GAGOSIAN GALLERY

ARTFORUM

"In the Studio: Paintings"/ "In the Studio: Photographs"

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Though I am not in perfect sympathy with all of the fifty-one artworks by thirty-six artists and some 150 photographs by fifty-two photographers chosen for this hugely ambitious Gagosian doubleheader, I admit to being awed by many of the loans secured from public collections—always a challenge for a private gallery. Of them, the Picasso classical-period still lifes from the 1920s and Jasper Johns's paintings took pride of place. Particularly subtle was the way in which the whitish planes of color and rectangular collage-like structure of Picasso's two 1928 *L'Atelier* works—brought together here for the first time in the United States—were seemingly absorbed whole cloth into Johns's encaustic and collage *In the Studio*, 1982.

But could there really be any surprise at the embarrassment of riches that was provided by these shows? After all, the curators of the exhibitions are among the most shining alumnae of the top brass at New York's Museum of Modern Art: John Elderfield, chief curator emeritus of painting and sculpture, and Peter Galassi, former chief curator of photography. Elderfield's brief proposed a "history of the painting of studios" that comprised "a period of expansion followed by one of retraction." The era of expansion begins with the Renaissance—the show opened with a mid-sixteenth-century drawing from the Pieter Breughel circle depicting the artist at work accompanied by an onlooker—and culminates in the nineteenth century, when "images of the studio were observed, staged, and invented,"

Constantin Brancusi, *View of the Studio: Plato, Mademoiselle Pogany II, and Golden Bird*, ca. 1920, gelatin silver print, 11¾ × 9½". From "In the Studio: Paintings"/"In the Studio: Photographs."

acting as "pedagogical spaces, venues for social gatherings, places for the display of art, entirely imaginary, and more." The epoch of contraction starts with modern art, particularly that of the early twentieth century, when the most innovative exploration of the theme of the studio was "reduced to basically . . . the artist and the model, and the studio functioning as a display space for art and the images related to it." Assuming that Elderfield is correct about our epoch of contraction, it attained its apotheosis, it seems to me, in the personal interiority and art referentiality of mid-twentieth-century American art.

To exemplify his thesis, Elderfield selected several rather undistinguished paintings, I must admit, works of a type that virtually all painters address at some point in their careers, mostly early on: depictions of easels, chairs, and things tacked to the wall. Indeed, "In the Studio" often came across as a survey of "early work," a feeling borne out by the inclusion of relatively undeveloped pieces by Larry Rivers (*The Wall*, 1957), Richard Diebenkorn (*Studio Wall*, 1963), and Helen Frankenthaler (the Gorkyish *21st Street Studio*, 1950).

The exhibition also presented a number of lesser-known artists: the Danes Wilhelm Bendz and Julius Exner, the Italian Ippolito Caffi, the Americans Louis Moeller and Walter J. Sherwood, among others. Rarely have such figures been conscripted to serve as the masons, as it were, charged with building the mount upon which the temple of modern painting was erected. Big names were also present, of course, and in abundant quantity, if, in my view, often second-tier example.

As for Galassi's show, Brancusi's own photographs of his Impasse Ronsin studio in Paris formed one of that exhibition's most cohesively beautiful parts. The Romanian artist's renowned sculptures appear so deceptively casual in their Cubist-grid distribution that they seem no more than witty toys. Meanwhile, a large selection of plates from Edmond Bénard's photographic album *Les Artistes chez eux* (The Artists at Home), 1884–94, let us intrude upon the studios of once-towering academicians—Jean-Léon Gérôme and Georges Jules Victor Clairin among them. (The pictorial style was maintained in the colossal bombast of Jacek Malczewski's painting *Melancholia*, 1890–94, obtained by Elderfield from a museum in Poznań, Poland.) Bénard's images bear out Elderfield's view of the studio at the end of the nineteenth century as a stagy, overupholstered backdrop—Baroque furniture, vast swags of drapery—that underscored the self-aggrandizing notion of the artist as social lion. Galassi, for his part, notes that the paring-down of studio imagery in twentieth-century photography to that of the artist and model may also have resulted from the fact that the studio of the modern photographer was, often enough, the street—a mutable locale, sited wherever he or she went, camera in hand.

An irony: The disappearance of the studio in our epoch of post-studio art also underscores the all-but-Baroque revival of the studio as atelier, as workshop, as factory. Think—as this exhibition willed us to—of Warhol, Koons, and Kehinde Wiley as the new Rubenses.

—*Robert Pincus-Witten*