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SCULPTURE STUDIOS AND WORKSPACES

The studio of Wm. Couper. Library of Congress.

THE STUDIO OF WALTER MATIA

BY WALTER MATIA, FNSS

Photos courtesy of the artist

“Most things that are important have you noticed, lack a certain neatness.”

—Poet Mary Oliver

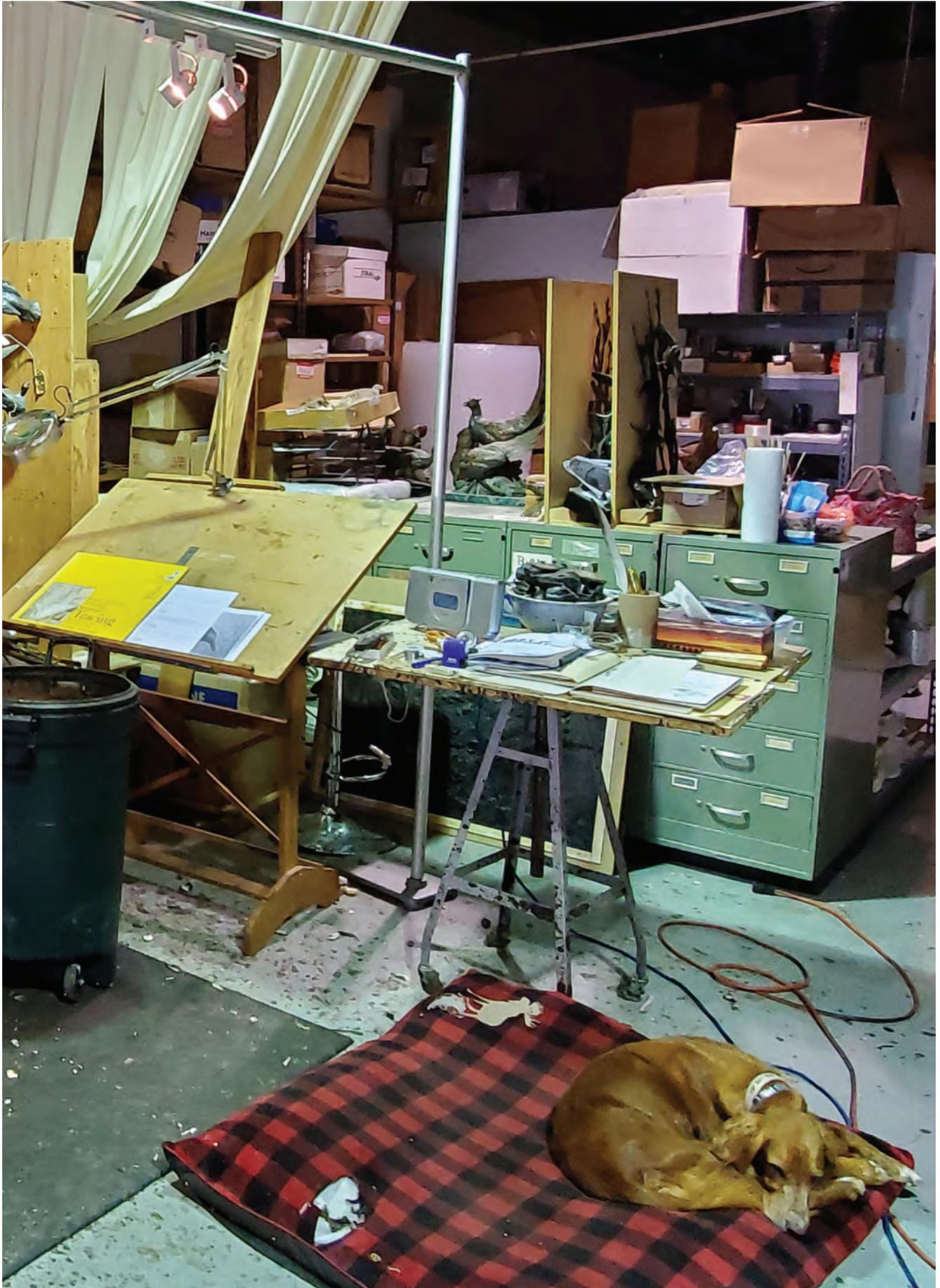
My current studio is the fourth in a line, starting in a spare bedroom, moving to a basement, graduating to a garage, and now occupying a bay in an industrial warehouse complex. The thoroughly unromantic setting was the child of urgent necessity. In 2001, I was awarded a commission to model seven over-life-size torsos of *Spanish Fighting Bulls* for the Houston Texans NFL Stadium. I needed a big open space, immediately. By luck, it has turned out to be perfect. My neighbors, including a flooring contractor, a kitchen stone installer, an electrical supplier, a picture framer, and a physical therapist make up an artistic ecosystem that only lacks an artisan brewer to be complete. I have used all their services and they have always been willing to lend a hand or a forklift in an emergency.

Over the last 20 years, the 1,500 square foot space has filled with the flotsam of the professional sculptor. About half the space can generously be described as materials storage: a morgue, including hundreds of sculptures, not quite good enough to finish but still some pearl of insight; a section of returned original pieces that made the traveling team and were sent to the foundry; and a sad section of finished castings that just were not that good and I haven't gotten around to cutting up to be melted down.

Of the remaining space, a third is dedicated to the office, a third to primping or repairing finished bronzes for shipping, and finally a 14-foot-square area for actual sculpting. (After 40 years as a sculptor, I have returned to the same space as my original spare bedroom.) This space suits me well. I have done several monumental projects, but by both interest and temperament, I find myself more concerned with the subtle gestures and intimate behaviors of smaller subjects. Google maps tells me that my studio is 2,671 miles from my foundry, Valley Bronze

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in Joseph, Oregon. Perhaps the logistics of getting originals across the country has reinforced my penchant for working smaller.

If there is a treasure in my studio, it is an inherited set of four huge file cabinets containing almost 50 years of clippings and photographs of hundreds of species from all over the world arranged by Linnean Classification. The files, the work of the great taxidermist A.B. Fuller, for the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, contain anatomical measurements, black and white photographs, natural history writings, and of greatest use, thousands of pages of illustrations from the *Outdoor* magazines of the 1930s through 1960s. Drawings of the great illustrators, Charles Livingston Bull, Schoonover, Wyeth, etc., can tell you a great deal about what other very observant people thought was important in various animal behaviors, gestures, and situational interactions. An hour or so of browsing the Fuller Files is like a trip into the great age of illustration. In this time of quick digital imagery, this collection seems an anachronism, but I find it more useful than color photography. What will become of these files is of concern to me, and I welcome suggestions.

A unique feature of the studio is a 14-foot-tall plywood wall gridded off in one-foot squares; I sculpt looking at that wall. It gives me a good sense of scale. I also use the wall to design large waterfowl and gamebird sculptures done for various great rooms and office lobbies. Other than that, the studio, while unlikely to make the pages of *Architectural Digest*, is a functional welcoming space, just far enough from my home to set my head straight on the short commute and distant enough to keep me from late night visits to “fix” some problem that awakened me in the dark of the night. ●

