



## Sarvisberry: A Green Studio

GIBBY WAITZKIN

*Sarvisberry Studio & Gallery is covered with recycled concrete board cloaked with a “green wall” made of welded wire livestock panels, a trellis on which vines can grow, providing insulation in the summer as well as habitat for birds and butterflies. All photos by and courtesy of the artist unless otherwise noted.*

The source of my creative expression lies in my experiences with nature, particularly through the art of hand papermaking. The processes of growing and harvesting the plant fibers and flowers; shredding, cooking, beating, and pouring the pulp; photography and digital printing; and the composition of all of these elements come together to articulate the poetic experience of a life or a moment.

Papermaking has become an extension of my life work to raise environmental awareness. The process serves as a metaphor for sustainability and recycling. I harvest fiber from plants that I find on my neighbor’s sidewalk, such as iris, cattail, thistle, bamboo, lavender, and Catawba tree pods; cook the fiber in an alkaline mixture to create an acid-free and chlorine-free pulp; beat the pulp, often by hand, for hours and hours with a pair of heavy mallets; preserve the acid-free paper with beeswax; and mount the work in handcrafted frames made from salvaged hemlock trees that had been destroyed by blight several years ago, or frame it in a recycled window. I believe that there is no need to reinvent the world, but we should allow ourselves to utilize seemingly worthless objects to create a functional and aesthetic contribution to our society.

A few years ago, it became apparent to me that I needed more space and a more efficient and environmentally sound studio for papermaking. My son Graeme Waitzkin, a product designer and engineer, assisted me in designing a “green studio” that reflects the same values that underlie my art—one that repurposes raw, local materials and combines old materials salvaged from other buildings to create something new.

We identified a site for the studio, based on both aesthetics and functionality. By building the studio into the side of a hill, we were able to use the existing landscape to provide insulation and



*The author at work in the studio with the garage doors open for natural lighting. Photo: Minnie Martin.*

grade-level access at both levels of a two-story building. The south-facing orientation of the building incorporates a passive solar effect that reduces heating costs and provides a maximum amount of natural light. We harvested trees that were cut down during excavation and reincorporated the lumber into the building. The pine trees became the ceilings, floors, and framing; and the birch and cherry were used for trim around the doors and windows.

In order to generate solar energy at a future date, we consulted with a solar feasibility analyst. As a result of that meeting, we created an amphitheater-style garden space around the building that will allow maximum sun exposure of the solar panels when we install them on the south-oriented, shed-style roof. Rainwater drains off the roof into two large, underground cisterns for use in papermaking. Since soil erosion from construction sites has long been identified as a significant source of sediment and other suspended solids in runoff, we planted quick-growing varieties of groundcovers, bamboo, tall grasses, and iris to prevent washout and soil loss. Not only will these varieties prevent soil erosion, they also provide raw materials for papermaking.

The exterior of the building is covered by durable and low-maintenance, recycled concrete board and locally manufactured, corrugated metal siding. The concrete board is cloaked with a green screen, which integrates the building into the environment rather than inflicting a glaring new edifice that scars the hillside. The screen functions as a trellis on which vines, such as honeysuckle, trumpet vine, and wisteria can be planted. The screen provides insulation in the summer, as well as habitat for birds and butterflies. Since commercially available green screens and brackets proved to be exorbitantly expensive for the surface area we wished to cover, we installed welded wire livestock panels,



*Installation of rainwater-collecting cisterns, 2008.*



*Gibby Waitzkin, Looking Out, 2010, 37 x 36 inches, pigment print on Sarvisberry-blend handmade paper sealed in beeswax, framed in a wooden window with embedded objects (tall grass, bee balm, cosmos, iris, yellow roses, bird's nest, vintage curtains).*

locally known as “hog wire,” which we suspended from the soffit by hooks and anchored them to the wall with inexpensive angle irons and wire.

To promote efficiency of construction and uniformity of materials, we designed the two-story building on a 30 x 60-foot grid. The regularity of the design enabled us to conceptualize the space as a collection of eight 15 x 30-foot cubes which laid out easily as a two-story gallery, a “dry” computer design space, a double-wide “wet” papermaking studio, and a residence upstairs. The floor on the ground level is a concrete slab with in-floor drains in the wet studio to direct the gray water into the garden. The supporting beams are recycled Parallam and many of the columns are recycled, blighted hemlock. The insulation is sprayed soy (in the ceilings) and blown, recycled paper in the walls. The outside wall of the papermaking studio consists mostly of commercial-grade, insulated, nine-pane glass, aluminum garage doors, which provide wonderful natural light and a sense of openness in the winter. In warm weather we open the doors to create an expanded indoor/outdoor studio space.



*The Sarvisberry Gallery showing the author's latest work inside/out. The staircase created out of salvaged iron and wood from a tobacco barn.*

Wherever possible, we obtained construction materials locally (within a 300-mile radius). Sometimes this required a fight, insisting, for example, that the local building supply company obtain framing lumber from nearby mills rather than imports from Belgium. Virtually all the interior doors were reclaimed from long-demolished, 1920s office buildings, courtesy of nearby Black Dog Salvage, and most of the functional surfaces and shelving were recycled from used restaurant supply stores.

“Green” solutions can be simple, but require a constant orientation towards incorporating them at all stages of planning and building a green studio. Hundreds of small decisions went into creating a space that energizes my work, complements the land, minimizes impact, and inspires visiting artists. It is worth it!