

The Studio

OF TIM CHERRY

By Sara Gilbert

Tim Cherry describes the studio in his Branson, Missouri, home in three quick sentences: It's small. It's not very glorious. And, it's usually neat and tidy.

"Everything has its place," says the sculptor. "I'm a pretty neat person. I try to keep my studio as clutter-free as I can; that's just my nature."

That clutter-free approach is evident on the workbench in one corner of the room, where the band saw, the grinder, and all of the vises are tucked into their prescribed locations. It's obvious in the various sculpture stands that Cherry rolls up against one of the crisp white walls before he closes the studio door each evening. And, it's equally apparent in the clean lines and striking silhouettes of the clay sculptures he crafts in the space.

"I guess that the art does have to be an extension of the artist and his personality," Cherry says. "My favorite saying is 'Keep it simple, stupid,' so I try to go with that in my sculpture."

Space for an in-home studio was one of the main selling points, when Cherry and his wife Linda bought their u-shaped home in Branson 15 years ago. One wing of the house was unfinished space, when they moved in. Although it was relatively small—just 16 feet wide and 26 feet long—Cherry knew it could serve as his studio. He lifted the ceilings, added eight banks of fluorescent lights, and closed off a corner closet for his workbench and tools.

At the time, Cherry's primary goal was to be close to his girls: Linda and their daughter Amber, who was still quite young when they moved into the house. "Linda worked and still does," Cherry says. "Amber would come and go from school, and I could be at home when she was there."

Cherry also likes being able to open the door, grab his fishing rod, and walk to the lake across the street



to fish for an hour when he needs a break. He likes that he can head out and mow the lawn, if he's struggling in the studio. He likes that he can sit on his front porch with a cup of coffee and watch various critters scuttle by.

"It's not a glorious space by any means, but it's been a really good space, both work-wise and family-wise for me," Cherry says. "That's been real important for our family

and for me personally and professionally, as well."

One of Cherry's solutions to working in a small space has been to affix wheels to almost all of his equipment, including three sculpture stands, a large table, the stand he uses for monument pieces, and the crude heat box he built to keep his clay soft and pliable. He rolls his various works in progress around



Tim and Tikka (his studio assistant)

the studio as he works, parking the one he wants to focus on directly in front of a 4' by 7' mirror hanging on the south wall of the studio. "It's pretty invaluable to work in front of that mirror," he says. "I can see the other sides as I'm working on one side, which really helps."

Cherry wheels everything against a wall at the end of the day. "I like to be able to walk in and see the strong silhouettes against the white walls," he says. "I'm always looking around at different angles, looking at the shape, the lines, the silhouette. I play a lot and experiment a lot."

On any given day, Cherry might move between any of the five or more pieces in progress in the studio—another reason it's helpful to have everything on wheels. "As I figure something out on one piece, then I'll hop from one piece to fix it on the others, as well," he says. "I try to learn as I go. If I'm working on a shape or line on one, then I'll see that it would help over on another, as well. So I just bounce around from piece to piece."

There are, of course, a few stationary objects in Cherry's studio. There's a long bench against the north wall that holds his stereo,

his reference books, and blocks of marble that eventually will become bases for his finished pieces. There's also a cabinet where he hides any clutter that accumulates, and a set of shelves where he displays the small maquettes he makes in advance of starting a sculpture.

Most of the art on the walls stays put, as well, including seven paintings and drawings by friends and mentors that hang on the north wall. One is a pastel of a fox by Forest Hart, who helped Cherry get his

start many years ago. Another is a drawing by Fritz White, one of Cherry's mentors. "He has passed away," Cherry says. "Having that drawing of his on the wall means a lot to me."

But the pieces hanging on the east wall—the wall affectionately known in the Cherry household as "the wall of noses"—are taken down and moved around from time to time. "I was a taxidermist a long time ago," Cherry says. "I took study casts of many of the different animals that



Branch Bender; bronze, 17"Hx38"Lx7"W



came in, so now I have true, three-dimensional reference materials.”

In total, Cherry has plaster casts of the faces of between 25 and 30 different animals on the wall. The largest is a buffalo; the smallest is a mink. At any point, one of them might be plucked off the wall and used as a reference while Cherry is working. “I absolutely do refer to them,” he says. “I often take them down and hold them in my hands while I’m working.”

Once or twice a year, Cherry has to turn his tidy little studio into a messy, mold-making room. He waits until he’s built up a sizable quantity of work and is ready to prepare them for a trip to the foundry, which is more than 800 miles away. Then he covers the floors with tarps, hangs plastic on the walls, covers the tables, and gets busy molding. “It can get very messy,” he says. “That’s just the nature of the beast, so I try to cover everything the best that I can.”

The mold-making process usually takes a week or two, depending on how many pieces Cherry has to mold and how large they are. Each piece has to be painted with hand-mixed rubber, then covered with plaster. When the plaster dries, Cherry breaks apart the molds. That’s the end of the process—except for the cleaning—before forging at the foundry.

For a day or more, Cherry’s studio time is spent breaking up the bigger chunks of plaster by hand, sweeping up the ubiquitous dust, and shaking out the tarps and table coverings. He mops the floors and dusts the shelves. “The plaster dust goes everywhere,” he says. “When it’s all done, I have to do a



floor-to-ceiling cleaning in the studio. Sometimes I can enlist my wife to give me a hand, but generally it’s just me.”

Cherry admits that he’s excited to get his studio tidied up, after the molding process is complete. But even then, remnants linger. “I leave the originals of the pieces I’ve molded in clay for awhile, just to be sure the molds work,” he says. “Once I know everything is okay—and as I need the space and the clay—they start disappearing. I break them down and re-use the clay.”

Occasionally, Cherry makes an exception and keeps an original piece. “If it’s a piece that I particularly like, that I feel is important, or that I learned something from, then it may be able to stick around,” he says. “I’ve got an owl sitting on one of the speakers in my studio. He can find a perch somewhere in here.” But, even when he has to recycle favorite pieces, Cherry doesn’t mind working in a small, unassuming space. “Bigger is not always better,” he says. “We’ve talked about moving or building something new, but I’ve been here for 15 years, and I don’t really want to start all over again. We’re happy where we’re at.” ^{AV}

Sara Gilbert is a writer living in Mankato, Minnesota.