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GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Review: The Artist's Studio, From Refuge to Gallery, in Shows at the Gagosian

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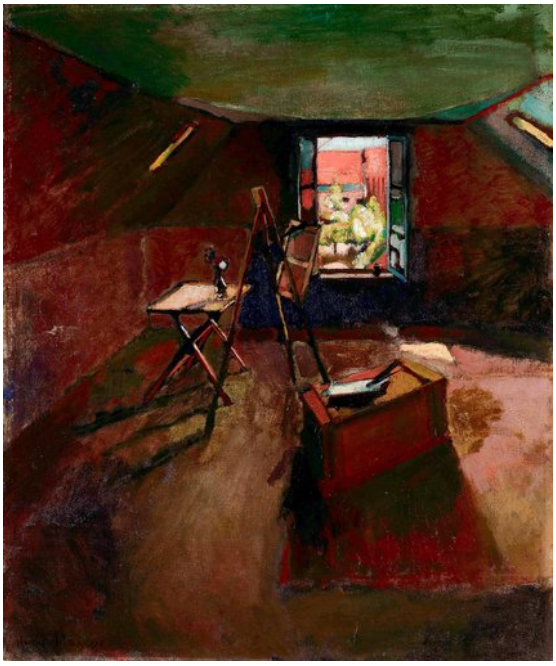

Henri Matisse's "L'Atelier sous les toits (Studio Under the Eaves)," 1901-2. © 2015 Succession H. Matisse/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, courtesy Gagosian Gallery.

In these days of post-studio, post-Internet artistry, of nomadic careers and collaborative cohorts, the artist's studio can sometimes seem like a thing of the past, a relic from that bygone era before the supposed death of the author and the age of mechanical reproduction. But even if young artists work increasingly out of backpacks, on laptops or in tandem, alone time in a fairly private work space remains an essential condition for creativity.

To remind us of the history of the artist's studio, its multiple roles as work space, refuge, stage, gallery and subject, the Gagosian Gallery has mounted not one but two museum-quality exhibitions, "In the Studio: Paintings" in its space on West 21st Street in Chelsea, and "In the Studio: Photographs" at its flagship gallery on the Upper East Side. While the artist-studio theme is a bit timeworn, these are undeniably sumptuous shows — variously smart, touching and elucidating — that boast little-seen gems and interesting juxtapositions. The effort downtown presents a combination of 50 paintings and works on paper from the mid-16th through the 20th centuries. Uptown, 143 photographs span from 1856 to the late 20th century.

Museum-quality shows like this form the Gagosian Gallery's wheelhouse. They vary in quality a bit — with surveys of Piero Manzoni (2009) and Lucio Fontana (2012) and the first of several Picasso shows (the late work) setting a high standard. There aren't any real low points, except possibly the show of Monet's Giverny landscapes (2012) whose main quality was its resemblance to a museum blockbuster.

In any commercial gallery, museum-quality fare tends to reveal the uneasy overlap between public service and brand-burnishing, discernment and ostentation, research value and muscle-flexing. At Gagosian, these factors can occasionally overshadow a show (Monet). Mostly, as here, they ring it irresistibly with signs and symptoms of the workings of art-world power.

This time, there are two at once — a matched set. They are also chockablock with loans from 35 museums here and abroad, plus works from numerous artists' foundations and estates, delineating a network of institutional connections. Perhaps most ostentatious of all, each exhibition has been organized by a longtime top curator at the Museum of Modern Art, now working independently: John Elderfield (the painting show) and Peter Galassi (photographs). Another matched set you could say — trophy-curators. Clout is definitely on display here, contributing to that heady combination of overt excellence and subtle vulgarity that may be something of a Gagosian specialty.

Mr. Elderfield's show, the better of the two, is obviously a long-held dream — you can tell by the obscurity of some of the pictures and lending museums. Just as obviously, it is a show he never could have done at the Modern, where he orchestrated sweeping surveys of Matisse and Mondrian. Here the material ventures not only back to the mid-16th century, but also encompasses small, charming genre paintings by unknowns like Ippolito Caffi, whose "Oriental Artist Painting by the Light of the Moon" of 1845 depicts a turbaned figure in a studio steeped in shades of blue.

Mr. Elderfield opens by pairing Jasper Johns's 1982 "In the Studio" with Picasso's 1928 "The Studio," a great match given their intimations of real and depicted bodies and their shifting combinations of white paint and bare or nearly bare canvas to depict walls, art and studio table.

Next follow two dark-walled galleries of small, mostly 19th-century canvases in which carefully measured natural light from windows and skylights is paramount, as is the artists' love of it. Easels are also prominent: From 1758, Hogarth sits near his, sketching an image, surrounded by dimness. Johan Julius Exner does the same in a 1910 self-portrait that is his last work, but is bathed in the glow of a generous skylight. Matisse's tiny "Studio Under the Eaves" from 1901-2, lent by the Fitzwilliam Museum in Britain, defines the cusp between old and new, showing a garret whose pervasive brownness is startlingly disrupted by the colorful scene out a window — a Matisse-in-waiting.

It's a little hard to go from these tender, finely detailed ruminations on the studio toward the more assertive present. In the fourth gallery, Mr. Elderfield snaps us to attention with "Melancholia," an overblown melodrama by the Polish painter Jacek Malczewski from 1890-94. In it, a scrum of tumbling figures rush from infancy toward death with more than a touch of Futurism, Social Realism and Neo-Expressionism. Opposite, in Diego Rivera's equally large and busy "The Painter's Studio, or Lucila and the Judas Dolls" (1954), a woman reclines under the gaze of several life-size, puppetlike figures. Like the Malczewski, it's a kind of terrible painting that is great to see.

As the works become bigger and brighter, the studio often shrinks to one wall, a single painting or some other detail. Delights are forthcoming from Georges Braque, Philip Guston, Robert Rauschenberg and Lucian Freud, who paints his studio sink. But the smaller efforts register strongly. Helen Frankenthaler's 1950 portrayal of her mostly red studio shows her in the thrall of Arshile Gorky. And Lygia Clark's 1951 "Interior" provides a peek at her beginnings in the nascent geometries of paintings, an easel and a flight of stairs.

Uptown, Mr. Galassi's show occupies two floors and delivers a similar combination of surprises and old standbys, but instead of slowing somewhat toward the end, it steadily intensifies. As Mr. Galassi makes clear in his wall texts and catalog, the photographer's studio is less a subject unto subject itself than a setting lurking behind or around the photographs of personalities or bodies performing for the camera within it. The studio as an empty stage appears in André Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri's uncut prints of a gentleman identified only as Kotchoubey from 1857-58.

We glimpse its encroaching reality beyond the artifice of Richard Avedon's seamless paper where Suzy Parker poses in Dior; with Irving Penn's famous makeshift converging walls that grip and shelter celebrated subjects like Elsa Schiaparelli and Truman Capote, and in the flimsy backgrounds of Lucas Samaras's Polaroid "Sittings" from 1978 and 1980. In these, someone we barely recognize (for instance, Mr. Johns) sits naked in a chair while the clothed artist lurks at the edges of the image. There are notorious solo performances, including Lynda Benglis's Artforum ad (naked with sunglasses and dildo) and Robert Mapplethorpe's sadomasochistic self-portrait (nearly naked, with bullwhip). And fabulous ensemble acts like the spatial riddle that is Helmut Newton's 1981 "Self-Portrait with Wife and Models, Vogue Studio, Paris."

The small second section, "Four Studios," takes us back to the studio as a place where things, not images, are made, with Brancusi's photographs of his own Paris studio and its changing cast of sculptures. Mr. Samaras — quietly one of the show's stars — returns, this time arranging the objects, material and tools necessary for his nonphotographic artworks into horror-vacui still lifes. Also here are André Kertész's exquisite photographs of Mondrian's Paris studio and Josef Sudek's views out his studio windows — which resemble photographs of photographs.

From Mr. Samaras and Mr. Sudek, the show flows into its final, most engrossing section, "An Embarrassment of Images," with the studio as a place where images cover walls in collagelike profusion. A dozen icy-hot, classical-weird scenes by John O'Reilly use the studio less as a place than as a malleable material to cut and fold into disorienting amalgams of reality and artifice.

Also not to be missed are Lee Friedlander's photographs of the patchworks of images covering the decrepit (also patchwork) walls of the shacklike Woodstock studio of the sculptor Raoul Hague (1904-1993). And perhaps the show's greatest gift are the 20 images that the French photographer Edmond Bénard took of artists in their darkly paneled, overstuffed Paris studios between 1884 and 1894. Their multicultural accumulations — paintings, busts, exotic objects, textiles, musical instruments — reward forensic attention. Among them, you'll find the bankerish Alexandre Cabanel, Emile Auguste Carolus-Duran playing an organ and Jean Léon Gérôme at the easel. His fierce concentration, as well as the meticulous execution it yielded, are evident in the artist's 1890 self-portrait "Working in Marble" which graces Mr. Elderfield's show. On loan from the Dahesh Museum of Art, it is a small but sensational oil depicting Gérôme among his sculptures, intently translating flesh into stone.

Correction: February 28, 2015

An art review on Friday about "In the Studio: Paintings," at a Gagosian Gallery on West 21st Street in Manhattan, and "In the Studio: Photographs," at a Gagosian Gallery on the Upper East Side, misstated the date of Matisse's "Studio Under the Eaves," which is in the "Paintings" show. As a picture caption with the review correctly noted, the date is 1901-2, not 1900-1. The review also misidentified the photographer whose images of Mondrian's Paris studio are in the "Photographs" show. He was André Kertész, not Brassai. The review also misstated part of the name of the final part of the "In the Studio: Photographs" exhibition. It is "An Embarrassment of Images," not "An Embarrassment of Riches."

Schedule information with the review, using information from a publicist, misstated the telephone number for the 21st Street gallery. It is 212-741-1717. The schedule information also misstated the address of the gallery where "In the Studio: Photographs" is on display. It is at 980 Madison Avenue, not 980 Park Avenue.