The Brooklyn Rail
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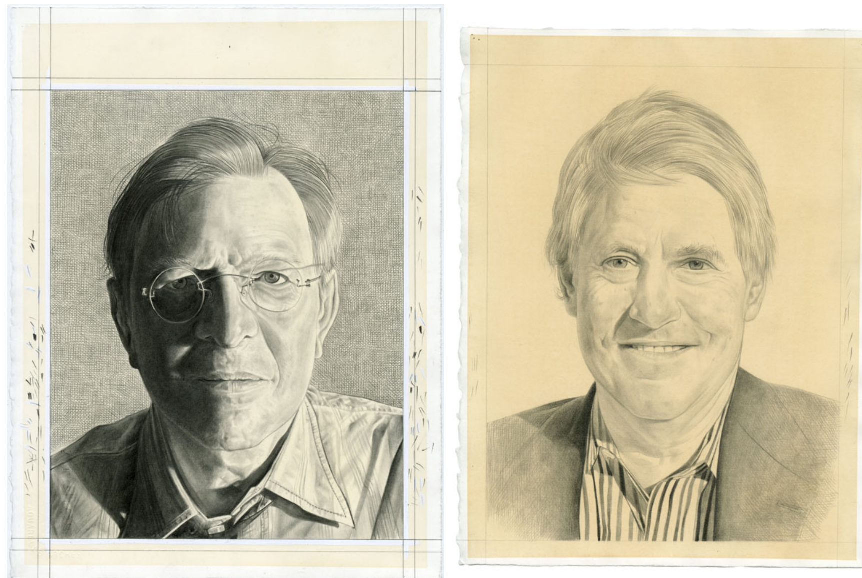
GAGOSIAN GALLERY

John Elderfield and Peter Galassi with Phong Bui

Phong Bui



(L) Portrait of John Elderfield. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.
(R) Portrait of Peter Galassi. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui. From a photograph by Robert McKeever.

For sensitive viewers of art, and for those curious about the relationship between what and how images are bred in artists' studios, this two-part exhibit at Gagosian Gallery, *In the Studio: Photographs*,curated by Peter Galassi (980 Madison Avenue) and *In the Studio: Paintings*, curated by John Elderfield (522 West 21st Street), both of which are on view until April 18, 2015, is a visual feast. A few days after the opening reception (February 17), *Rail* publisher Phong Bui managed to see the two exhibits and then engaged in an extended talk with both curators at the latter location about how the exhibit began, and more.

Phong Bui (Rail): When I was in college studying to become an art director, my dream was to work for Alexander Liberman at Condé Nast. Yet it was only in my final year that I discovered the first edition of Liberman's book, *The Artist in His Studio*, published by Viking Press in 1960. I still remember vividly that the texts were written in parts so as to include direct quotes, especially from living artists like Picasso, Braque, Léger, Sonia Delaunay, Balthus, among others, and deceased ones such as Renoir, Monet, Bonnard, and Kandinsky. The texts were written after his pilgrimages to their studios. Either way, what was so compelling was, as you were quoting Svetlana Alpers, John, "not simply the site where [artists] worked, but a condition of working." Which means their work habits, their

interests, their particular or idiosyncratic uses of materials and techniques, and so on, that are tied to the objects they were making. Have there been any exhibits of this kind before? How did the concept of this exhibit come about? And, how long did it take you to materialize it?

John Elderfield: There was a vast survey of images of studios in Stuttgart about four years ago, which had many wonderful things in it, but not what I wanted to do, which was a focused, inductive study about particular themes and subjects that artists were responding to and their similarities or differences. With our exhibit, especially the one focusing on painting, I wanted to stop with the generation of Johns, Rauschenberg, Lichtenstein, and Dine mostly because if it went later, we'd have to include installation art such as Fischli & Weiss, or other video installations like those of Bruce Nauman for example. However, let me say in passing that, coincidentally, even though it's not part of either of our exhibits, there's a video installation of William Kentridge's Johannesburg studio (which he used as a set for this suite of short films, *7 Fragments for George Méliès*, *Day For Night*, and *Journey to the Moon*, as his homage to the cinematic innovations of the French film director George Méliès) on the sixth floor of the 980 Madison location, which was shown in Venice in 2003. In any event, my project goes back to my speaking with David Sylvester after his visit to Jeff Koons's studio in the late 1990s, where he said that Koons's studio was like Rubens's studio. I thought to myself: if I were to curate an exhibit of this kind, what would the exhibit look like since there are famous pictures like Velázquez's "Las Meninas" at the Prado, Vermeer's "The Art of Painting" at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, Courbet's "The Painter's Studio" at Musée d'Orsay, none of which could ever be included in it.

Rail: But they were featured in your essay.

Elderfield: Right, and they would have to be in the big comprehensive book that still needs to be done on this subject. But a survey of the greatest hits of paintings of studios is not only unattainable but also unrepresentative of the history of the subject. If one said, okay, I've really got to have some of the greatest studio paintings by Matisse, Braque, and so on, it would be amazing, but they actually may not convey as much about the development of the theme as some of the middle-level works, such as Jacek Malczewski, Alfred Stevens, and Johan (Julius) Exner, among others. Peter and I talked about the larger issue, which is the relationship of the documentary interest and the aesthetic quality of the image. That is why Alex Liberman's photographs are not in Peter's show. For my part, I've collected plenty of anecdotal images that I rejected for the show: children painting, apes painting, school boys chasing models, etc.—there was a huge attraction to studio images in the 19th century as this theme proliferated. Everybody seemed to want to do studio paintings. And there's obviously such a demand for them—from the public who wanted to know what went on in the studios—that artists could be relied upon to make something up, which led to many of them being staged. There were pictures that were not staged, like (Carl Gustav) Carus's paintings "Studio Window" and "Studio in Moonlight," in which he painted two different views of his easel in front of the window at different times of the day and night. The one big area of non-staged pictures really are the self-portraits of artists in their studios, which I felt I should exclude from this exhibit because they've been dealt with already in other exhibitions, and insofar as they're really about the artist rather than about the studio.

Rail: Is that the reason why you chose Picasso's painting "The Studio" (1928) instead of the other equally famous, "Painter and Model," painted the same year, from MoMA?

Elderfield: Actually, I had hoped when I was at MoMA to bring together "The Studio" with the partner painting from Venice and the plan was that they would be shown together in Venice, then in New York. But the New York part of the project collapsed. However, Philip Rylands (the director of the Peggy Guggenheim Museum) in Venice, and Richard Armstrong (the director of the Guggenheim Foundation and Museum) in New York said if I could get one from MoMA, I could have the one from Venice.

Rail: That's terrific. They both look stunning when you walk into the first room of the exhibit. Peter, when did your contribution on photography begin to take place? And is this exhibit the first collaboration between you and John?

Peter Galassi: It began two years ago when John and Larry (Gagosian) invited me to curate the other half on photography. I couldn't resist the chance. But yes, this is the first time John and I have collaborated, although we had participated in committing a lot of joint crimes at MoMA. [*Laughs*.]

Elderfield: And also preventing some. [*Laughter*.]

Rail: Not to mention it would have taken twice as long to curate an exhibition of this breadth and comprehension at MoMA and other museums.

Elderfield: And it only took the two of us, and our two brilliant assistants Lauren Mahony and Anna Page Nadin.

Rail: Peter, you were surprised to have discovered that there were far fewer photographs of photographers' studios than paintings of sculptors' or painters' studios. I'm curious how you and John managed to divide different themes in each of your exhibits respectively. For you, there were three themes, the first one being "Pose and Persona."

Galassi: Well, unlike John's exhibit, which is rooted in a great tradition with old and modern masterpieces, in the photography side of the question, I recognized that one could do this very small exhibition of photographs of photographers' studios which could be quite interesting, or one could do a very large exhibition of photographs of painters' and sculptors' studios, which would be equally interesting from the documentary point of view because if you're interested in the artist, as long as the picture is in focus, there are things to look at. But I decided I didn't want to curate either one of those two ideas. I wanted to focus on the artistic quality of the photographs themselves. So then it was just a matter of looking at pictures and accumulating them, and then seeing what groups they might fall into. The fun was to allow the spontaneous process to take place as the exhibition was coming together.

Rail: I was very compelled by Irving Penn's portraits of Elsa Schiaparelli and Truman Capote (1948), partly because the exposed edges of the famous corner contraption, which you don't normally see in the photographs of Marlene Dietrich, Duchamp, and Stravinsky, among others.

Galassi: That was the reason that I chose those two, because including the edges makes the setting part of the subject of the picture. The same can be said for the picture of his wife

(Lisa Fonssagrives-Penn) in the mermaid dress, which shows the edges of the cloth that she's standing on.

Rail: What about the wonderful small picture of Claude Cahun, "Self-Portrait"? It's so haunting and enigmatic, it could have been taken by Cindy Sherman.

Galassi: Because the studio is the artificial construct, not the real world, I thought there should be some pictures that simply represented the blunt straight-ahead recording of the individual identity so to speak, which could be the theme of the whole exhibit. At any rate, Claude Cahun is perfect because she's got her background and then she's got her mask on; her posture and the whole straightforward setup of the picture is to create an identity photograph.

Rail: The scale of it is what really got me. As far as pairings are concerned, I was interested in, for example, the two black-and-white photographs by (Edward) Steichen of—

Galassi: Fred Astaire (1927) and Maurice Chevalier (1929).

Rail: Exactly! And two of Lucas Samaras's color Polaroid self-portraits, one with David Whitney, the other with Jasper Johns. They seem to share the multiple and inventive uses of shadow, light and dark, and so on.

Galassi: It actually went in reverse because I started with the Samaras portraits, which revel in the artificiality of that kind of setting with the lights and all the trappings of the studio. At the same time, of course, he's also making fun of it, which is the opposite of the Steichen, because that style was at its height in the late '20s and he took it very seriously, even though the subject may be smiling or dancing.

Rail: What about "Hogarth Painting the Comic Muse" (1758), John, the near square and small painting, which without the usual identifiable satirical nature, could have been mistaken for a Chardin, in terms of the beauty and subtlety of the paint surface?

Elderfield: Well, I was looking at how to represent things before the 19th century. Because at one point I thought, as far as I understood the development of studio paintings, the first real outpouring of them was in 17th-century Holland. But I felt it didn't make sense to begin so early and therefore commit myself up to a real historical account, so my first instinct was just to include 19th-century paintings, because a similar theme was also very popular. But then I felt, as I was thinking about images of materials, that I needed pictures from the 18th century. Fortunately, I was able to borrow a pair of Chardin's "Attributes of the Painter" (c. 1725–27) and "Attributes of the Architect" (c. 1725–30) from the Princeton University Art Museum. As for the Hogarth, because I've been working with the National Portrait Gallery in London on their Cézanne show for a little while, it was less difficult to borrow it. What I love about the painting is that it's the closest in the exhibition, really, to a self-portrait of an artist, although obviously it's not a mirror painting. He's not looking at you. It had to be a staged thing where he set it up and then painted his face into it. But it's very much a self-image of an artist. When one compares it to the many self-images of artists in that period, it's extraordinarily modern in that in most of the paintings one finds, they're wearing wigs. They're really well dressed and they're sort of daintily dabbing on the picture. Hogarth, however, really—looks like a Manchester United supporter. [*Laughs.*]And this, of course, is

an image that Hogarth enjoyed. There's a famous painting of him with a pug next to him. I presume that the word pugnacious comes from pug. And we know from X-rays of this painting that there was originally a dog in the background, peeing on Old Master paintings. [*Laughs.*] Obviously, Hogarth must have felt he'd gone too far here, so he edited it out. There's this sort of vitality, the real energy of being an artist in this canvas. And it's strange because the outline drawing on the canvas is of Thalia, the muse of comedy, contrary to Hogarth, the theoretician Hogarth, who wrote the treatise *The Analysis of Beauty*, who, as a painter, organizes things very carefully. It's such a rich painting because it contains seriousness and humor all in one.

Rail: It's a wonderful addition to the exhibit, for sure.

Elderfield: The next question was, what would be the earliest picture I can include and borrow for the exhibit? It turned out that I knew of a private collector who had a lovely collection of studio paintings and one thing which this collector had was the copy of the great ink drawing of Bruegel's self-portrait, which is in the Albertina. It was a contemporaneous copy. And it's very good. The arm of the person watching is a little strange. He hadn't quite gotten that right. But it's a good example, which was true of many early images of artists at work—there's no interest whatsoever in the studio itself, it's about them. There's not even an easel there, not even a painting there, just the artist and the patron. I should say that since the exhibit has been open and I've been walking around it, I've been thinking, as I mentioned to Peter, we could actually do the whole thing again with different pictures. Peter just rolled his eyes. [*Laughs.*]

As it often happens with these kinds of projects, the conceptual basis isn't clear before you begin. It actually emerges as you're working on it, which I think is how it should be, to paraphrase what Picasso once said, "if you know what you want to do, there's no point in doing it." Initially, of course, I had on my computer hundreds and hundreds of images of studios, which I would go through and think of what to do. And then starting to think about what has been presented, is it really what studios look like or what artists who painted them wanted them to look like? The larger subject is actually why there were studios, what went on in studios, how it was different to working out of doors as opposed to indoors, and certainly some of this does intersect with the conditions under which photography appeared. Actually, Peter curated a wonderful exhibition at MoMA called *Before Photography*:*Painting and the Invention of Photography*.

Galassi: In 1981. It was inspired by Heinrich Schwarz's idea, to challenge the conventional notion that the invention of photography was just fundamentally a technical achievement, without artistic roots. Photography in fact was born out of the Western pictorial tradition. There were paintings and drawings by Constable, Corot, Thomas Jones, Christen Købke, and others, made in the half-century before the invention of photography was announced in 1839, which suggested that what we think of as a photographic way of seeing had begun to evolve before photography was invented—juxtapositions of near and far, unexpected croppings, and the like, which departed from earlier standards of structuring an image. All of these new perceptions occurred as though they anticipated the advent of photography.

Rail: Which was to become widely used in the circle of Impressionist painters. Meanwhile, in corresponding to John's exploration of "The Studio as Subject," you've selected images

of different artist studios for your second theme "Four Studios." Why Mondrian, Brancusi, Sudek, and Samaras, and not others?

Galassi: It's partly because they made pictures that are interesting to look at, and partly because, with the exception of Kertész's three pictures of Mondrian's studio (1926), the other three—Brancusi (twelve in total, taken between 1920 and 1929), Sudek (seven taken between 1940 and 1972), and Samaras (seven taken between 1978 and 1980)—were looking at their own spaces, their studios, which have an interest in and of themselves. Kertész's picture "Chez Mondrian" is a famous one I've been familiar with for a long time, but it never occurred to me, and actually I'm not sure any of the Kertész literature has explicitly pointed out, that in it he's turned his back on Mondrian. He instead photographed the staircase. That strategy was characteristic of a whole body of work in Paris from the mid-'20s to the mid-'30s, in which he successfully takes other artists' studios as the raw material for his own art. Another example in the exhibition is his "Chez Kisling" (1933).

Rail: So Brassaï's and Cartier-Bresson's photographs of, say, Giacometti's studio would have a different sentiment than those by Kertész.

Galassi: Most of Cartier-Bresson's photographs of Giacometti were taken outside his studio—the famous ones being Giacometti walking on the street in the rain with his coat covering his head, or working in his Stampa studio (1960), and also one of him installing his sculpture at Galerie Maeght, Paris (1961). Giacometti himself was also one of the great exploiters of photography as a tool for making a reputation. There was a show at the Pompidou several years ago based on what was left in Giacometti's studio, and it had a fascinating section of Giacometti's photographic images in books and magazines, which unfortunately was not really documented in the catalogue, which was disappointing. But it's very interesting how little you learn about Giacometti's studio from all of these photographs, whereas in some other cases, the studios themselves are very well documented.

Rail: I was also interested in the subject of what artists collect, as we see, for instance, in Brassaï's two photographs of two different views of Picasso's studio on Rue La Boétie (1932–33). In one we see a Rousseau painting of a group of people standing before a big ship, leaning on the wall and floor to the left, while on its right is a stack of canvases facing in, as well as other things on the floor. My question is, did you consult each other about the differences and similarities between the pictures, because the motif of the canvas seems to repeat. Guston's remarkable painting, "Reverse" (1978–79) is among them.

Elderfield: One could have done a small show of one room of canvases, front and back, as subjects of paintings, which would actually be really interesting, except some of them, again, you can never borrow. But in the end it comes down to what Peter and I have talked about, which is that anecdotal interest should not be minimized. And the difference between our interest in how artists thought of their environment and, you know, finding works which really had authority as independent paintings is a very subtle and interesting one.

Rail: That's the exciting part about curation. Meanwhile, looking at Edmond Lebel's photograph of his son posing for a later painting, it reminds me how spatially unconvincing, for example, either Cabenel's or Bouguereau's paintings of the same subject "Birth of Venus" (1863 and 1879) were. That's not to say the use of photography in painting can be

trivial, because it's not true in the case of Cézanne, especially "The Bather" (1885) at MoMA, which Peter has mentioned in his catalogue essay.

Elderfield: Actually in the 15th century there were drawings of studio models placed in landscapes, which were similar to those of Cézanne's bathers. I mean, these images have been in the visual culture for a long, long time, and obviously they appear and disappear at different times. And certainly the creation of and the popularity of photographs of artists' models really obviously revived all of this interest. What I've continued to find fascinating is the whole inside/outside relationship to the studio and painting in general. How Corot's painting in Rome can be seen as the origins of plein air painting, which obviously led to an enormous shift in the way in which pictures are conceived. And then, of course, its continuity in relation to Cézanne. But then one moves backwards and realizes that the studio as initially conceived was on the one hand a place for the preservation and encouragement of the creation of images of the artist's subjective, individualistic experience of something placed in the studio; but, as Peter said a while ago, the studio is an artificial place. So that subjective, individualistic experience is clearly affected by the artificial set-up. So to what extent can it be thought to be a true thing? And one of the reasons why I wanted a wall of windows is obviously the window being the source, the control of light into the studio, which was a very critical thing. Svetlana Alpers has written beautifully about this in the 17th century in Holland, but it's an element which continues. You can look at these paintings and see how it isn't all northern light: the bottom half of the windows must be shielded so that the light is coming in from the top. Thinking about this condition—I don't know whether this was common for the early plein air painters—but we know that with Cézanne and Pissarro, they wrote regularly about their preference for working outside with gray light because it didn't have the confusion of multiple reflections. So in a funny way, their wish to control the environment outside is a transposition of something they've learned inside. But of course, you can't control it outside. And artists came to accept that kind of lack of control in the paintings done inside as well.

Rail: It's an interesting condition, which was the reason why Mondrian covered all the windows in his studio with white paper. He preferred artificial light over natural light.

Elderfield: I think an argument can be made that eventually the experience of painting outdoors and accepting the uncontrollable nature of the environment which is being represented, is brought back indoors and comes to classically change painting, say, between Cézanne and the Cubists. Although Picasso and Braque did make some landscapes, they're not really landscape painters. But the kind of fracturing of form in illumination is something which was observed and recorded outside and then brought back inside, so that there's a kind of back and forth between these two environments. Of course there comes a point where the whole thing collapses. Perceptual painting becomes less and less practiced. And the history of studio representation in the 20th century is of an increasing diminishment, as pictorial space gets narrower and narrower. But we do know the more restrictions that artists have, the more inventive they can become.

Rail: That's when photography became prominent as a legitimate medium as it referred to painting in various ambitious ways. Of course, I'm thinking of Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood" (1967) essay.

Galassi: [*Laughs.*] Well, as Michael himself has pointed out, everything's already explained in "Art and Objecthood." If you just read that essay, you don't ever need to read anything else.

Elderfield: I think the phone is ringing. [*Laughs.*]

Galassi: Actually there is Alexander Liberman's photograph that could have been in the exhibition, except that basically there are no prints. I'm sure those pictures were made as transparencies in order to be made as reproductions in the book. There never needed to be any prints. But certainly there aren't any existing exhibitable prints from the time. The picture I have in mind is related to the pairing of two photographs of a wall in Bonnard's studio in his small villa at Le Cannet behind Cannes where he lived from 1925 until his death in 1947, one by Cartier-Bresson (1944), the other by Brassaï (1946). Liberman was there and photographed that same wall in 1955 or so. What is interesting is that he included more of the wall than Cartier-Bresson and Brassaï. Extending to the right there is the map of Cannes and its environs and those little chocolate wrappers made of glittery silver paper, which as he once said, he loved "because they help me with my sparkles."

Rail: [*Laughs.*] I suppose the same is applied to Lynda Benglis's case since there was no original photograph.

Galassi: It's slightly different in that the original is the two-page ad in *Artforum,*the November issue, 1974.

Rail: A wonderful surprise for me was Rudy Burckhardt's two photographs of "A View from Brooklyn" (1954). His activity as a painter became more pronounced later in the '80s until his death in 1999.

Galassi: Burckhardt's pair of pictures is like Photography 101, a primer in how photographs are made and how to look at them. He makes the view out the window into a picture, which he then changes simply by changing the position of the camera. He moves just a little bit and instead of seeing the skyline of lower Manhattan we see the Brooklyn Bridge.

Rail: To continue with the theme "Materials in the Studio," John, I thought Guston's other painting, "Pink Summer" (1975), was so moving because it shows what a painter's daily life is all about. Everything is on the table; a bunch of brushes loaded with oil paint, a piece of cloth for cleaning, a wristwatch, a sandwich, and the four plywood corner braces. And above on the horizon there appears a half of a head in profile.

Elderfield: Moving out of the picture.

Rail: How wonderful!

Elderfield: But he shall return to the studio soon because it's his obsession.

Rail: Peter, can you comment on Lee Friedlander's six pictures of Raoul Hague's studio in Woodstock taken between 1983 and 90? Unlike the studio walls of Bonnard, Rauschenberg, and others—which included images of their works along with works of those they admire of

the past or present, as well as art from other cultures—his were filled, packed with all kinds of images: a car, a factory, the pyramid, and all sorts of people: a dancer, a buffalo, and whatnot.

Galassi: It's clearly very eclectic. As you may know, Friedlander and his wife Maria were very close friends with Hague. In fact, when Friedlander did a book on his photographs of Hague's studio, which includes these six in the exhibit, Maria Friedlander wrote the text. And one of the things that the book really conveys is that Hague was a person for whom everything was aesthetic. It was his own aesthetic. For example, on one occasion the three of them went to a restaurant to have a meal. Once they sat down, Hague said, "No, we've got to go. We've got to go. I can't eat here." When he was asked why, he said: "I can't eat in a place where there are ladies with blue hair." [*Laughter*.]

Rail: So specific! Peter, would you say the inclusion of John O'Reilly's work at the tail end of the show is a surprise?

Galassi: O'Reilly's work should be better known than it is, but this isn't the first time it has been featured in New York. I think we at MoMA first came across his work in the mid-'80s, bought one or two pictures and showed them in group exhibitions. Then later Klaus Kertess fell in love with O'Reilly's work and included him in the Whitney Biennial in 1995. Klaus also did a show of his at the Addison Gallery in 2002. O'Reilly's is a wonderful story in that he was already in his 50s when he discovered Polaroid, partly through the example of Lucas Samaras, and the Polaroid medium enabled him to flower as an artist.

Rail: Amazing! Would you say, John, the two Dine paintings—"Double Studio Wall" (1963) and "Two Palettes in Black with Stovepipe (Dream)" (1963), which I thought added the in-between meditation of Guston's bold and expressive images and Jasper Johns's subtle use of graphic ambience on the wall and the floor with real objects—are considered a surprise?

Elderfield: Dine has always been a commercially successful artist, but the early work doesn't get looked at properly because some aspects of the later work have created a certain persona of an artist which some viewers made their minds up about, which prevented them from looking at the early work. Certainly, as Lauren and I were looking at the two paintings, both painted in 1963, we thought they were extraordinary. It's just difficult to know quite what's going on. There seems to be a word "cash" that gets painted out. And then I attempt to look at it and I think it's actually some kind of glass container with something in it. It looks like a pair of scissors.

Rail: They both contain more austerity than the later works, which tend to spell out everything to the viewers.

Elderfield: I should add two more things: one, Jasper and Jim are the only living artists in the *Paintings* exhibit; two, someone should curate an early Dine exhibit somewhere. Maybe this can be an annual exhibit with the same subject. Let's see! [*Laughter.*]