

The Studio

By Vicki Stavig

After years of working in everything from a kitchen corner to a laundry room to a converted garage, Susan Blackwood and Howard Friedland couldn't be happier as they create their award-winning paintings in a new studio at their home in Bozeman, Montana. It takes a special couple to spend 24 hours a day, seven days a week living and working together, but Blackwood and Friedland found each other a little late in life, and they delight in each other's company.

Blackwood, born in Chicago, fell in love with the mountains as a teenager, when she participated in a Young Life Camp in Buena Vista, Colorado. She married young and moved with her husband to Colorado and then to Taos, before heading for a three-year teaching stint in Pakistan. Not long after returning to Colorado, the couple divorced. When Blackwood visited her sister, artist Karen Vance, in Bozeman, she fell in love with the area. "It was just my heart's desire," she says. "I moved here in 1992."

Friedland, who was born and raised in the Bronx, had lived for 10 years in Miami, Florida, before moving to Albuquerque, New Mexico, and later to Taos. He met Blackwood in 1993, when he invited her sister Karen to come to Taos to paint. She brought Blackwood along. The connection was instantaneous—and not to be denied. The couple today laughs and says that, during the five days they painted together in Taos, their easels "got closer together every day."

"Then Susan was leaving to teach in England and was going to be gone for seven weeks," Friedland recalls. "On her way to the airport, she called and said, 'Do you have a passport?' I said, 'No, but I can get one.'"

And so he did, meeting Blackwood in England and spending three weeks painting in various cities in Europe. Upon their return to the States, Friedland quickly packed up and moved to Bozeman. "He moved here in February and proposed on Valentine's Day," Blackwood says. "One month later—nine months after we met—we got married."

The couple initially lived in Blackwood's house, which had been



built in 1865, but its many stairs began to wreak havoc on Blackwood's knees, so the couple went in search of a home that would provide them with one-level living. They found what Blackwood describes as a "moderate ranch" house and set about gutting it and remodeling it. That included the addition of a 2,200-square-foot, L-shaped studio with 20 windows.

"We wanted it to have north-facing light, to be our dream studio, with every bell and whistle," Friedland says. "We're at a stage in our lives and careers that we will be here for the duration. We worked with an architect and contacted a lot of artist friends for suggestions: Nancy Guzik, Richard Schmid, Laura Robb, Carolyn Anderson, and Morgan Weistling. We picked their brains, asking what they would have done differently and what they like about what they did in their studios."

The couple knew what they wanted in the space and worked with a designer to incorporate their ideas, which included tall north windows.



nice size workshop for teaching.”

The couple took their time selecting the railing for the loft, finally settling on old wrought iron fencing Friedland discovered. “It’s delicate and kept it open and airy and gave it a European flavor,” Blackwood says.”

The new studio, which was completed in November 2008, is attached to the house and is complete with work space, a storage area, kitchen space that serves as a cleanup area, a bathroom, and more. “We had an open house to inaugurate the studio,” Friedland says. “We live in a residential area and wanted the neighbors to know what we were doing, because it’s not your typical ‘housey’ architecture.” The couple also hosted a community party for more than 100 people in the new space.

“Our main goal with the studio was to have a big enough space so we could work together, have a room with beautiful north light, and be able to control the light,” Friedland says, adding that the studio windows have built in shades that allow them to adjust the light as necessary. “If we want to only have one source of light, we can shut off all the other light. We also have fluorescent color-balanced lighting and spotlights along the walls on dimmers. We have windows on three sides of the studio. The tall ones are 8-feet high and start about 13 feet off the ground; each is about 4-feet wide. There are six windows; three on my side and three on Susan’s.”

The spotlights were important to both artists. “One of the things we wanted so badly was the versatility of seeing our work in studio light and gallery light, so we have spotlights like galleries use,” Blackwood says. “We have

“As the framing for those windows went up, we’d climb the scaffolding and look out at this beautiful view of the entire Gallatin Valley and the Bridger Mountains,” Blackwood says. “We were going to have a cat-walk loft with storage but we said, ‘Forget that,’ and we put in a guest room, where artist friends can stay. The loft runs the whole width of the studio. Versatility was important. We needed to have our own space, and we like to bring artists to Bozeman, so we wanted to have a



gallery lighting in the bump-outs and all around the studio. The final test is when we put a painting on our big stone mantel on the fireplace, which shows what it will look like in someone's home."

The bump-outs Blackwood is referring to are areas in each artist's space that extend out seven feet and allow them to step back some 20 feet to view their work. The two artists' spaces don't mirror each other, however. Friedland's area includes a door on the east that leads to a porch, while Blackwood's space has a set of French doors that face north. "I have a bathroom and small storage area; Susan has a small storage area and stairs to the loft," Friedland says.

The studio's flooring, which is called Ionique and includes radiant heating, emits negative ions that remove toxins from the air. "Everything in the studio is on wheels, so we can roll things into a corner and open up the space," Friedland says. In fact, the couple converted the space to a dance floor when they hosted a New Year's Eve party to ring out 2009.

The studio includes couches and chairs where the artists can relax or guests can gather and features a large bronze sculpture of a grizzly bear and an eagle fighting over a fish that was created by Blackwood's father, David Swartwout. "I also have a few rugs from Pakistan and Afghanistan," she says.

Friedland says the original plan for the studio was to include a small scaffolding on wheels with plywood on each side where he and Blackwood could hang paintings and that would serve as a buffer between the two work areas. "But we never took it out of the box," he says. A separation of spaces was never necessary, because Friedland and Blackwood are compatible both as a couple and as artists.

"We met doing plein aire painting, so




Step Into The Light by Howard Friedland



Reflections In The Road by Susan Blackwood

we're comfortable painting with someone else," Blackwood says. "As artists, you have to like the person—and his art—and be a cheerleader and an extra set of eyes." Friedland is quick to add, however, that neither of them ever offers a comment on the other's work unless asked to do so.

"Building and working in this studio has been extremely exciting and fulfilling," Blackwood says. "People said, 'This will ruin your marriage,' but it has been so much fun. We're still pinching ourselves. It's an incredible joy." 

Photos by Eva Eriksen

Vicki Stavig is editor of Art of the West.