

DANIEL PINKHAM

TEXT BY BONNIE GANGELHOFF • PHOTO BY MICHAEL GARLAND



California painter Daniel Pinkham once seriously considered becoming an Episcopal minister. Instead, Pinkham says, he came to the conclusion that a career in art could also feed his soul. “The true use of art is first to cultivate the artist’s own spiritual nature,” he says. “I decided that the gifts I had for art were more obvious and that I could say spiritual things through my work.” Today, his studio is his church of sorts—a place where he retreats to quietly create landscape and still-life works.

The cream-colored stucco and wood structure resembles a Cape Cod bungalow. Lush rose gardens spill across the lawn all year. “I like the idea that my studio is a garden room that looks out into nature,” Pinkham says. “I purposely keep the studio in order and let the garden go wild. It’s a good balance.”

The 600-square-foot space is located behind the home in Palos Verdes where he was raised. When he moved here from inner-city Los Angeles as a boy, he says, it seemed a

paradise dotted with dairy farms and sprinkled with fields of flowers. As he grew older, the dairy farms were replaced by single-family homes. Pinkham began scouring construction sites, gathering cast-off lumber and glass from windows and doors. He saved the scraps for years.

After finishing his studies at the Art Center College of Design and completing a five-year apprenticeship with Russian artist and teacher Sergei Bongart [1910-1985], he decided the time was right to create his own studio. In 1984 he hauled out the scavenged materials and began to build with the help of a nephew.

Pinkham designed his studio to capture perfect northern light, he says. And he chose what he considers the perfect gray paint for the walls. At the time he was building, he explains, Los Angeles was hosting the Olympics, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art was presenting a blockbuster French Impressionism show in conjunction with the events. Pinkham liked the gray on the museum walls so much that he asked a staff member for the leftover paint. The museum obliged, offering him two gallons. "I didn't want the walls in my studio to compete for attention when I was looking at a canvas," he says. "This color was perfect. It was mixed to set off the Monet pieces."

Pinkham's studio boasts an array of relics from his past. On one recent day the dominant features are two aqua-colored doors that he appropriated from his grandparents' North Carolina farmhouse. Situated in the middle of the room, they are set on wheels so they can be rolled behind a still-life tableau to serve as a backdrop. The doors are (CONTINUED ON PAGE 128)

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 44) reminders of pleasant summers spent on the farm, where his grandfather grew tobacco, corn, and beans. "On the back of the door there is still the towel rack where my grandfather would shave in the morning. The door knob has a wonderful patina worn from his hands after working decades in the fields," Pinkham says.

A tied bunch of tobacco leaves dangles on one of the doors, and overhead near the ceiling's wooden beams there are hand-hewn wood poles where the leaves once hung to dry. A shelf that stretches along the ceiling sports multi-colored antique bottles, including one with the label "Lydia Pinkham's Pills." Pinkham notes that his distant relative was the first national distributor of these cure-all-that-ails-you pills. "In other words," Pinkham jokes, "she was a snake-oil salesman."

In one corner of the studio there's a sitting area that features a comfortable Craftsman-style sofa and chairs made by California artist Steve Patton. Nearby, a glass cabinet displays family heirlooms left to Pinkham by his mother, including hand-painted French china and sterling-silver pieces that often appear in his still-life works. His mother's old sewing machine now serves as the stand for his palette.

Every day, Pinkham says, he derives inspiration from being close to his roots. "If I don't have reverence for my past and where I come from, I will never be able to convey on canvas the reverence I feel for nature," he says. □

Pinkham is represented by Michael Hollis Gallery, Los Angeles, CA; Hollis Gallery, Pasadena, CA; and Drifter Gallery, Ojai, CA.