

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Art in America

Five Points With Peter Galassi

Chris Chang



Charles Ray: Plank Piece I-II, 1973, gelatin silver prints mounted on rag board, in two parts, 39 1/2 by 27 inches each. Private collection © Charles Ray. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery.

Recently *A.i.A.* spoke with Peter Galassi while he was doing one of the things he does best: hanging an exhibition. “In the Studio: Photographs,” at Gagosian’s Madison Ave. branch, was conceived as a pair to John Elderfield’s “In the Studio: Paintings” (at the gallery’s 21st Street outpost). Both shows run simultaneously through Apr. 18. The idea of how artists’ workspaces are documented was a topic of discussion while both colleagues worked as chief curators at the Museum of Modern Art, Galassi in the photography department and Elderfield in painting. While researching his own exhibition, Galassi says he was “surprised to discover how rare images of photographers’ studios seem to be” and that “there exists no coherent tradition” of such images. “In the Studio: Photographs” serves as a thought-provoking corrective to that omission.

1) In his 1931 essay “Little History of Photography,” Walter Benjamin wrote: “The most precise technology can give its products a magical value, such as a painted picture can never again possess for us.” This seems particularly relevant to the photography vs. painting duality of your and Elderfield’s shows. Does Benjamin’s quote ring true to you?

Benjamin, of course, was a genius, and also a radical pioneer in terms of what cultural criticism could be. He tried very hard-and failed-to be a good communist. He was sensitive to the magic of photography. He wanted to say that photography had a magic that painting was no longer allowed to have-because painting had been a bad capitalist boy and must go stand in the corner! But no one controls culture like that. No one is cultural commissar. So, in fact, painting still has all sorts of magic. Benjamin's name, by the way, did not come up during my discussions with John [Elderfield]. We talked about pictures-not writers.

2) I am struck by certain similarities between your catalog for this show and that for “The Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort,” which you curated at MoMA in 1991, particularly your comments about a photographer’s “withdrawal” and “retreat” from the outside world into a “secure and private zone.”

Those shows are not parallel, but it's true that we're dealing with two realms that are equally inaccessible to outsiders. Part of the richness of tradition of street photography is that it's open, it's free and you don't have to ask permission. You just go. If you could be a fly on the wall in anyone's house, there would be all sorts of amazing pictures that we don't have, so that's part of what that language is about. But the studio is different from the home. It's more like the white cube, and what you put into it is what you need to create an artificial world-as if it were real. The studio condition is a way of withdrawing from the mess of the world into a more controlled environment.

3) Allow me to pull a related quote from your “In the Studio” introduction: “The studio setting matters even when there isn't any-especially when there isn't any.”

The context of that is the evolution of studio portraiture. Studio portraiture really begins in the 1860s when photography becomes a real business. The standard props were bourgeois things like, for example, the balustrade. Eventually the props went away, and you get to Penn and Avedon, who both make a big deal about there being nothing. In Avedon's case it became the white background, which ends up being a style, just as much as a Victorian or Edwardian studio filled with stuff. Penn brilliantly made his little narrow corner. It's as if he has his subject/victim trapped. The two Penn images I chose for the show reveal the edges of the rickety props he built. That was part of his genius, that he could make an unraveled carpet look like something from Versailles.

4) I assume that you had specific iconic images in mind when you began your research. Did unexpected photos reveal themselves along the way?

Absolutely. One image I had in mind from the very beginning is a famous fashion photo by Penn, *Rochas Mermaid Dress (Lisa Fonssagrives-Penn), Paris, 1950*. It's a great picture. You can see a beat-up seamless studio cloth in the background. You can also see the edges of the cloth. One of the first things that I began to think about were pictures that disclosed their studio artifice. This Penn photo is definitely one of them. Next, I had to find an institution to loan a print. I found out there was a beautiful platinum print at the National Gallery in Washington, so I talked to my friend Sarah Greenough, who's the head photography curator there, and she mentioned that along with the Penn, she might have some other pictures I might be interested in. One of them was by Franc Chauvassaignes, a mid-19th century French photographer I had never heard of. It's an image of a nude female model. I wrote back to Sarah and told her, “It gives a

whole new meaning to hanging around the studio,” and she wrote back, “That’s exactly what I thought!” It’s in the show next to the Penn.

5) Any other pairings that you are particularly struck by?

I love Charles Ray’s *Plank Piece I-II*. When I was at MoMA I bought a print of it for the museum’s collection. And I have always loved the pair of Callahans that I will hang next to *Plank Piece*. The Callahans are pictures of his wife, posing nude, against the radiator in his studio. In one image her hair is up and her legs are down; in the other, one leg is up and her hair is down. That’s just like the *Plank Piece*! The concept is totally the same for two artists who otherwise have nothing to do with each other. They are completely different yet their images resonate. The Ray is a diptych; the Callahans are two separate pictures clearly conceived with each other in mind. I’m absolutely delighted to put all four together.