



by Natasha Jacob | Photography by Jill Hunter

winter street studios



EVEN AFTER THE LIGHTS GO OUT, I IMAGINE THE WHITE-WALLED ROOMS AND SPACIOUS HALLWAYS OF WINTER STREET STUDIOS CONTINUE TO DAZZLE ONLOOKERS. ONCE A FURNITURE WAREHOUSE SLATED FOR PARKING LOT REIN-CARNATION, THE MASSIVE RENOVATED STRUCTURE OFFERS ARTISTS AN EXTRAORDINARY FUSION OF SPACE, LIGHT AND AN ENERGY YOU CAN ALMOST TOUCH.

The merciless July sun throbs against the corrugated tin roofs of surrounding factories, illuminates a blocky sign that reads SUCCESS RICE and drapes languidly over the train tracks that hedge Winter Street Studios. I wait outside for Sandi Seltzer Bryant, an artist in residence and driving force behind the space. A red and gold lettered cargo train storms by, issuing clouds of dust and waves of hot air that press against my neck.

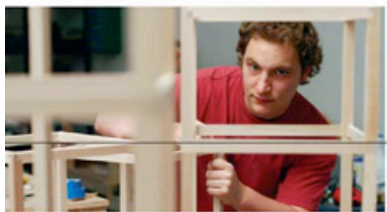
"It's part of the charm," Sandi reassures me as the last ear-splitting screech of the Union Pacific fades. Inside the studios, yawning white ceilings and the smell of fresh paint create a deceiving sense of cool. The door creaks open again behind me and a woman with cropped blonde hair emerges gripping a cardboard box rescued from the trash outside. "I just couldn't help myself," she explains breathlessly and disappears up the stairs.

Later, while giving me a tour of the building, Sandi reminds me again and again that "the work comes from the work." I think of the blonde with the cardboard box and nod to myself. These artist people rummage through metal bins at noon in July in Texas. These people do not mess around.

Exposed air ducts and spartan track lighting snake through the capacious hallways that unite Winter Street's thirty-eight studios (all are currently occupied). The studios range from 300 to 25,000 square feet and start at \$250 a month. Separated into three parallel wings, each space differs slightly in configuration. In Sandi's studio, a single skylight and one window placed high on the back wall allow the room to be bathed in a fantastic supply of natural light. Her studio is no exception though; every space I passed possesses the same intense brightness.

I drift towards open doors and find myself inside Studio 13B, home to Betsy Evans, ceramicist and unofficial event planner and organizer at the studios. Rows of beautifully glazed vases cum cookie jars line one wall. The air is heavy with the scent of wet clay. Betsy believes the studios are unique in their ability to provide equal opportunity. "Houston's kind to established artists" but Winter Street is welcome to everyone "from the hobbyist to the full-time artist to someone who dabbles — we've got it all."

She discovered the space last April at the Art Swap, Winter Street's first event to garner city-wide attention and its first 10 tenants. According to Sandi, "it's been snowballing ever since."



Another artist who asked not to be named was drawn to Winter Street for its faithfulness to true studio standards. "I've never been able to hang my work this high before," she muses. The aesthetic effect is clear. Her paintings dangle at a lofty height that compels the viewer to step back and actually study the work. She remembers when it first became known that someone had "fixed it [the studios] up." Word spread like "wildfire." **For this artist, Winter Street represents a jump forward for the Houston arts scene.** "We will not rank as an international city if we don't cultivate an arts culture...[I]t [Winter Street] is almost a shelter for us."

For Shane Tidmore, a resident of Studio 30B, Winter Street is a shelter away from school. **As the director of ceramics at the Glassell School, an instructor at University of Houston and other arts programs in the city, Shane's studio space provides a much needed place** "to work away from my students." A native of Wichita Falls, Shane left Texas with international pursuits and studied under a mentor in Korea and Japan where the tradition of ceramics is thousands of years old. Now, as a nascent Houstonian, he maintains Winter Street "is going to be the next big thing on the scene." It "bridges some of the gaps" and acts like a Ferris wheel for the city's disjointed arts community. There are "spokes going in different directions...but there's this central hub and that hub is this building."

A giant purple rose unfolds across a dividing wall of Deborah Morris' studio. A student of architecture and painting, **Deborah reflects similar sentiments. Winter Street "feels so much more like home than previous spaces."** Like several artists on the floor, she leased the studio the day she saw it. I begin to get the sense that most artists at Winter Street have grown intolerant of long commutes and inflated rental costs. Deborah adds that past rentals lacked the same "sense of community." It seems "the stars just aligned for this project."

I notice a man waving at us from across the hall. Deborah mouths hello. I wave back. It is true; there is a distinct feeling in Winter Street that one is among friends.

Inside the studio across from Deborah's, I meet Alex Wilhite, a deaf painter that hails from North Carolina. Alex left in search of "a community with good taste." North Carolina was stifling and conservative and "there wasn't anything happening there." A former student of Pratt University in Brooklyn, **he believes Winter Street's location, sandwiched between I-10 West and Washington Avenue, generates an interesting, contemporary "mix of industrial and residential."** This mix, combined

with the tremendous amount of space and light available is, in a word I only understand after it's finger-spelled, *unique*.

I ask Sandi about the future of the space. She confides in a personal vision that Winter Street will one day become a thriving arts center for Houston. Along with real estate developer Jon Deal, Sandi anticipates that Winter Street Studios will become a home to fundraisers for the arts, dance performances and gallery shows. The second story already benefits from a large gallery space that is currently being utilized for Art Houston in conjunction with the Deborah Colton Gallery (open until August 18th). **During September and October, it will open its doors to an Art League Gala honoring Art Guys,** a team project with Dance Houston and a benefit for Angel Flight.

Additionally, the high demand for space has persuaded Jon Deal and Avenue CDC, another mastermind behind Winter Street, to renovate the ground floor in hopes of opening more spaces by October 1st. While it will not have the same ventilation and light as the second story, the new floor is still staggering in size and might even see the creation of a foundry.

Winter Street Studios boasts a space that crackles with the kind of excitement you find backstage before the opening night of a show. **It makes me**

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want to get my hands dirty, to play hide and seek, to run in circles until I'm dizzy. But it is not a funhouse. Residents must be working artists with a record of shows in galleries and must exhibit a clear-cut interest in productivity. Sandi, who also helps with the screening process, is resolute about the studios' commitment to serious art. **"Winter Street is not a living space. It is not a retail space."** And while they do permit private party rentals, "we don't do bat mitzvahs." Yet.

The tenants of Winter Street Studios reflect a breadth of talent and experience rarely encountered in one space. They are established artists, emerging artists, fine arts folk and fine crafts folk, organizers and visionaries, and

people who have little in common except a profound understanding and respect for doing what they do best – making art.

Bios of the artists are available online. If you are interested in renting a space (perhaps one of the new slots on the first floor), contact the leasing office at winterstreetstudio@sbcglobal.net or visit the studios' website at www.winterstreetstudios.net. Winter Street Studios is located at 2101 Winter Street, one block east of Sawyer behind the Success Rice Mill.