

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

THE NEW YORKER

What Goes On in the Artist's Studio

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*André-Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri, "Kotchoubey," September, 1857-November, 1858.
Photograph Courtesy Gagolian Gallery*

The studios of famous artists are fascinating for the double insight they provide us: on the one hand, a view of the creative process; on the other, a view of the creative life. Those who are casually interested in such things will find no shortage of relevant listicles online—inspiring workspaces of the famously creative, desks of the rich and famous. Within the art world, the artist's studio has lately become a subject of curatorial interest as well. Last February, MOMA's exhibit "A World of Its Own: Photographic Practices in the Studio" highlighted the photography studio's various roles, as "a haven, a stage, a laboratory, or a playground." Now, a year later, a pair of exhibits at the Gagolian gallery entitled "In the Studio"—one of photographs, the other of paintings—provide an exhaustive survey on a similar theme.

Like MOMA's show, the Gagolian's photography exhibit—which includes images dating from 1856 through the twentieth century—divides its contents into themes, focussing on the studio as a stage for posed portraits, as a "total aesthetic environment," and as a de-facto gallery for the "accumulation and display" of images. But individual photos offer idiosyncratic pleasures and insights. A Richard Avedon portrait of the model Suzy Parker—luminous in a black Dior dress, with an unevenly hung black cloth backdrop behind her—calls attention to the artifice beneath the photographer's carefully glamorous scene. Constantin Brâncuși's black-and-white studio-view series, featuring arrangements of his sculptures, is a natural continuation of his three-dimensional experiments in form, light, and shadow. Jeff Wall's stunning "Picture for Women," from 1979, restages the bar scene in Édouard Manet's "Un Bar aux Folies Bergère" in an artist's studio, stripping the painting's populated milieu to two actors—a woman and himself—and positioning the camera as a third figure at the center of the work.

There's special satisfaction in seeing an artist photograph the work space of a peer, as in Saul Leiter's portrait of a grim-looking Diane Arbus standing before her inspiration board—a double treat of authorship. In Edmond Bénéard's nineteenth-century image of the French painter Jean-Léon Gérôme at work, we witness an artist of one medium honoring the toil that goes into another. Gérôme's studio is, indeed, a “total aesthetic environment,” crammed with period textiles, low-hanging frames, and other objects for the viewer to pore over. It also invites a practical question: Why did the artist paint atop such an uncomfortable-looking stool?