

Excerpt from Contra Costa Times Artful living and working

By Jennifer Modenessi

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Artist Ann Weber works at a simple sawhorse table in her live/work space in the Emeryville Artists' Co-op. Photo: Lane Hartwell/Staff

Artist Ann Weber's studio is full of creative surprises. The large cardboard-and-bronze sculptures that she exhibits in museums and galleries around the country fill the downstairs area. Those made during a February residency at San Francisco's de Young Museum dangle from the ceiling. And the antique wooden bed ... a work-in-progress, perhaps?

"It's my guest room," Weber says with a laugh about the dreamy, romantic alcove

that houses her heirloom bed. "My daughter sleeps here when she visits."

Weber's studio, you see, is also her home, one of 56 live/work spaces inside two buildings of the Emeryville Artists' Co-op. Once labs and repair shops owned by Shell Oil, the spaces were transformed by artists into studios and established by the city of Emeryville as nonprofit, affordable housing in the 1980s. Similar artist communities exist in San Jose, at the Art Ark; at the Montalvo Arts Center in Saratoga; and at the Tannery Arts Center in Santa Cruz.

For Weber, form meets function on a daily basis: When it's time to create, she sets up a worktable made from a long plank of wood and two sawhorses. When it's time to party, she whips up meals for up to 20 people on her minuscule gas stove. And when she wants to rest, she heads upstairs to her sleeping nook and draws the curtains surrounding her bed.

"Anyone can make beauty out of copper and marble," Weber says. "But it takes a clever, resourceful person to make something out of nothing."

That describes the kind of people who call the co-op home. Individually owned by painters, sculptors, dancers, photographers, musicians and architects, the live/work spaces have housed Rome Prize winners, Guggenheim Fellows and National Endowment for the Arts honorees. Rather than conduct open studios, residents play host to curators and gallery owners. And when a highly coveted space becomes available, which rarely happens, the competition to buy it is stiff.

"As soon as I saw this place, it became my major commitment to get in," says Catherine Courtenaye, a painter who lives in a sun-splashed, bi-level 1,200-square-foot studio amid her canvasses emblazoned with abstract calligraphy. Courtenaye discovered the co-op in 1984, the same year she finished graduate school. She began subletting and three years later, was able to buy her own space.

"But it was a real pit," says Courtenaye, who began renovating the dark, raw space. She painted the walls white because painters, she says, need as much light as possible in which to work. She installed skylights and added a bathroom upstairs so she wouldn't have to use the communal toilets and showers down the hall. And she put in eco-friendly bamboo flooring.

Recently, Courtenaye had a false wall built downstairs that doubles as storage and as a place to hang her paintings.

Then there's the sink, because every painter needs a place to wash brushes. But this is no ordinary sink.

She made a sketch of her ideal sink on a napkin and gave it to a carpenter friend. He built Courtenaye a custom sink and storage closet out of plywood coated with

marine epoxy. When Courtenaye opens the doors, which blend so seamlessly into the wall you almost don't notice them, the sight of the three-foot-long amber-colored sink makes you catch your breath. It's big enough to double as a dog bath. Party guests have expressed their envy — one even said if Courtenaye ever sold the place, he'd buy it and use the sink as a bar.

Her creativity isn't limited to her studio. Several years ago, Courtenaye and a friend created a dog run for her pet whippet, Tintoretto, where there once was nothing but a dirt pile.

It now is an oasis filled with the scents of roses and pink jasmine, a place where birds' songs nearly drown out the rumblings of not-too-distant trains and big rigs.

Although high-tech companies such as Pixar and Novartis are neighbors, this part of Emeryville hasn't completely lost its gritty, industrial flavor.

But that's easy to forget when you're standing in such a peaceful, fragrant spot.

Artist Mari Andrews has a green thumb, too. She grows chard and lettuce in the raised beds of the co-op's organic gardens and tends the potted succulents that thrive in the greenhouse-like atmosphere of the building where she lives.

The large brick structure has attractive common areas that Andrews, who sits on the co-op's board of directors, has had a hand in beautifying. For example, she found long, rustic tables at Urban Ore in Berkeley, and hung a chandelier that bathes the common hall with candlelight. It's the perfect spot for a dinner party with neighbors and friends.

Her personal live/work space, around 1,200 square feet, has the feel of a laboratory, or maybe a natural-history museum. Parts of her studio have even been displayed. Several years ago the Oakland Museum used Andrews' soil specimens in a show about artists and the things they collect.

"I wish I'd been a botanist," Andrews says as she lifts one of the hundreds of bottles and jars that line the shelves inside her studio. A draftsman who has transitioned into sculpture, Andrews collects and displays all manner of natural material that she uses in her art.

But while her "drawings made with wire" cover all of her downstairs wall space, the 315 square feet upstairs are reserved for the bedroom, kitchen, dining and living areas.

"I have a rule. I do not have my artwork upstairs," Andrews says. "When I go upstairs, I can get away from it."

Downstairs though, she is in her element. She talks with reverence about the different seeds, pods, branches and other things she finds and saves for future projects. Her office, which is next to the bathroom, is filled with her artwork and that of her friends.

She is a registrar at San Francisco's Crown Point Press, and many of the works she owns are prints.

But she admits there are storage problems. "There's no solution to the space issues," she says, "but I make the most of it."

That's just what artists do. They make the most of things. And Weber, Courtenaye and Andrews have made their little corners of the world shine.