Hyperallergic
April 13, 2015

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

HYPERALLERGIC

The Private Language of Painting, Revealed in Artists' Images of Their Studios

John Goodrich

Jacek Malczewski, "Melancholia (Melancholy)" (1890–94), oil on canvas, 54 ¾ × 94 ½ inches (139 × 240 cm), Muzeum Narodowe w Poznaniu, Poznań. Fundacja Raczyńskich (all images courtesy Gagosian Gallery)

Gagosian has done it again: produced another museum-quality show, this one devoted to images of artists' studios, as recorded in photographs (on view at its uptown gallery) and in paintings (installed at West 21st Street). The downtown half of *In the Studio,* curated by John Elderfield, Chief Curator Emeritus of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), has all the virtues and a few of the faults of some recent museum blockbusters. Paced by some stunning paintings, the handsome installation is a visual marvel, but also something of a thematic mélange.

The installation of more than 50 paintings and works on paper, ranging over five centuries, repeatedly mixes the masterful and the forgettable in its investigation of artists' relationships to their workspaces. The introductory wall text traces a historical contraction in the way artists depicted their studios: such depictions, proliferating after the Renaissance, were eventually abstracted and flattened by the Modernists; post-Modernists further reduced them to visual conceptualizations. The catalog essay agonizes over distinctions between the "internal" and "external" artist, as revealed by outward-looking or self-absorbed figures, and by those tried-and-true stand-ins: a lone paintbrush on a bench, canvases turned to the wall. Never mind. There's some extraordinary works in the exhibition, and they say all that really needs saying.

Surprises — mostly good ones — abound in the wobbly but luminous trip from Brueghel toJim Dine. The Brueghel (actually a sprightly copy, produced in c. 1565–66, of his famous self-portrait drawing) hangs in a section of paintings of artists at their easels; these works range from a radiantly brushy Daumier (ca. 1870–75) to the high-pitched inertia of Gérôme's academic

canvas (1890). A group of paintings depicting unattended easels includes a pre-Fauve Matisse from ca. 1901-02; its subdued browns circulate subtly through a dim studio's interior before arriving at the burst of greens and oranges of a window view. Even with this restrained palette, his genius for color stands out, lively yet supremely disciplined.

Installation view of 'In the Studio: Paintings' at Gagosian Gallery, 522 West 21st Street (left: © Estate of Roy Lichtenstein, center: © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, right: © Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA, New York, © Gagosian Gallery, photo by Robert McKeever)

In another gallery, a large Diego Rivera canvas (1954) presents, with bizarre matter-of-factness, an elegantly dressed woman reclining under giant, menacing monsters. (The wall text explains that they're part of Mexican Holy Week festivities.) Its tamed exoticism contrasts with the wild fantasy of the painting hanging opposite: the 8-foot wide "Melancholy" (1890–94) by Polish painter Jacek Malczewski. Compared to the great paintings elsewhere, it's a dreadful mishmash of unweighted color and errant line, but it highly entertains as an illustration of elaborately tumbling Hussar warriors and musicians — and a lone scholar, too, judging by one figure's absorption in a book.

Nearby, an early Frankenthaler canvas (1950) turns the contents of a studio into a spry, collage-like geometry of color. A striking painting (1972–73) by Lucian Freud contains his usual qualities: the uncomfortably reclining nude, rendered with rich/raw modeling, and a keen tuning of adjacent colors. But the painting also achieves something rarer in his work: a gravity of gesture across the canvas. Other notable works include a series of Giacometti lithographs, a spooky, skull-dotted Ensor, two sturdy late Gustons, and — channeling Matisse — a particularly vibrant Diebenkorn painting of a studio wall. And while "gem-like" is not a phrase one normally applies to a work by Rauschenberg, it seems apt for his "Small Rebus" (1956), a canvas of rough brush strokes and collaged magazine clippings energized by pert counterbalances of color.

In the final gallery, large works by Rauschenberg and Dine reference studio practice with color charts and outlines of palettes and canvas stretchers. They convey little of the pictorial dynamism of studio walls, unlike — surprisingly enough — Jasper Johns's "Studio 1" (1964), on loan from the Whitney Museum. This artist's talents lie more often in laidback ellipticisms than in rigorous form, but "Studio 1" not only conjures a studio space conceptually, with color-chart colors and attached paint cans, but animates it with intensely measured contrasts of angle, color, and scale.

In the Studio may be a rambling journey, but as Elderfield writes, it's intended not as a survey but as a speculative "essay on the history of studio painting." It gratifies as such, its thesis illuminated by major and lesser works alike.

One could, however, draw a different argument from the selection of work — that what it really illuminates is the enduring powers of great painting in all its guises. "Artistic greatness" may sound quaint in 2015, but how else to describe the one-in-a-million eloquence, courage, generosity, and curiosity expressed in painting's most basic elements? The phrase certainly applies to Matisse and Picasso, and even more so to a master they both admired, and one that the young Matisse studied more than any other in the Louvre. This is the unassuming Chardin (1699–1779), whose two early still lifes grace a gallery midway through the installation. The power of these paintings — which are simpler, and even more restrained than his better-known works — is disguised by their familiar forms. They conform to every stylistic and thematic convention of their time. But they also exceed every limitation of style through sheer energy of color and form. Chardin conceives of "Attributes of the Architect" (c. 1725–30) as a fusillade of diagonal lights (rolled architectural plans) propped by piled reds and browns at one end (books) and wedged at the other by a confluence of verticals and horizontals (a box, a book). Condensations of details — such as the tight coil of a protractor viewed on edge — anchor the rhythmic flight of larger forms. Objects become epiphanies, as if we're seeing them for the first time. We are within an original, hyper-animated construct. It's this visual language, unique to painting, that connects Brueghel to Daumier to Matisse.

A peculiarity of *In the Studio* is how this formal language and the show's theme pass like ships in the night. They never engage with each other. At one point, studio scenes by Braque and Lichtenstein hang side by side, as if the latter had just taken the former's Cubism a step further. This isn't the case: the Braque, though not one of his best efforts, shows through its vitality of color and rhythm an appreciation of painting traditions; Lichtenstein shows almost none. All good artists move on from what came before, but of the two only Braque seems conscious of what he's moving from. Whatever Lichtenstein's merits, the installation should cue gallery-goers into the sea change between the artists' two approaches.

Or have painting traditions simply passed from our consciousness? We might get a presentiment that they have, based on the four large paintings introducing the show. These include the two astonishing Picassos, which both create abstracted studio scenes out of wild oppositions of tightly brushed forms. "The Studio" (1927–28), on loan from MoMA, tangibly carves the presences of a figure, a sculptural bust, and a still life out of racing, folding forms. The figure holds its full height in space, the still life palpably rests on a table, the bust looks on from a brief distance. Shifting planes of color locate every element: dense green apples against an ethereal violet wall; a simmering yellow doorway braces and all but encompasses the figure. (One tiny hand escapes.) Picasso's intense imagination is matched, point for point, by his powerful pictorial expression. The painting feels at once tautly austere and lushly full.

Opposite hangs a work by a great admirer of this painting: Robert Motherwell, whose "The Studio" (1987) boasts a bold, rough mapping of reds, yellows, and blues. Motherwell brings to the canvas everything afforded by an intelligent appreciation of Picasso's style, yet it has neither quite the same rigor nor wildness. On a wall in-between hangs Johns's "In the Studio" (1982), a canvas which includes a painted depiction of two of his own "crosshatch" paintings, along with a three-dimensional, multicolored arm, and a vertical wood stick. The exhibition's title suggests that this painting serves as its keystone. And yet, provocative as it is in conceptual terms, the

painting itself has next to none of the formal powers at which Picasso excels and which Motherwell obviously respects.

Draw a line from Brueghel to our time, and this grouping of four works baffles. Are there sensibilities out there that can embrace both Picasso's pictorial brilliance and Johns's conceptual play, when, based on the visual evidence, their entire experiences of painting barely overlap? Undoubtedly there are, but the two can be brought together only by the most serpentine of arguments — or an appealing but amorphous theme like that of *In the Studio*. And if that theme is the admission price for experiencing Chardin, Daumier, Matisse, and Picasso, we're happy to pay.

In the Studio: Paintings *continues at Gagosian Gallery (522 West 21st Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through April 18.*