"The Studio"

HUGH LANE GALLERY

Between 1998 and 2001 the Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin undertook one of the most mind-boggling art-historical enterprises of the last decade: After acquiring the studio of British painter Francis Bacon, until then housed on the top floor of a small coach house in South Kensington, the museum reinstalled it entirely in a purpose-built addition to its own building. Via the former door and window openings, visitors to the Hugh Lane can now peek into Bacon’s studio with the original door, walls, floors, ceiling, and shelves, replete with easel, slashed canvases, vintage champagne crates, books and magazines, dirty brushes, and paint splatters. Aware of the fetishistic and monumentalizing aspects of this endeavor, the Hugh Lane recently organized a show that questioned and reconsidered the significance of the artist’s studio within postwar and contemporary art. Curators Jens Hoffmann and Christina Kennedy took their cue from Daniel Buren’s 1971 essay “The Function of the Studio,” the now highly regarded manifesto of post-studio practice. In this essay Buren proudly proclaimed that his work no longer regarded the studio as “an essential, often unique, place of production” but proceeded “from its extinction.” Through an exquisite array of works by nineteen artists, most of whom are not categorized as post-studio artists, the show evaluated the fundamental changes that have occurred in art production since Buren wrote his text. The exhibition managed to let the studio emerge as a space and place that in recent decades hasn’t been abolished but questioned and reinvested in the most diverse manners.

In addition to an obligatory intervention by Buren on the facade and iconic studio works such as Ian Wallace’s At Work, 1983, Paul McCarthy’s Painter, 1995, Martin Kippenberger’s Spiderman Atelier, 1996, and Bruce Nauman’s Mapping the Studio (Office Edit I [Fat Chance John Cage]), 2001, there were also more surprising inclusions. Isa Genzken’s Atelier, 1993, a series of thirteen small C-prints taken by her friend Wolfgang Tillmans, shows the artist in the Gothic cathedral of Cologne, apparently an inspirational place for her at the time. Fischli & Weiss’s Bus to Atelier, 1995, documents the artists’ separate daily commutes to their shared studio, before they embark on their collaborative practice. Dieter and Björn Roth’s Bali Floor II, 1977–98, consists of the paint-splattered floor panels of the former studio of father and son, installed as a monumental V-shaped sculpture (in order to fit it in the gallery space). John Baldessari, who famously labeled his class at CalArts as post-studio in the early ‘70s, is represented by Alignment Series: Corners in My Studio (in Corner), 1975, a delicate, almost Judd-like stacking, in the corner of the gallery space, of small close-up photographs of a corner of his studio.

Most of these works, whether through filmic mapping, photographic documentation, or blunt relics, give merely a partial and fragmented view of the studio, or show its peripheral, precursory, and supplementary spaces and places. Within the context of a museum that opted for the total reconstruction of the workplace of one of the most celebrated painters of the twentieth century, these works delicately assert that an artist’s studio never fully collides with one singular space but is constituted through various spatial, social, institutional, and artistic regimes. Thus, the surprisingly literal and “full” studio representations by Urs Fischer, Andrew Grassie, and Martha Rosler looked particularly dreary. Madame Fisscher, 1999–2000, consists of a faithful reconstitution of the entire studio—walls and contents—that Fischer occupied in London during his Delfina Studios residency in those same years. Grassie theatrically set up his studio, his bed included, in one of the galleries. Rosler instructed the curators in the re-creation of the office-like studio in her house in Brooklyn. Paradoxically, even Rosler—one of today’s exemplary itinerant artists—thus upheld the romantic belief that an artist’s practice deeply coincides with his or her actual personal workplace and is best evoked through its literal restaging.

—Wouter Davids