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GREAT ROOMS | OCTOBER 24, 2023 | 8:50 AM

They Still Make Art in Soho Reformed  
“wild man” painter John Alexander and  
ceramicist Fiona Waterstreet’s loft life.



By Wendy Goodman, Curbed and New York Magazine’s design editor who covers the city’s most spectacular interiors.



**His studio:** John Alexander at work. “You get your cup of coffee and come in here and start staring.” Photo: Annie Schlechter

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ven after 44 years of living in New York City — 43 of them in this Soho loft— artist John Alexander still sounds, to this New Yorker anyway, as Texas as can be. His wife, British-born ceramicist Fiona Waterstreet, has similarly retained her accent, and sitting with the two of them discussing their life together is like listening to music.

Alexander was born in Texas and started teaching at the University of Houston shortly after earning his M.F.A. from Southern Methodist University. But by his early 30s, he was getting restless and, wanting to “expand the playing field,” as he puts it, decided to move to Manhattan. Within a year, he found this 3,500-square-foot loft in an 1874 cast-iron building.

“People thought down there that I had lost my mind,” says Alexander. “I knew so many artists there and the barbecues and all that lovely atmosphere, but that’s not productive. Here, it’s work all the time, and you have a real conscious and subconscious understanding that if you don’t work hard, you just will be left behind.” His art has often depicted the natural world. “My work in Houston was all landscape oriented, nature, and then for the first time in my career in the ’80s, I was doing figurative, manic, crazy works. It’s easy to make the association of the shock value of living two different lifestyles.” Moving was a “big adjustment,” he adds. “I left this rich flora and fauna of the Gulf Coast, and I was living for the first time in a big city. The most shocking thing to me was the noise because I didn’t have insulated windows.”

His work is now in the permanent collections of the Met, the Dallas Museum of Art, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. (He’s showing with Berggruen Gallery at the Art Show at the Park Avenue Armory this November.)

Waterstreet had been living in Colorado and was running her own business representing Australian fashion and accessory designers before she met Alexander and moved to New York with her son, Harrison, in the early ’90s. In 1994, they became a family living in the loft. “Fiona and Harrison coming into my life changed everything,” says Alexander. “Because you think you are this wild man about town, then all of a sudden you have this little boy in your life.”

He had been living as many artists do close by his work. “John was literally sleeping on the floor,” Waterstreet says of when they met. “No, I wasn’t,” Alexander interjects. “You were so,” Waterstreet says. “When I moved in, you had a mattress on

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the floor.” Alexander thinks about that and then agrees. “I could live very comfortably right here,” he says of the studio.

To help create a more residential feel, they worked with Richard Mishaan, who created intimacy with bookcases and large screens, rather than dividing up the luxurious expanse of space in the front part of the loft. “I’m English,” she says. “I want square rooms, little rooms with light.”

There is also enough space for two artist studios. Twelve years ago, Waterstreet “found ceramics,” she says. “It happened very slowly, very organically,” she says of taking classes at Greenwich House Pottery. “And I felt like I had a capacity for it and then I started sculpting one summer getting off the wheel, but still my practice is both; I do the wheel and sculpting.” Her porcelain birds and larger pots and abstract pieces have been exhibited at the Drawing Room in East Hampton and Tayloe Piggott in Jackson, Wyoming.

“People say we should have a show together,” Waterstreet says — pairing her pieces with Alexander’s art — “and I say, ‘Absolutely not.’”

“Oh no, we’re going to do it!” says Alexander.

“No, we are not,” Waterstreet says with affectionate finality.



**The Living Area:** The family side has been divided into more intimate spaces using large custom screens. Photo: Annie Schlechter

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**Her Studio:** Waterstreet's work area is separated from Alexander's. "Once she starts," Alexander says, "we're not allowed to open that door." Photo: Annie Schlechter

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**The Kitchen:** The open living/dining room with a table from Aero and one of Alexander's paintings above the counter. Photo: Annie Schlechter

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**The Hallway:** A view from the kitchen towards the long hallway that connects the residential side of the loft to the studios. The ceramic jars to the right of the ceramic tea pots are by Fiona Waterstreet. Photo: Annie Schlechter

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**The wall of art:** One wall of Alexander's studio features his own art and that of artists Red Grooms, Jim Hatchett, Terry McDonell and Edward Kienholz. Photo: Annie Schlechter



Alexander's working studio wall with art in progress and his painting table. Photo: Annie Schlechter

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Alexander's paint-encrusted cans and a painting of a monkey. Photo: Annie Schlechter

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The west-facing windows in the living area of the loft and Waterstreet's porcelain ceramics on top of the table. Photo: Annie Schlechter

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