

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



In the Studio, Gagosian Gallery, New York — review

A pair of complementary exhibitions succeeds in exploring the vast topic of artists' workspaces

Ariella Budick



Thomas Eakins' 'William Rush Carving His Allegorical Figure of the Schuylkill River' (1876-7)

Not content with running an empire of galleries that stretches across three continents, Larry Gagosian is now competing with some of the world's great museums. He has enlisted not one but two veteran curators from the Museum of Modern Art and leveraged their reputations, their expertise and their access to mount *In the Studio*, an exhibition that leaps from his Madison Avenue headquarters to his outpost on West 21st Street. Under Gagosian's banner, John Elderfield, MoMA's former curator of painting and sculpture, has reunited with the museum's ex-photography expert Peter Galassi to explore the sweeping, fuzzy topic of artists in their studios.

The result is a tour-de-force of self-interested generosity. Gagosian polishes his worldwide brand, while the public gets free access to a matched set of stunning, thoughtful and endearingly uneven shows.

The halves are complementary but independent: paintings in Chelsea, photos on the Upper East Side. Both mix masterworks with arcana, familiar gems with indelible oddities. Distinct sensibilities separate the two parts. *In the Studio* is the culmination of a concept that Elderfield has been mulling for years, and the deliberation shows. Galassi has used the opportunity to root

gleefully around the history of photography, digging up hilarious, puzzling and profane treasures.

As Elderfield acknowledges in the catalogue, a truly comprehensive survey of the subject would have to include classics such as Velázquez's "Las Meninas", which never leaves the Prado in Madrid, and Courbet's "In the Studio", a massive allegory of his own life that not even Gagosian could dislodge from the Musée d'Orsay in Paris. Instead, Elderfield has confined himself to a somewhat random tangle of rubrics. There's the studio as physical representation of the artist's psyche, and as intimate turf for the relationship between artist and model. There's the studio wall, covered in sketches and sources of inspiration, which serves as a collage of the artist's experience and also as metaphor for the finished work.

Elderfield works his way through themes and periods with scholarly passion. He begins with a handful of Enlightenment pioneers, pauses briefly at the 19th century, when the genre was in its Romantic prime, then rushes through Picasso, Matisse and the abstract expressionists before culminating in a late, sublime efflorescence in the 1960s.

Thomas Eakins' "William Rush Carving His Allegorical Figure of the Schuylkill River", on loan from the Philadelphia Museum of Art, beckons in a dim gallery. It's a dark scene, lit from within with Rembrandt-like drama. In the shadows, the sculptor chips away at his wooden allegory, while the model perches on a pedestal in the foreground, her dimpled, beautifully painted skin flickering in the half-light. She is not the protagonist, however. Eakins draws the eye to the jumble of white lace and blue silk that's been tossed on a chair and picked out by a lone patch of brightness.

Eakins shocked his more prudish contemporaries when he argued that rendering realistic nudes required looking at actual nude bodies. Here, he makes the case in paint, accentuating the model's nakedness by focusing on her discarded clothing. "This gives the shock which makes one think about the nudity — and at once the picture becomes improper," spluttered one critic.

A handful of more modest interiors surround the great Eakins. Two pieces by Carl Carus fix on the same window. In one, moonlight whispers through a thin curtain, silhouetting the easel and highlighting the room's inky shadows. In the other, a mounted canvas rests on the sill and faces out, hogging the view and leaving only a glimpse of sky shrouded in thin wisps of cloud. Carus has erased himself from both scenes, but we sense his presence — in the meditative, soulful cell, in the easel at rest, and in the painting that turns to let the vista seep on to its primed, receptive surface.

The back-of-the-canvas motif reappears in the show's last room, again alluding to reticence and death. The stretched painting turned towards the wall in Philip Guston's "Reverse" resembles the door of a prison or interrogation chamber, lit by a lone bulb dangling with sinister intent. Jim Dine's "Double Studio Wall" radiates absence: bare squares on a paint-splattered wall map the places where artworks once hung. In another ingenious contribution, Dine positions two enormous paintings of palettes side by side in reverse symmetry, so that the thumb holes morph into startled eyes in a spectral face. You might also read the smudged white diptych as tombstones silently communing in a graveyard. Jasper Johns' blank grey "Canvas", a framed surface coated with textured grey wax, advertises its refusal to engage. It's a window to nowhere, a mirror without reflections. These mournful works suggest that painting is a kind of loss. To complete a creation means to let it go; to sell it is more wrenching still.

Uptown, Galassi approaches his part of the project with omnivorous good humour. The studio, for him, is an artificial microcosm in which artists can play God. He has unearthed pictures of painters' ateliers, photographers' self-portraits, nude models striking contrived poses, fashion shoots taking place against squares of artfully neutral background. The largest section, "Pose and Persona", consists of pictures that highlight their indoor setting. In her official portrait by James Stack Lauder, Queen Victoria rules over a preposterously opulent interior, her gown merging with the decor. Richard Avedon arranges Andy Warhol's collection of superstars (clothed and unclothed) in a blank white expanse. Truman Capote jams himself into a tight corner at Irving Penn's place.

Photographers' lairs have windows, too, the architectural equivalent of the camera's lens. Rudy Burckhardt, the photographer and film-maker who emigrated to the United States from Switzerland in 1935, looks out of the double-hung window of his Brooklyn Heights studio and discovers a surreal panorama that he can transform just by moving his apparatus a foot or two across the floor. One shot frames the lower Manhattan skyline in the upper square and a grey expanse of water below. In a second shot, Manhattan has vanished and the Brooklyn Bridge magically fills the window frame, a slight change in angle yielding a completely different view. The effect of the two photographs together is eerie, as if the world beyond the studio were an illusion, flattened on to posters that can be rearranged at will.

Josef Sudek, too, dealt eloquently with the tense relationship between the studio and the world beyond. In 1940, after the start of the second world war, he recorded the view from his rooms in Prague with elegiac obsessiveness. Beyond the glass, now bordered with ice, now misted with rain, a boomerang-shaped tree contorts itself in a garden. In one image it twists in wintry sorrow, in another it erupts in bloom, like a costumed actor expressing Sudek's moods. There are no soldiers, no ruination or refugees in these photographs, yet they are wartime scenes, in which the studio acts as both prison and safe haven, a place the artist savours yet longs to escape.

To April 18, gagosian.com