

A home where artists can thrive

When artists Barry Coombs and partner Aleda O'Connor tired of condo living in Toronto, they started looking for a home where they could both have studios.

"It took us one day looking in Toronto to realize we'd be living in a gas station," O'Connor says. "We were priced out of the market."

Coombs taught watercolour painting at Dundas Valley School of Art for 20 years, so the pair decided to house hunt here, where they have art connections and real estate prices are reasonable.

They landed in the Strathcona neighbourhood in a 1910 house with a big backyard, a driveway, and good marks for walkability. "We're close enough to Locke Street, James North, the new Mustard Seed Coop and trails," says Coombs, who is also an avid birder.

Major renovations had been done, creating an open concept feel with enough wall space for art. With a small modification, a wall separating the entrance hall from the living room became a place to hang art salon style.

Both Coombs and O'Connor have been collecting art for years, and hang favourite pieces from others with their own work.

Coombs, known primarily for watercolours, also works in gouache, ink, mixed media, and cardboard reliefs. Recent works have a vivid collagelike quality that reflects his travels, including workshops he leads in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico.

In contrast to Coombs' sharp, precise presentation, O'Connor's oil pastel landscapes are in soft focus, as if painted just after a storm. "I like weather," she says.

Coombs paints on the top floor in a slope-sided room with the angles of an artist's garret. O'Connor recently moved into a new studio at the back of the house.

The space started small, like so many renovations. A summer kitchen and mud room, both crudely constructed and cold, would become a studio. The worms came out of the can rather fast.

"We opened up a wall, and there was no turning back," Coombs says. Knob and tube wiring, zero insulation and a wonky rubble stone foundation made a cosmetic renovation impossible.

Architect Bill Curran of TCA, and Shane Renovations turned the summer kitchen into a 15-square-metre studio.

After reframing, and changing the pitch of the roof for skylights, big windows and an oversized door were added. Windows look out to the garden and a busy bird feeder. A cork floor was chosen for texture and warmth, and an original window found a new home in the studio.

The old mud room's killer stairway to the basement was demolished. Coombs says it "was like climbing down a ladder." In its place are a new laundry room, washroom and a less-lethal stairway.

The 20-square-metre space showcases Coombs' paintings and a selection of cardboard reliefs along with winsome bird carvings the couple collected during their travels.

When Coombs leaves to teach in Mexico, O'Connor will immerse herself in painting, and savouring the view from the studio with its panorama of trees, birds and the weather she captures on canvas.

Kathyrenwald.com



A reclaimed old door was installed on sliders.

ART

The entrance has a wall of art by Barry Coombs, Aleda O'Connor and other artists.