



ART REVIEW: Inner Life of the Artist Revealed in Gagosian's "In the Studio"

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by Charles A. Riley II

Anyone who's ready for a seriously rewarding lesson in the inner life of the artist should carve out time for both the uptown and downtown installations of "In the Studio," the Gagosian Gallery's latest *coup de theatre*.

The course of this literally wonderful show follows the clear-minded plan of a brilliant lecture. The notes can be found in the substantial and well-edited two-volume catalogue published in conjunction with Phaidon Press. Our professor of painting is the eminent John Elderfield, lured from the ivory tower of the Museum of Modern Art in New York to present a master class in the delicate balancing act of chronicling art history and big-ticket curating.

The studio as subject is a premise nearly irresistible to lovers of either painting (in Chelsea at 522 West 21st Street) or photography (980 Madison Avenue between 76th and 77th Streets). The allure is comparable to tours of libraries or writer's homes for book lovers.

The substantial history of this theme, including recent critical commentary in which theorists turn a genre of painting into an arena of philosophical debate, is presented in the painting volume of the catalogue. Unlike its photography counterpart, written and curated by Peter Galassi, the painting catalogue has a generously annotated bibliography and piece-by-piece essays on each painting (what is photography, chopped liver?).

Not surprisingly with Elderfield in charge, Henri Matisse's *Red Studio*—at MoMA, not in Chelsea, alas—looms over half the argument of the show, alongside Velazquez's *Las Meninas*. These masterpieces are keynotes for some of the highlights of the exhibition, which begins in a light-filled anteroom that juxtaposes Picasso's *L'Atelier* (1927), a response to the Velazquez, next to Jasper Johns's *In the Studio* (1982), two symphonies in white major. Luckily they are just out of the peripheral sight range of Robert Motherwell's *The Studio* (1987) on an adjacent wall, whose glowing red pays homage to Matisse.



"L'Atelier (The Studio)" by Pablo Picasso, 1928. Oil and crayon on canvas, 63 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 51 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice. © 2014 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery.

In the essay, Elderfield adroitly traces the nomenclature from *studiolo* (a place for scholarly *studium* (diligence, zeal, contemplation and, although it seems so anachronistic in our day, concentration) as distinct from the *bottega* (workshop) and *atelier*, a place where the artist worked not just in solitude but in the company of critics, collectors, and students (the academy was often in the neighborhood). The essay follows this public “invention of the studio” through a period of private “contraction” that began in the 19th century.

In the galleries, this narrative is complemented by another train of thought. First up are the perfectly paired Johns and Picasso that salute the sun at the door as you enter, with a gesture to the Motherwell. Then you plunge into darkness and a series of paintings hung against walls painted in a somber color that suggests the *atelier braun* (studio brown) that Oswald Spengler identified as the “metaphysical” tone of great Rembrandt interiors. The mood is dour even when you expect just a bit of levity (from William Hogarth and Honoré Daumier, the latter in a fantastically atmospheric self-portrait with the silhouette of the painter and edge of his unseen canvas limned in electric white light).

Although the endgame is high Modernism, including Abstract Expressionists (de Kooning, Frankenthaler, Motherwell, Diebenkorn) and Pop (Lichtenstein), Elderfield first trots out a number of Old Masters, including Chardin, Eakins and Gerome, with a provocatively Pygmalionesque portrait of himself carving a plaster figure of Tanagra.



“Le Travail du marbre or L’Artiste sculptant Tanagra (Working in Marble or The Artist Sculpting Tanagra)” by Jean-Léon Gérôme, 1890. Oil on canvas, 19 7/8 × 15 1/2 inches. Dahesh Museum of Art, New York. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery.

Just to keep you on your toes, Elderfield inserts one small, early Matisse (1901-2) that is so tenebrous, so damn brown, that until a window suddenly opens on a sunlit exterior such as those he painted in Collioure four years later, we could scarcely recognize it as a Matisse. The brief anecdote behind the painting involves a downturn in the artist’s fortunes during which he moved his workspace back into the attic of his family’s home in Bohyain-en-Vermandois.

Matisse is also represented in a bright, seductive portrait of a *Danseuse au Repos* (*Dancer Resting*) from 1939, included in part to bolster the argument that life drawing (and figural sculpture) is the essence of the technical studio practice. The work has a few of the painter’s attributes, including an easel, an unfinished painting or drawing of a nude on another easel, and some of the house plants and objects that are often in his still lifes. The Chardin paintings are devoted to the celebration of the palette and tools.

In a later room, a marvelous corner of Richard Diebenkorn drawings and paintings, as well as Helen Frankenthaler's vigorous *21st Street Studio* (1950)—with its quotations of a poster by Miro as well as her own *Woman* (1950)—pay tribute to the *Red Studio*. These are paintings composed of paintings, setting up a further point made by Elderfield in the way the show is hung: from depictions of the studio as an interior he zooms in on the many ways in which artists pick a wall full of images (Diebenkorn's *Studio Wall* created in 1963 based on the scene in his studio in the Triangle Building in Berkeley). Next to it (and this shows what the resources of Gagosian can conjure) is one of the conte crayon and gouache drawings that Diebenkorn refers to in the painting. The sheet is a beauty, especially in its play of glossy and matte surfaces.

A Modernist interlude offers an atmospheric interior by Alberto Giacometti with an odd point of view, looking downward on the table and space, as well as studio scenes from his *Paris sans Fin* (*Paris Without End*) suite of lithographs. Included in this interlude are major Braque paintings that are all the more touching as they are so meticulously painted. The work was created after his war injury, and the way in which he moves so laboriously through the patterns on the table reveals an immediate affinity to another slow-motion painter in the show, Johns.



“L’Atelier (The Studio)” by Alberto Giacometti, 1951. Oil on canvas, 29 ½ x 23 ½ inches. Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Zadok. © Alberto Giacometti Estate/Licensed by VAGA and ARS, New York, NY. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery.

It is a great idea to include Roy Lichtenstein's cheeky *Artist's Studio* (1973), which alludes to (again!) *The Red Studio* as well as Leger. It rhymes sweetly with the loving catalogue of objects Braque offers. It is also—as this writer can attest, having worked with Lichtenstein on a show—entirely fictive. The Washington Street studio looked nothing like this fussy space. In distinct ways both the Lichtenstein and Giacometti question the ontological status of the art work in the depiction of the studio, introducing a note of doubt that is implicit in, yes, *The Red Studio*.



“Artist's Studio” by Roy Lichtenstein, 1973. Oil and Magna on canvas, 60 x 74 inches. Ostrow Family Collection. © Estate of Roy Lichtenstein. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery.

In the final rooms, the show carves a graceful slalom turn, returning to Johns, as well as to some

wonderful Robert Rauschenberg and Jim Dine, who make that wall enter the gallery by leaning a ladder against it, or depending Ballantine ale cans with traces of paint from its surface, or fitting a stovepipe that heads from a giant palette out and around a bend into an adjoining wall as through a fireplace, which is Dine's *Two Palettes in Black with Stovepipe (Dream)*.

The only real stinker in the painting show, for me, is a bold move: devoting a wall to *Melancholia* (1890-1894), a vast (54 ¾" x 94 ½") and chaotic fantasy by the Polish Symbolist Jacek Malczewski that releases a hyperbolic cavalcade of children, soldiers, and elderly men behind a shrouded figure of Melancholy who is supposedly "Poland itself ... in all its cruel fate." This viewer is just not quite Polish enough to appreciate it.

Curators will roll the dice on gestures of this kind, hoping somebody who loves Lisa Youskavage or George Condo will call its inclusion an *acte gratuit* of genius. No less a personage than Roberta Smith of the *New York Times* took the bait.

Smith also singled out Diego Rivera's clunky *Lucila y los judas (Lucila and the Judas Dolls, 1954)*, a macabre vision of the actress Lucila Balzaretti reclining with her pink sun dress open (there is a touch of Balthus in the style) while the dolls named for Judas Iscariot that are burned in effigy during Mexican festivals, dangle above her. To pique our curiosity, a papier mache white dove hovers, more tightly painted than Braque's bird. It is code for Frida Kahlo, whom Rivera called his little *paloma* and who had died the year the painting was made. Smith called the two "terrible painting that is great to see."



"Estudio del pintor or Lucila y los judas" by Diego Rivera, 1954. Oil on canvas, 70 x 59 inches. Acervo Patrimonial, Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público, Mexico City. © 2014 Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery.

Uptown at the photography installment, the approach taken by Galassi could not be more different. Although the historically important photographs that Constantin Brancusi made of his own studio are hung near the great Josef Sudek and Andre Kertész elegies to Mondrian's serene workspace, the emphasis in the show is on the work of the professional photographer, including Helmut Newton, Eadweard Muybridge, Brassai, Walker Evans, Richard Avedon, Lee Friedlander, and Cindy Sherman.



"View of the studio: Plato, Mademoiselle Pogany II, and Golden

Bird” by Constantin Brancusi, c. 1920. Gelatin silver print, 11 3/4 x 9 1/2 inches. Private collection. © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery.

Although the photography volume is lazy by comparison with its substantial Elderfield companion, Galassi felicitously inscribes the motto for the two shows: “Art begets art, images propagate images, and the studio is an ideal breeding ground. It can serve as storage vault, private museum, exhibition venue, or salesroom—or all of these at once—and photography is adept at capturing and characterizing the whole while making an inventory of the contents.”

The phrase invokes a wonderful couplet from late in “Byzantium,” a poem by William Butler Yeats, who in 1933 was ceremoniously contemplating “complexity” in a room at the top of a tower in Galway, the literary version of the ascetic space of the studio.

Yeats captured the abundance of this exhibition perfectly: “Those images that yet/Fresh images beget.”

BASIC FACTS: “In the Studio: Paintings” and “In the Studio: Photography” remain on view through April 18, 2015. “In the Studio: Paintings” can be found at Gagosian Gallery in Chelsea, located at 522 West 21st Street, New York, NY 10011. “In the Studio: Photographs” is exhibited uptown at Gagosian Gallery located at 980 Madison Avenue (between 76th and 77th Streets), New York, NY 10075. www.gagosian.com.

A two-volume illustrated catalogue accompanies the exhibitions and features essays by exhibition curators John Elderfield and Peter Galassi. It is published by Gagosian and distributed by Phaidon Press.

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