

STUDIO AS COLLAGE: FAMILIAR & STRANGE

Alison Shields

Abstract

In this visual essay, I present an artistic inquiry I created as I examine the studio as a space to dwell, a space to daydream and a prompt for the imagination. I draw from previous research about artist studios and a visual archive created of objects within the studio as I re-imagine the studio as a collage; it is a place filled with odd juxtapositions of images, artworks, ideas and space that may produce new connections and imaginings. Through presenting the studio as both subject and process, I encourage readers to embrace the strangeness within familiar places

Bio

Alison Shields is an Assistant Professor in Art Education at the University of Victoria. She received a PhD in Art Education from the University of British Columbia and an MFA from the University of Waterloo. She has exhibited her paintings across Canada and abroad, including a solo exhibition entitled *Studio as Portal* at McClure Art Centre in Montreal (2020), a collaborative event about Arts-based Research at the Tate Exchange Gallery in Liverpool (2018) and an artist residency and exhibition at the Skaftfell Centre for Visual Art in Iceland (2019). Her research focuses on painting, artistic inquiry, studio practices and artist residencies. Contact: alisonleashields@gmail.com | alisonshields.com



a drone; animal bones; electronic music equipment; architectural designs; tape sculptures; interior design colour swatches; old spice deodorant; family photographs; animal antlers; gothic art history books; garbage; diapers; suitcases; old costumes; paintings hung from chains; vintage store bird sculptures; puppets; fake meat; how-to-draw books; dioramas made out of cheese graters; books about cowboys; neon lights; pseudo-scientific experiments; re-configured childhood toys; nautical tools; newspaper articles; mountains of fashion magazines; google image printouts; sailing flags; fairy tales; strings of paint; piles of fabric; collages; paintings; sketches.

These are the objects I saw when I travelled across Canada visiting over 125 artists in their studios. On these visits, artists described the studio as a stage; a playground; a laboratory; a waiting room; a puzzle; a pressure cooker; and a brain (Shields, 2018a). One artist described the studio as full of portals that take us elsewhere. In this visual essay, I expand on these metaphors of the studio through an artistic inquiry as I re-imagine the studio as a collage. Throughout my visits, I came to view the physical space of the studio as an assemblage of architecture, ideas, imagery, objects and artworks. Odd and mysterious juxtapositions of objects in the space prompted surprising and curious narratives and connections. I draw from these odd juxtapositions that I propose form an assemblage, and through this lens I create collages that mimic the assembled quality of the studio. Through this process, I view a studio as a prompt for the imagination, one that is filled with generative possibilities through poetic juxtapositions of imagery.

While I spent years visiting, documenting and examining artists' studios across Canada (Shields, 2018b), my passion and curiosity about studios turned inward in 2020 as I focused on my own studio. In an old building in Victoria, BC, Canada, I hunkered down throughout the past year and half. An old building with wooden rafters and old cement brick walls, with the smell of oil paint in the air, invites its inhabitants to imagine. These curious messages and dark portals left mysteriously by past inhabitants, suggest that we can be here and elsewhere simultaneously. The Ministry of Casual Living (figure 1) is a collective studio space I inhabited over the course of the past 3 years. In particular, throughout the covid-19 lockdowns in 2020-2021, this studio became both a space in which to settle and a space in which to imagine.

Figure 1



In this visual essay, I present an artistic inquiry I developed as I examine the studio as a space to dwell, a space to daydream and a prompt for the imagination. I explore studio and the objects that inhabit the space through the lens of Bachelard's (1958/2014) *Poetics of Space* and Jane Bennett's (2010) *Vibrant Matter*.

Through this process, I examine how my artistic practice developed throughout the past year through a renewed appreciation for the imaginative potential of a place. Through this work, I reimagine the studio as a collage. Through doing so I encourage readers to search for the magic within the spaces they inhabit as I oscillate between familiarity and strangeness within my own studio.

Studio as familiar and strange

And all of the spaces of our past moments of solitude, the spaces in which we have suffered from solitude, enjoyed, desired and compromised solitude, remain indelible within us, and precisely because the human being wants them to remain so. (Bachelard, 1958/2014, p. 31)

In his book *Poetics of Space* (1958/2014), Bachelard uses the term topoanalysis to describe the study of our relationship to places. In particular, he examines “spaces of our intimacy” (p. 30), arguing that our memories inhabit space rather than time; our memories of intimate spaces become sites of projective memories. Drawing from Bachelard’s prompt, I recently began considering the intimate spaces of my childhood memories. In my childhood home throughout high school, I turned my basement into an art studio every night. Covering the floor in sheets, the distinct smell of oil paint filled the air. Within the quiet solitude of my nighttime studio, the basement became a space in which I felt comforted, curious and imaginative. Barbara Bolt (2004) describes the performativity of art-making as the affect and movement that occurs within the heat of practice: “The painting takes on a life of its own. It breathes, vibrates, pulsates, shimmers and generally runs away from me. The painting no longer merely represents or illustrates reading. Instead, it performs. In the performativity of imaging, life gets into the image” (p. 1). I recently found the paintings I made in that basement studio 25 years ago. Upon re-viewing the paintings, I was immediately transported back to that space of my childhood. I was reminded of the sensation of working in the studio, the moments of frustration and exhilaration as a becoming artist learning my way through the messy language of painting.

Throughout the past two decades, I have sought out studios as spaces of imaginative solitude. Upon moving to new cities, the studio became a sign of home, grounding me in a place and within a community. This feeling of connectedness within the studio was ever more present throughout the past year and half. Rather than looking to others’ studios as the world closed down due to covid, I looked inward toward my own studio as a source for imaginative thinking. I currently work in an open concept studio and artist-run centre named The Ministry of Casual Living in Victoria, BC, Canada. As I explored the nooks and crannies, I discovered creatures up in the rafters, found natural objects arranged with care, and spaces overflowing with artistic materials. The studio, filled with artistic materials and activity, is a space that is in process and always changing. As I explored this place, I realized that my voyage over the past several years into others’ studios was sparked by my own curiosity and my fascination with the objects, images and ideas within the studio. I draw from my early memories of studios as I look to the studio as a prompt for imagination. The studio while taking on qualities of all the studios I have inhabited over the past 25 years, always offers up something unexpected. It is both grounding and ever changing. It is always in process, in movement. It is at once familiar and strange.

Figure 2



I view a studio as a place full of curiosities, and a space where one is constantly seeking out unanswerable questions, new problems and generating new connections and new meanings. It is a messy space, both physically and psychologically and a space of incompleteness, uncertainty and continual change. It is a space where the materiality of the studio, materials, experiences and ideas become entangled in a continual learning process. The objects within the studio each have their own histories and tell their own stories. Further, it is a place where artists' memories, histories and experiences become materialized through making. This process by which our experiences become materialized in the studio is expressed by artist Amy Granat (2010): "There is emptiness and history, acting together... This history, my memories, they still insert themselves in this space" (p. 259). Artist Carolee Schneemann (2010) similarly describes how experiences become entangled through her art making process:

It is empty, it is filling. It is the constant site of permission – permission of uncertainty and the rarity of the circumstances in which I can address only my materials and the influences which may or may not bring them into a new form... but the permission is that I can be in a solitary concentration... the strands are pulling at research, at dream, synesthesia, at political outrage... The studio is full of nests. (p. 154)

Following my journey across Canada into artists' studios, I began creating an archive of studio objects. In a grid format, I painted over 100 studio objects from both my own and others' studios. Through this process, I revisited each studio as each object prompted a memory of the place. Highlighting the interaction between humans and non-humans, Bennett (2010) describes the affects produced by a grouping of objects that she happened upon: a glove, oak pollen, a dead rat, a bottle cap and a stick of wood.

When the materiality of the glove, the rat, the pollen, the bottle cap, and the stick started to shimmer and spark, it was in part because of the contingent tableau that they formed with each other, with the street, with the weather that morning, with me... I caught a glimpse of an energetic vitality inside each of these things, things that I generally conceived as inert. In this assemblage, *objects* appeared as *things*, that is, as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the

contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics.
(p. 5)

She describes this affective interaction as the thing-power of objects (p. 3). Through viewing the studio through this lens, the objects within the studio become active agents within the story told to me by the artists. The studios contain remnants of old works next to new works, sketches, piles of books, trinkets, all in a seemingly haphazard formation. As such, I propose that the studio forms a poetic assemblage through juxtapositions of objects, artworks, imagery and the architecture of the space itself.

Figure 3



Studio as Collage

One thinks of collage as a particularly 20th-century artistic phenomenon. But in its very nature of pasting together different fragments of the world and the possibility of constructing a coherent world from them, it is a central category today, both for artistic activity in itself and for artistic activity as a metaphor for how we think in general. This idea of taking the world as a single element and then splitting it apart is one of the fundamental activities of the studio. (Kentridge, 2016, p. 25)

As I nested within my studio and explored the objects surrounding me, I sifted through my paintings of studio objects. While initially viewing each studio as an assemblage in itself through the juxtapositions within the studios I visited, I began to see the imagery from the studios for their generative and creative potentials through the lens of the medium of collage. Kentridge's discussion of collage as fundamental to artistic processes allowed me to re-view the studio. I wondered what would happen if I re-collaged the studio. Thus, I began cutting up that archive and recreating new collages with these objects, new juxtapositions and new imaginings. Bachelard (1943/2011) describes a poetic image:

We always think of imagination as the faculty that *forms* images. On the contrary, it *deforms* what we perceive; it is, above all, the faculty that frees us from immediate images and *changes* them. If there is no change, or unexpected fusion of images, there is no imagination; there is

no *imaginative act*. If the image that is *present* does not make us think of one that is *absent*, if an image does not determine an abundance – an explosion – of unusual images, then there is no imagination. (p. 1)

Through this process, I sought out this poetic image, one that generates imaginative thinking.

Figure 4



This reworking of the studio as collage allowed me to view the studio as both a subject and a process. Taking on the studio as both subject and process allowed for a meta-analysis of the studio, and prompted me to more deeply examine my life-long relationship to my studio. I view artmaking as a performative process (Bolt, 2004), one that generates experiences rather than merely represents. Thus, through remaking the studio archive into multiple collages, I capture the in-process, ever-changing quality of artists' studios. Further, the odd juxtapositions of objects and the empty space surrounding them prompted me to create new connections and consider what is absent.

As I reflected on this process, I became aware of the quality of the studio as a prompt for imagining new possibilities. Thus, I highlight the creative potentials of the studio. Art Educator Charles Garoian (p. 2013) describes the process by which working with materials situates the artist's subjectivity into the making:

Our bricoleur's fancy improvising, jerry rigging incongruous images and ideas, adding and subtracting, attaching and detaching, gluing and nailing, leaning and propping, in order to extend and expand their presumed functions prosthetically, linking the present with the past, the familiar with the strange, to see and understand the one through the other, back and forth, and again. (p. 3)

Simon O'Sullivan (2010) similarly explains that through art, we continuously and deliberately move between sense and nonsense, continually scrambling existing codes to create new more complex systems of understanding and meaning. As such art making becomes a production of assemblages. Making art allows for a continuous mixing up and reconnecting of ideas to create new connections, like a puzzle that has no final image, but can instead be continuously reconfigured to create multiple new formations. O'Sullivan

argues that art may produce a diagram that opens up in multiple directions, allowing for unintended outcomes, new connections and multiple meanings to emerge. He describes art as having the capacity to produce new worlds. I view these collaged images as performing the collaged quality of artistic practice as described by Kentridge (2016). Thus, the collages of the studio, through their active and ever-changing quality became a metaphor for studio practice, thus prompting me to re-view the studio as process.

Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Reconfiguring the studio as a collage allowed me to continually reimagine this familiar space. In a time when my world felt ever-more confined and repetitive, I looked toward the studio that I inhabited as a space of infinite possibilities for story-telling and poetic connections. In a moment when the world appeared to stand still, and I often felt stagnant in my research, art practice and everyday life, this small gesture of cutting up and continuously recreating the studio transformed my art practice. Further it changed my understanding of what it means to transform my practice. With this work, rather than look forward toward newness to change my art practice, I instead looked toward a place of familiarity with a fresh perspective. This work prompted me to examine what I hold as important to me within my art studio, examine the roots of that connection and create work that captured my curiosity-driven love of art studios. Lisa Wainwright (2010), professor at the Art Institute of Chicago describes the importance of the studio space for the creative process: “The studio is a space and a condition wherein creative play and progressive thinking yield propositions for reflecting on who we are – individually and collectively – and where we might go next” (p. ix). Creating these collages allowed me to embrace that condition of the studio and find the strangeness that exists within familiar spaces.

Figure 9



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