

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

ARTNEWS

Centuries of Studio Visits: John Elderfield on ‘In the Studio,’ His Essay in Pictures at Gagosian

Anna Heyward



Jacek Malczewski, Melancholia (Melancholy), 1890–94, Oil on canvas, 54 ¾" × 94 ½".

COURTESY GAGOSIAN GALLERY/MUZEUM NARODOWE W POZNANIU, POZNAŃ/FUNDACJA RACZYŃSKICH

When John Elderfield stepped down as chief curator of painting and sculpture at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, he had three shows left on his list of projects: “Matisse: Radical Invention, 1913–17” (presented in 2010), his 2011–12 de Kooning retrospective, and an idea for a show about artists’ representations of their studios. Realizing he wouldn’t be able to finish it, he took it with him to Gagosian, and it opens tonight at its West 21st Street space in Chelsea. Titled “In the Studio,” it runs through April 18, along with another show, of photographs, which Peter Galassi has organized at Gagosian’s Upper East Side gallery.

Elderfield, now in his 70s, is chief curator emeritus of painting and sculpture at MoMA, a distinguished professor at Princeton, and works for Gagosian, and “In the Studio” occupies a particular meeting place of the worlds he inhabits—the academy, the marketplace, and the public institution. None of the work will be for sale. There are loans from museums, foundations, and private collections, from Poland to Dallas. There is an Eakins from Philadelphia, a Freud from Tate London, and Diego Rivera’s *The Painter’s Studio* or *Lucila and the Judas Dolls*, which has never been shown in the United States before and is on loan from a collection in Mexico City.

This show is an essay on the history of the artist's studio, Elderfield told me when we met at the West 21st Street gallery, and naturally there are a few famed examples that are missing, pictures that are never allowed to travel, like Velázquez's *Las Meninas* or Courbet's *The Artist's Studio*. "There are classic works of the genre that could never have been included... They couldn't have been included here, or at MoMA," he said. "*Las Meninas* has never left the Prado. But the field is so vast, I had to decide what to try and do. I couldn't do a survey. A survey wouldn't be possible. You would just need hundreds and hundreds. Nor was there any point in my making a list of the best studio paintings and trying to get those. I didn't want to do the greatest hits. What it needed... what it led me to was an essay on the history."

The show's works range from early pictures of artists at easels, such as a Hogarth from London's National Portrait Gallery, to the abstraction of high modernism (two Picassos), to the studio walls of Lichtenstein and Diebenkorn. "The next step," said Elderfield, is artists who "make replicas of studios, or make video installations, or they reduce the studio back to the old study, because that's really what conceptual art does"—but, he said, that last part is for "the next exhibition that someone else can do. This show ends with the Rauschenberg and Lichtenstein generations."

As the subject of a show, it's one of great interiority, as much about the process of how art gets made as the product itself. Elderfield studied fine art before studying art history, training that he said developed his interest in the studio. He referred to the studio as an "institution," and spoke of it as center for renewal and experimentation—a nucleus for art as expression rather than decoration. "When you meet an artist in the street in the morning, and you say, 'Where are you going?' and they say, 'The studio,' what does that mean?"

The studio begins with the Renaissance. Before then, artists worked in workshops, often in groups. The workshop model was based on the idea of the artist as craftsman, making work that fit into preordained conventions. These workshops sometimes had a room where the artist could retreat, read, think, and contemplate—like a writer's study. The distribution model for fine art, though, means that the space in which an artist works functions totally differently from that of the writer's room or composer's room, as it has historically needed to be a salesroom and gallery because, as Elderfield writes in the catalogue, unlike writers and composers, "artists make objects for sale." The studio developed from this contemplative space.

With the studio, art became a matter of selfhood, the expression of unique, individual experience. This is not to say that the studio is not a public space, as it can be that and often is, but rather that it's the center of an individual enterprise.

The studio is a privileged place, said Elderfield. "This is how artists have thought about their studios." The history explored in the show, incidentally, runs contiguous to the development of the concept of human rights, which only took hold truly in the 18th century, in France—a time and place that is the highpoint of representations of the studio. The greatest force that enabled human rights to take hold, argues the scholar Lynn Hunt, was art. Renaissance and post-Renaissance art that represented individual experience, including individual portraiture, gave rise to ideas of selfhood and inalienability, and therefore made empathy into a sort of convention—in this manner, the studio, as seen in this show, represents both the means and possibility of subjective expression.

It's a romantic, almost subversive conception of the way that meaningful images get made. Elderfield said that the institution of the artist's studio has, "throughout its history, been under attack from institutions that are set against the idea of individual invention," meaning academies and art schools, "where the idea of art is principally the development of existing conventions."

"The whole business of art school is so conflicted for that reason," Elderfield said. "We know that if art were purely an individualistic thing, it would be incomprehensible, because nobody would know what it was. Yet we know, from writers like Gombrich that art develops from art. Really that's a version of the old and medieval idea of patterns. It's true, art wouldn't exist without this. But there has been a polarization."

Elderfield seems to argue in his essay that to be polarized in either direction—to believe that art is purely individualistic, or purely a matter of convention, is incorrect. Without convention, we wouldn't understand each other. Yet without subjectivity—that is, without the studio—there would never be "any kind of renewal, from artist to artist and generation to generation." (Here Elderfield adds a caveat—"not that I believe art improves. I mean clearly it doesn't.") This, he said, is one of the reasons "to be involved in looking at art": to be able to watch the continuation—a continuation marked by the breaking of patterns, and the intrusion of the strange and imprecise human self.