery in Vermont. In 2002, he also began to sell his work through a gallery in Arizona. Early on, the owner of that gallery told him that, if he wanted



The Sacred Ties That Bind, oil, 30" by 24"



Warrior of the Morning Sun, oil, 20" by 16"

to do Western-theme work, it would sell in a heartbeat.

Eventually, Dudash thought, "Why not?" So he dressed up in cowboy gear, with a gun slung over his shoulder, photographed himself, and used that photo for his first Western painting but wasn't satisfied with his own face or head. That's when serendipity took

over. While attending a friend's wedding in Vermont, he noticed a quintessential cowboy saunter onto the scene, wearing a cowboy hat and boots. Dudash wrangled some photos of the man, went home, took out his painting, and replaced his own head and face with that of the man he met at the wedding. He sent the painting to his gallery, where it was an instant hit and sold in one day.

"I figured someone from upstairs was knocking on my attic door," he says. "I had been searching for a focus for my art, and here was my opportunity. Western subject matter could be my future. I knew it would take a lot of research

to do it right. I decided to do narrative stories from the 19th century."

Dudash has loved American history since he was a child, so it was a natural move. His fascination with Western history is evident in the studio décor. As he shifted from illustration to Western fine art, he was making eight or more trips a year to the West and moved to Idaho 12 years ago to get closer to his subject matter.

He also began to collect cowboy gear. Among the vast array of artifacts in his studio is a 125-year-old Vaquero saddle he bought from an old cowboy in Oregon. "He used to sit on it on the porch as a kid," he says. "The tapaderos [stirrups] that hang down are just ancient. It looks like something out of an archeological dig. I love looking at it." A rideable saddle, guns, and rifles that he uses with his models are scattered around the studio and influence its atmosphere.

Dudash also started to collect Native American memorabilia—

Cheyenne leggings, furs, piles of wool blankets and buffalo robes, a trapper's basket, and several sets of moccasins. A large elk hide that hangs high on one wall is a commanding feature. The only thing he doesn't have, but really wants, is a buffalo head, but he says he can't justify paying \$5,000 for it.

Paintings cover nearly every surface of the studio. "That's typical of many artists to have art in the studio," he says. "Paintings from the many workshops I've done over the years, including a lot of portraits, fill the walls, which also include some 'orphan' paintings from my gallery and Western work. I also occasionally pull out an old illustration or two from the hundreds I still have in my collection."

Dudash spends eight to 10 hours a day working in his studio. "I am incredibly blessed to have such a wonderful place to work in," he says. "Creatively, it's where one prays that the magic will happen." ❧

Mary Nelson lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

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