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Two Exhibitions Explore Artists' and Photographs' Portraits of Their Own Studios

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Picture for Women, 1979, Jeff Wall, from "In the Studio: Photographs" at Gagosian Gallery in New York. Silver dye bleach transparency, aluminum lightbox, 56 1/8" x 80 1/2". Photo: © Jeff Wall, courtesy of Gagosian Gallery

A noun, we are told as children, is a person, place, or thing. But in the realm of art, those options usually shrink to two, the what and the who—that is, the artwork and the artist—but not the where. And that's odd, since the artist's studio has kindled as many romantic fantasies as the person and the thing have for 150 years or more. Just ask your friendly neighborhood real-estate developer, who will tell you that urban gentrification trends and artist-studio migratory patterns have an awful lot in common.

This legendary locus of artistic activity is finally getting some well-deserved institutional attention. Two shows, "In the Studio: Paintings," at Gagosian's 21st Street gallery, and "In the Studio: Photographs," at its Madison Avenue location, opened last week, the first is curated by John Elderfield, chief curator emeritus of painting and sculpture at MoMA, and the second by former MoMA chief curator of photography Peter Galassi.

The parallelism of the two shows was no accident.

"John and I have been talking about this idea since we were at MoMA," says Galassi. And both shows trace the (in some ways) similar paths that the two art forms took over time in depicting the studio and their relationship (and their art's relationship) to it. In the 18th and early 19th

centuries, painters often approached the subject of the studio with a sort of low-key dignity, creating accurate, sensitive portrayals of what was usually a poignantly modest environment.

In the 20th century, that feeling changed, as seen in the more impressive canvases in the exhibition, including works by Frankenthaler, Johns, Lichtenstein, Motherwell, Picasso, and Rauschenberg. For them, the studio became a more symbolic and experimental place, a locale more akin to the interior world of the artist than a gloriously humble workroom.

Meanwhile, when their medium was young, photographers and their studios alike often aped the simple, bohemian style of the painters whose portraiture trade they had begun to supplant. But later, as Galassi notes, as photography became one of the 20th century's foremost forms of mass media, the photographer's relationship with the studio became more mechanical, less intimate. This change, different from how painters came to see their studios, is underscored by a witty fashion shot in the show by Richard Avedon, of 1950s supermodel Suzy Parker in a Dior dress, "wearing" the studio's seamless black backdrop as a surreal cape.

One of the greater ironies of photography, notes Galassi, is that when the conceptual artists of the '60s and '70s came along, some of them re-embraced the human figure in the studio as a trope—and the extent to which they knew or didn't know they were mimicking the studio practices of the 19th century is a subject ripe for a doctoral dissertation.

Through April 18; "In the Studio: Paintings," 522 West 21st Street, New York; "In the Studio: Photographs," 980 Madison Avenue, New York; gagosian.com