

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

THE BURLINGTON
MAGAZINE



70. *The sign of the artist, a trompe-l'œil with palette*, by François Bonvin. 1866. Oil on zinc, 25 by 17 cm. (Private collection; exh. Gagosian Gallery, West 21st St., New York).

Studio paintings and photographs

New York and London

by JONATHAN VERNON

IN RECENT YEARS, the strategy of commercial galleries in hiring renowned guest curators has paid great dividends for the **Gagosian Gallery**. The Picasso exhibitions organised by the artist's biographer John Richardson (the most recent of which, *Picasso and the Camera*, closed in January)¹ have been immensely popular and, particularly in the case of 2010's *Picasso: The Mediterranean Years*, generated considerable scholarly interest.² One of the chief benefits of this model has been the pulling power wielded by the gallery's collaborators, particularly in securing ever more elusive and important loans.

This trend continued with *In the Studio* (closed 18th April), which comprised exhibitions of painting and photography respectively curated by John Elderfield and Peter Galassi (former Chief Curators at the Museum of Modern Art, New York) at the Gagosian's downtown and uptown New York premises.³ Any eyebrows raised by the omnipresence of its subject-matter – representations of the

artist's studio up to the turn of this century – may promptly descend with the realisation that a museum survey has yet to tackle its full depth and width. Elderfield delivers a sharp explanation for this in the catalogue: 'at the same time that it encompasses great works unavailable to any exhibition, it cannot be reviewed properly without the inclusion of works by lesser-known artists'.⁴ This leaves room for novel perspectives on the topic, but also greatly emphasises the tact and heft of those who wish to offer them.⁵ The success of *In the Studio* was always going to depend upon the capacity of its loans to give shape to a potentially loose bag of concepts while suitably representing the standard-bearers of the genre.

The fanfare sounded by the first room of Elderfield's exhibition betrayed an acute understanding of these stakes. It contained two important works by Picasso, both executed in the winter of 1927–28, from his suite of large-format studio pictures (pp.67 and 69).⁶ These were hung alongside two paintings produced by Jasper Johns (1982; p.151) and Robert Motherwell (1987; p.163) around sixty years later but nonetheless heavily indebted to the crisp geometries that frame the encounter between the artist, the canvas and the object of study in Picasso's two studio works. The sole exception to an otherwise chronological hang, this room was not just a statement of the exhibition's quality, but of its bold intent: we had broached a particular kind of space, and it was going to be turned over and reformulated in the works on view until we better understood its logic.

Broadly speaking, Elderfield's approach to making an inevitably partial account resonate with the larger history of studio paintings con-



71. *The wall*, by Larry Rivers. 1957. Canvas, 81.3 by 111.8 cm. (Hall Collection; exh. Gagosian Gallery, West 21st St., New York).

sisted of exchanging grand narratives for a visual 'essay' argued through the works on show. This in no way reduces the burden of defining just what we mean by 'the studio' – against, say, the Italian *bottega* – or examining the ways in which the modern definition was shaped by the academy, the art market and Romantic ideals of creative life. It is therefore to Elderfield's credit that he does precisely this in his catalogue essay, which also presents an opportunity to illustrate canonical works that necessarily influenced the paintings on show but would have been unavailable and unsuited to an exhibition of this size.⁷

The necessarily broad strokes thus executed by the essay cleared a path for the emergence of an incisive and coherent narrative of the studio space through the exhibition. Given that Elderfield first developed the concept for this show with the late David Sylvester, it was unsurprising to find that this space was a phenomenological one in which the route to art is sustained through the reiteration and revision of the artist's relationship to the model, their tools and materials, objects arranged for study, assorted ephemera and the space itself. However, it was also established as a space through which the history of art and pictorial conventions become live.

This vision was typified by a room of post-War American paintings in which the studio wall functions as a *musée imaginaire*, with reproductions of other works, pop-cultural images and press cuttings collaged across its face. These were divided between works which included such walls within broader views of the studio, such as *The wall* by Larry Rivers (1957; p.143; Fig.71),⁸ and those that treated the surface of the picture as a wall in itself, as with Rauschenberg's *Caucus (spread)* (1980; p.161).⁹ These objects clearly represent

the apotheosis of Elderfield's argument. For this precise reason, however, they are also the objects about which we learn the least. It might indeed be said that the exhibition's signal achievement was to make a condition of art that was self-evident to the likes of Rauschenberg and Johns – the interdependence of the activity of making, its sources and its outcomes – inextricable from the tradition of studio painting as a whole.

Thus, Braque's *Studio with black vase* (1938; p.101; Fig.72), with its hard-edged planes,

bolt-upright *trompe-l'œil* easel and two canvases depicted within the picture, finds itself cast among the American painters and usefully prefiguring their attention to surface. Small still lifes by Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin (p.117) and François Bonvin meanwhile designated the studio as a place in which objects may be invested with a distinct vocabulary. The latter's exemplary *The sign of the artist, a trompe l'œil with palette* (1866; p.119; Fig.70) is understood as a 'surrogate self-portrait' composed of the painter's professional shop sign, the mahlstick, palette and brushes signifying his vocation, and a black-and-white image of a work by Pieter de Hooch pinned behind the palette as a token of Bonvin's artistic lineage.¹⁰ A significant sub-category of works was given over to a more straightforward exposition of the modern studio's development, such as François Louis Dejuinne's portrait drawing – depicting his master, Anne-Louis Girodet, painting *Pygmalion and Galatea* (1819; p.83) – which is claimed to be the first record of a painting executed under artificial light. However, the exhibition ultimately privileged the discursive over the documentary, and in doing so gave new voice to well-studied but thoroughly deserving works. While it may be difficult to resist tacking appendices onto Elderfield's 'essay' – Picasso's 1920 painting *Studies*, in the Musée Picasso, Paris, comes to mind – this says far more about its vigour than its omissions.¹¹

Peter Galassi cultivated a fundamentally different idea of the studio, but one that magnified two key aspects of Elderfield's exhibition: the hang – which is not only chronological but opens out into increasingly larger works that chip away at the bounded studio interior – and the ever-present function of the studio as an extension of the artist's persona. The first



72. *Studio with black vase*, by Georges Braque. 1938. Oil and sand on canvas, 99 by 132.1 cm. (Kreeger Museum, Washington; exh. Gagosian Gallery, West 21st St., New York).

73. *View of the studio: Endless column, Leda, and Plato*, by Constantin Brancusi. Before 25th May 1922. Gelatin silver print, 29.8 by 24.1 cm. (Private collection; exh. Gagosian Gallery, 980 Madison Ave., New York).



room of Galassi's exhibition reimagined the studio as a meticulously constructed but moveable theatre, balancing the camera's capricious relationship to the closed environment of the studio space and its unique disposition, with the advent of Hollywood, to artifice and the construction of identity. This model brought all manner of subjects and styles into view, from Peter Stackpole's images of servicemen posed against the trivially painted sets of a sidewalk photo booth on Broadway (1944; p.51) to Lucas Samaras's *AutoPolaroids* (1971; p.103), in which we stare down the length of the artist's tensile body and the studio itself is pushed to the periphery. However, certain well-timed moments in the exhibition illustrated how the divergent concepts of staging and performance displayed by such images emerge, at their roots, from the subtlest permutations of the tripartite relationship between the camera, the subject and the spaces they inhabit. Irving Penn's photographs of Truman Capote, who kneels on a chair sandwiched between two screens, and Elsa Schiaparelli, who stands upright in total, languid ownership of the same space (1948; pp.60–61), provided one such moment.

Like Elderfield, Galassi proved to be less interested in telling than showing. Brassai's portrait of Matisse working from a nude model in the studio has immense documentary value, but in this context its power was generated by the contrast between the familiar but distant

figure of Matisse and his painted odalisque made flesh and hair, bangles and sandals (1939; p.92). The incursion of the real within the carefully procured continued in the rooms upstairs, beginning with André Kertész's *Chez Mondrian* (1926; p.115). Rather than shoot this most archetypal of modern studios, the photographer turns to face the stairwell. This set the tone for a display of images from four studios – belonging to Mondrian, Samaras, Josef Sudek and Constantin Brancusi – that have provided fertile ground for photographic experiment. Galassi's best work here was drawn out by Brancusi, whose extensive catalogue of photographs (the Centre Pompidou holds no less than 560 negatives and 1,250 prints) aches for serious attention in an exhibition. Galassi has identified and exploited trends in this body of work that introduce a refreshing variation of the sculptor's vision for his fabled white *atelier*: in particular, the personification and dramatic, often witty, placement of certain sculptures, such as *Plato* (c.1919–23, the severed head of which is now in the Tate collection) and *Leda* (c.1920; see Fig.73).

Such consideration and verve would have greatly benefited a selection of Brancusi's photographs currently on show at **Waddington Custot, London**, as part of *Rodin, Brancusi, Moore: Through the sculptor's lens* (to 11th July).¹² Instead, the gallery displays a number of prints developed from well-known and frequently published images, largely bending the

idiosyncratic character of Brancusi's camera work to the task of showing his sculptures. While there is some interest in contrasting John Hedgecoe's photographs of Henry Moore's work with those taken by the sculptor himself, opportunities for more enlightening and enlivening comparisons have been missed: Edward Steichen's images of Rodin's sculptures, not included here, are among the most technically innovative that he commissioned, while Steichen's influence on Brancusi's photography is a subject ripe for examination. Galassi sets a high bar, but if previously neglected images such as these are to be taken seriously, it is a height to which others, with or without Gagosian's clout, must at least aspire.

¹ *Picasso and the Camera*. With essays by Paul Hayes Tucker, John Richardson, Mary Ann Caws, Man Ray, Victoria Comballa, Jacques Prevert and Marvin Heiferman. 400 pp. incl. numerous col. + b. & w. ills. (Gagosian Gallery, New York, 2014), \$100. ISBN 978-0-8478-4591-0.

² J. Richardson, E. Cowling and C. Arnaud: exh. cat. *Picasso: The Mediterranean Years (1945–1962)*, London (Gagosian Gallery) 2010.

³ Catalogues: *In the Studio: Paintings*. With an essay by John Elderfield and contributions by Lauren Mahoney. 180 pp. incl. numerous col. + b. & w. ills. *In the Studio: Photographs*. With an essay by Peter Galassi. 188 pp. incl. numerous col. + b. & w. ills. (Gagosian Gallery, New York, 2015), \$150 (in slipcase). ISBN 978-0-714870-26-7.

⁴ J. Elderfield: 'Studio visits', in *In the Studio: Paintings*, p.15.

⁵ This fact may have inhibited *The artist's studio*, an exhibition held at Compton Verney and the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, Norwich, in 2009 and 2010, which limited its scope to the studios of artists working in Britain. It was reviewed in the January 2010 issue of this Magazine by Marina Vaizey, who received the impression 'that the organisers had to make do with what they could get'.

⁶ A wall label opposite Picasso's *L'Atelier* (1928; Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice) cited technical analysis of the painting – revealing traces of pigment beneath its thick layers of white overpainting – to suggest an even closer relationship between its original composition and that of the adjacent *L'Atelier* (1927–28; Museum of Modern Art, New York).

⁷ Vermeer's *The art of painting* (1666–68) in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, for example.

⁸ The images plastered on the wall in Rivers's studio include the front and back of the dustjacket of Wilhelm Boeck's and Jaime Sabartés's *Pablo Picasso* (1955), as well as the covers of Alfred Barr's *Matisse: His art and his public* (1954) and Andrew Carnduff Ritchie's *Vuillard* (1954), both of which catalogues accompanied MoMA retrospectives.

⁹ Elderfield's blunt moniker for such works ('paintings as walls') belies his evident appreciation for, and ability to complicate, what Leo Steinberg called 'the flatbed picture plane' in 1968; see L. Steinberg: 'Other Criteria', in *idem, Other Criteria*, Chicago 2007, pp.55–91.

¹⁰ Elderfield, *op. cit.* (note 4), p.118.

¹¹ Any review of this show cannot afford to ignore Jacek Malczewski's monumental and utterly disarming *Melancholia* (1890–94; p.106). Here, the scale and drama of a history painting enters the intimacy of the studio, with figures plucked from centuries of Polish military history sent sprawling across the floor from the bare canvas at which the painter sits.

¹² It might also have taken the lead of the first gallery exhibition held in 1990 at the London gallery of David Grob, who has collaborated with Waddington on this exhibition, to treat Brancusi's photographs as images of more than documentary value.