



TERESA ELLIOTT

# The Studio

By Mark Wilcox

A perky, curious French Charolais, swirling the reflective water it's churning through, gazes over Teresa Elliott's shoulder. She's not outside, but the half-finished, 23" by 30" painting of the cow that sits on her easel feels at home in the dry, open landscape outside her studio window.

Elliott's studio overlooks the Que Dice Ranch with 10,000 open acres of hills, buttes, and desert plants. Cattle often wander through the vista, so it's not surprising that Elliott has made them her subject matter ever since she pivoted away from graphic design, copywriting, and illustration and into a full-time career as a fine artist. She did so in 2006, the same year she and her husband bought the property in Texas on which her studio now sits.

The painting of the water-slogging cow sitting on her easel is classic Elliott fare. Her works often showcase longhorns, cows, vast Southwest skies, and limitless viewsheds. Other times, she paints portraits of the people who work the land or she'll mix it up on a classical portrait with a modern flair. Her vivid treatment of a classic approach has earned her invitations to prestigious shows.

The career topper, Elliott says, is being invited to show her work at the Prix de West at the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma in June, and she's enthusiastically preparing for the Autry Museum's Small Works in February. Her ca-

reer, however, began on a much smaller scale.

Following her graduation from high school, Elliott worked at Six Flags Over Mid-America in St. Louis Missouri, where she created realistic pastel paintings of guests at the amusement park—and did so quickly at an attraction called the

Fast Draw. "Pretty soon, there was a long line behind my easel," she says. That hard, muggy summer doing quick-fire portraits in

a booth was a far cry from the studio in which she now works.

Elliott's studio perches some 5,300 feet on a knoll in the West Texas mountains near the small town of Alpine. It's in quintessential Texas ranch country where she is

*"I can really incubate here."*

living the quintessential Texas life. The 800-square-foot studio sits on 11 acres of land and is built on a foundation of lava rock. It's surrounded by scrubby evergreens, yucca, and cactus dotting the landscape in an almost pointillistic style.

The land dips away from Elliott's roost before rising into an iconic and beautiful lava butte that feels about as "Texas" as any view possibly can. Her north-facing studio windows provide the best light for painting while also framing massive views that retreat into the Chihuahuan Desert much like the speeding roadrunners that frequent the area do.

Speaking of roadrunners, one of them found its way inside the studio while Elliott was painting. She used the opportunity to take several reference photos and videos of it before cornering it, opening a window, taking the screen off, and returning it to the great outdoors. She's also had encounters with hummingbirds that pass through during their migration to or from Mexico, which is only about 80 miles south of Alpine. At times the diminutive birds have fluttered into the studio, aimed for the skylights, and gotten stuck trying to get out. Other encounters with wild turkey, deer, white-wing doves, javelinas and the eerie night sounds of preying coyotes and puma reinforce the fact that Elliott and her studio are one with the desert.

Elliott shares her home with her husband Peter Czamecki, but her studio, just steps from the house, is almost a sacred place. Peter, who is retired from the medical-supply business, has been known to drop in to check on his wife's paintings. "That's been a problem," Elliott says. "He likes to come in and tell me, 'You need to put a mountain in the background.'"

While that unsolicited advice can be irritating at times, Elliott values his availability when she gets stuck and needs an outside eye and voice. She will occasionally seek him out as she works to get his ideas, spend a breezy lunch with him on the deck, or just go for a walk with him and their two dogs in tow.



*Sudden Storm, oil, 48" by 36"*





*Palo Duro Canyon, oil, 24" by 30"*

Elliott especially appreciated Peter's input when they were planning to build her studio. She shared her wish list with him, which included a big north window, French doors, porches to relax on or work on while priming canvases, track lighting that simulates gallery lighting, diffused skylights to allow in natural light, Santa Fe-styled twisted columns, a bathroom with a shower, and beautiful utilitarian-stained concrete floors. She also wanted lots of win-

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*(Top left) Cibolo, oil, 30" by 40"*

*(Bottom left) The Cooler, oil, 24" by 30"*


dows—but later discovered that she wanted too many of them.

"I have them covered up because I don't need all that glare," she says, adding that, if she were to do it over again, she wouldn't have as many windows as she does now. On the flip side, Elliott says she could never work in a "warehouse situation" where all work takes place under artificial lights.

Elliott's studio is a cacophony of creation. It houses carts of supplies that include easels, a stereo for piping in music as she paints, art books, artwork by artists she admires—including a recent acquisition from Aaron Westerberg—and half-finished paintings of her own.

A four-foot-by-five-foot painting

of a brahman cow sits unfinished, while other unfinished works also await her attention. Elliott loves to start a painting but often stumbles over the middle of it. "The middle part is always the hardest, and then the end is when we find it," she says, adding that she knows a painting is finished "when the struggle is over." So it is that she works on multiple paintings at a time.

Although Elliott takes reference photos during her walks with her husband and outings to cattle shows and ranches, the magic happens in her studio. "I can really incubate here," she says. 

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*Mark Wilcox lives in Cache Valley, Utah.*