

RENEE MOILANEN: Redondo Beach's Cannery Row Studios delights in the offbeat

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By Renee Moilanen

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For years, I passed the weedy lot off Catalina Avenue and wondered about the building inside. Cannery Row Studios - as the exterior mural indicated - seemed so out of place in this stretch of Redondo Beach, wedged against an information technology business park near some of the area's swankiest hotels and restaurants.

But Cannery Row Studios is a charming misfit, the kind of place that rankles city planners, who like things in neat, easy-to-categorize zones. Cannery Row - part art gallery, part artist's studio, part motorcycle repair shop, part storage shack, part school - defies categorization. Still, it's managed to exist for 20 years in an area fast losing its offbeat edge.

Richard Stephens founded Cannery Row Studios with his partner, the late Paul Orvalla, back in 1990, laying claim to the 19th-century lumber mill-turned-commercial warehouse on North Francisca Avenue.

Richard bills Cannery Row as the "last remaining bit of the Bohemian art scene in Redondo Beach," recalling the days when surfers, hippies and starving artists roamed the South Bay.

You get a taste of it from the road. The yawning warehouse door that serves as Cannery Row's entrance fronts a cluttered lawn of oddball furniture, animal-shaped mailboxes and hand-painted knickknacks, like a garage sale on acid.

And although there is a rather traditional-looking gallery up front with an ever-changing display of local art, the real heart of Cannery Row Studios is behind the scenes.

Richard takes me around, in and out of rooms, up and down steep staircases, and it's a bit like traveling through a rabbit's warren.

The once open building has been divided and subdivided and subdivided again into artist studios and storage spaces and all sorts of tucked-away nooks.

Walls were put up. Taken down. Put up again. Reconfigured, repainted and reinstalled. An ever-changing space for artists who despise finality.

Richard is a collector of sorts. Just behind the gallery is a cavernous storage space with pieces of wood, chairs and benches, hula hoops and ladders, any little scrap of something that could be used, maybe, possibly, just not quite yet.

Off to the side is Richard's storage area, where he collects rows and rows of his paintings, all stacked away until it's time for a show, or whenever.

Richard does community murals and commissioned pieces every now and then, but he makes a living as a handyman and commercial painter. He collects the half-used paint cans in a closet.

And you might say Richard collects people, too. He finds like-minded artist types and brings them into his world, providing a studio and gallery space, but, more importantly, a sense of community.

Not long ago, Richard found motorcycle mechanic Paschoal Revi and persuaded him to set up shop inside Cannery Row's old fish freezer left over from the building's warehouse days. Now, Paschoal has a thriving repair business, aptly named "Art on Wheels." The only drawback is having to wheel the bikes through an art gallery on their way to the shop.

Likewise, Richard found artist John Cantu three years ago, and John brought in artist Emiko Wake, whose show opens tonight at Cannery Row Studios.

John and Emiko now share a studio atop the gallery where they paint side by side and conduct children's art classes. It's a comfortably messy space, the countertops littered with empty wine bottles and paint brushes soaking in plastic cups. There are cardboard boxes filled with books and old LPs. A cat lazes on the sofa.

You get the feeling that everything in the room - from the hulking chandelier to the cymbal-banging monkey toy - has a great story behind it. And you want to just sit back, sip a cup of coffee, forget about the world outside and listen to it. *La vie Boheme*.

Hanging out in that studio, I could have been anywhere but Redondo Beach. A Manhattan loft. A Parisian apartment above Montmartre. San Francisco circa 1969.

Richard seems to relish this laid-back, off-the-grid lifestyle. He offers cryptic answers to the simplest questions, like: Do you live in the studio? Do you collect rent from the artists? Do you own the building?

I'm not quite sure whether everything's strictly by the book; maybe it is, maybe it's not.

But I get the impression that Richard's evasion is not a willful defiance of authority, just a casual indifference to the rigid rules of life. How can you maintain the South Bay's last remaining bit of Bohemia if you're worried about trivial things like collecting rent or filling out the right paperwork?

Richard - and by extension, Cannery Row Studios - bucks business as usual. Even if it doesn't fit neatly into our carefully zoned suburbia, it has a fun, offbeat character that's increasingly hard to find. It doesn't try too hard. It just is. And that's a refreshing approach to life.