The Many Faces of the Artist’s Studio

Pauline de Souza


The Whitechapel Gallery’s ambitious exhibition sets out to show the private and public production of the artist’s studio. The planning of this exhibition took over five years and was unfortunately interrupted by two events: a sudden death, and Covid-19. This busy and varied exhibition was first proposed by the two art historians, Dawn Ades and Giles Waterfield, but, sadly, Giles Waterfield passed away in 2016. Iwona Blazwick, Director and curator of the Whitechapel Gallery took on the leading curatorial role as the exhibition evolved. Other critical perspectives were introduced into the mix later with the arrival of Richard Dyer, writer, curator and Editor in Chief of Third Text, and Hammad Nasar, curator, writer and freelance strategic advisor with the Paul Mellon Centre and
Principal Research Fellow at the Decolonising Arts Institute at the University of the Arts, who, along with Ades and Blazwick, comprised the curatorial team. All these voices are important because they have presented us with an exhibition that offers much that is worth considering. There are 100 works and eighty artists, from the UK, China, Australia, Africa, Europe, the Middle East, India, the US, Romania and Cyprus – but there are, inevitably, some gaps.


Lisa Brice’s *Untitled* blue painting from 2019 has a woman holding a paintbrush and palette; Jasper John’s lithograph *Savarin* (1977) shows paintbrushes in a Savarin coffee tin; and Antony Gormley’s work *The Origin of Drawing VIII* (2008) shows a man with a long paintbrush drawing his own shadow. These tools also reappear in other areas of the exhibition.

In the ‘A Day in the Life of the Studio’ section, Lisa Milroy’s *A Day in the Studio* (2000) is a wonderful painting organised in the format of a comic strip, reminiscent of the work of cartoonist Posy Simmonds. In Milroy’s sequence, the figure is seen with a brush, drawing and mark-making.

In the ‘Performing the Studio’ section, Mequitta Ahuja’s painting *Notation* (2017) has the artist standing at a table where paintbrushes can be seen in a container. Kerry James Marshall’s

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**Untitled (painter)** (2008) features a female figure with a large paint palette, while Inji Efflatoun’s self-portrait, *Portrait of Inji Efflatoun* (1958), holds our gaze, with a paint palette in her hand and behind her a vase full of paintbrushes. These works, and Gordon Parks’s photographs of artists Grace Hartigan (from 1957) and Margaret Taylor-Burroughs (from 1946) in the introductory section, stress the importance of painting – but the camera is also a tool, and the exhibition fails to acknowledge the darkroom space that is part of the creative production implicit of the studio. We only see the trace of the tool, but not the complete studio.

There is a hierarchy of media implicit in this exhibition. Sculpture is located as part of the creative process of the studio – as is evident in the photograph of *Henry Moore working in the Maquette Studio* (1960) at Perry Green. But what is also missing is the digital technology studio where artists work with digital animation, virtual reality or augmented reality – for example, Jacoby Satterwhite or Michael Takeo Magruder, who has shown works at the Jewish Museum in London, or Inci Eviner, who represented Turkey in the 2019 Venice Biennale, could have been included. All are contemporary artists who fit within the timeframe and who have been using digital technology for some time. Images of them in the studio can be easily found, and the internet as a creative studio space could have been explored. It is strange that this aspect is missing, especially when the Whitechapel Gallery’ put on the Electronic Superhighway exhibition in 2016, which included Jacoby Satterwhite. Paul Théberge wrote his paper, ‘The Network Studio’, in 2004, discussing how the conventional studio space is changing due to the extensive range of technologies producing creative do-it-yourself studios.²

The studio as a ‘dirty space’ where creativity takes place has to be part of an exhibition on this subject. After all, the artist’s messy studio is a conventional image that often comes to mind, and the exhibition does not disappoint in representing this kind of conventional space. Congealed tins of paint on the floor, patches of colour on the walls and doors, clothes thrown over a chair in Perry Ogden’s photograph of *Francis Bacon’s Studio at 7 Reece Mews* (1998) is just one example. Freud’s used rags on the studio floor in Darren Almond’s *The Remnants* (2021), in ‘The Secret Life of the Studio’ section, is another. This is in direct contrast to Almond’s video *A Real Time Piece* (1996), or Wilhelmina Barns-Graham’s painting *Studio Interior (Red Stool, Studio)* (1945) in the same section, and Bruce Nauman’s video *Dance or Exercise on the Perimeter of a Square* (1967–1968) in ‘Performing the Studio’. In all these works, the space is clean but not quite clinical. In Barns-Graham’s painting, the way in which the easel in front of the red stool is painted makes it seem almost metallic, reinforcing the cleanliness of the studio. The positioning of objects in *Studio Interior* is repeated in Almond’s *A Real Time Piece*: the red stool is replaced by a blue chair next to a white desk with a fan; occasionally a banging sound is heard but it is not clear where it is coming from. There is a picture frame resting against some drawers on the floor, but generally the studio looks bare. The bareness and cleanliness of the studio are also noticeable in Nauman’s video of him moving around a square on the floor.

Wilhelmina Barns-Graham, Studio Interior (Red Stool, Studio), 1945, oil on canvas, 60 x 45.6 cm, courtesy of the Barns-Graham Trust

Darren Almond, A Real Time Piece, 1996, live video broadcast with sound, installation view of video recording of original broadcast, courtesy of the Whitechapel Gallery
‘The Artist’s Studio: A Century of the Artist’s Studio 1920–2020’ is conspicuously about people – and definitely both women and men. Images of Picasso, Freud, Bacon, Matisse, Giacometti and Rodchenko show there is no separation between masculinity and the artist’s studio: the male genius at work. But this is counteracted by images of Helen Frankenthaler, Margaret Taylor-Burroughs, Frida Kahlo, Martha Rosler, Cindy Sherman and other female artists, who make references to art and life in their studio spaces. I touch on this gender divide to highlight a connection between the studio and domestic space that is apparent in the exhibition, yet it becomes blurred. The most obvious example is Martha Rosler’s film *Semiotics of the Kitchen*. In this seminal feminist work from 1975 Rosler picks up kitchen utensils, naming them as she does so. Frustration can be heard in her voice as she claims the kitchen as her working space. The kitchen materialises again in Holly Antrum’s film *Catalogue* (2014), where the painter Jennifer Pike’s kitchen studio is part of her identity as an artist. A sculptural/installation work, *Kitchen Cabinet* (2022), a series of kitchen cabinets by Li Yuan-Chia, recreated by the artist Aaron Tan, is another connection of the studio to the domestic space. These kitchen cabinets are based on cabinets rescued from Li Yuan-Chia’s home in Cumbria; they contain the artist’s work, and there is a film projection of his home as a working space within one of them. Kitchen cabinets are also present in Guy Ben-Ner’s video *Berkeley’s Island* (1999), based on the 1719 novel *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe of York, Mariner* by Daniel Defoe. In this work, the artist not only deploys the kitchen as his studio but it also becomes part of the performance. The artist takes on two identities: the artist in his studio, and the fictional character of Robinson Crusoe. As he takes on the character of Crusoe,
he loses his identity as an artist. The title of the work is a reference to the philosopher George Berkeley’s maxim ‘to be is to be perceived (or to perceive).’ The kitchen cabinet and the kitchen table, evident in the other films, are also tools of the trade — and they continue to be, especially for creatives working at home during Covid-19. In a way, the kitchen studio becomes a neutralised domestic studio space in the exhibition.

It is intriguing that Antrum’s film is in the ‘Performing the Studio’ section, and Li Yuan-Chia can be found in ‘The Studio as Installation’ section, while Rosler’s is located in ‘The Studio as Stage Set’. Rosler’s work could be seen as an installation and Jennifer Pike’s kitchen as a stage set; the words ‘stage set’ and ‘performance’ are interrelated, if we ponder the semiotics and meaning. Pike’s kitchen studio acts as background, allowing her to define herself as an artist, while Rosler’s kitchen is reminiscent of advertisements that situate the female in the kitchen; the kitchen as an installation is often promoted in commercial adverts.

I want to continue considering the ‘Studio as Stage Set’ with the Ghanaian photographer Felicia Abban’s Untitled (1960s–1970s) and its images of two women, and Vivan Sundaram’s Re-Take of Amrita: Amrita with Self-Portrait (2001). These two images locate the artist’s studio space as an imaginary construction in different ways. Abban is known for making self-portraits that she describes as her calling cards. She was equally interested in female subjectivity and was the only professional female photographer in Ghana during the 1960s and 1970s. The image of the two women in fashionable clothing of the time reflects the self-portraits that Abban would take in different clothing to promote her photography studio. The studio remains present with or without the artist, because it is reconstructed by the two women and their clothing. Vivan Sundaram’s reconstruction of his aunt Armita Sher-Gil’s artistic identity, as a celebrated modern artist in India, is created as a photomontage using a self-portrait painted by Armita and a photograph of her wearing the same clothes as in the painting. Both images are located in a domestic environment that is not the kitchen and which becomes the extension of the artist’s studio, thereby confirming artistic agency.

The exhibition allows us to see the artist’s studio as a foundation for inspiration. From March to April…2020, a video by Ramin Haerizadeh, Rokni Haerizadeh and Hesam Rahmanian, shows plates of food, paint pots, brushes, a newspaper and other visual imagery, which passes by as if on a conveyor belt. As they move, we hear the artists’ voices reciting the days of the week and months of the year as they wait for inspiration. The image of Kim Lim’s Studio Wall (2022) offers us similar approaches to inspiration. What we see is a taxonomy of sculptural objects: buildings, a star fish, tools and bottles. The idea of the studio as a site of inspiration also connects with Paul Winstanley’s paintings of empty art school studios (2013–2015). The art school studio is meant to be a space for experimentation and for testing ideas. Art schools still exist but have been transformed by government policies over the decades, yet they are still places for experimentation. The architecture of the art school is meant to be a recreation of the conventional artist’s studio space, with large

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windows, natural lighting, white walls and high ceilings, features often also echoed in art galleries. In Antrum’s film, Jennifer Pike extends her kitchen studio into a gallery space, her props from the kitchen studio rest on a table and in boxes. She performs to the camera with these props behind her. The Whitechapel gallery itself becomes part of that extension, and the actual reconstruction of artists’ studio spaces on the upper floor of the Whitechapel turns the gallery into a space reminiscent of an artist studio.

This is an exhibition that offers much more to consider. You need to visit the exhibition yourself, if you can, to discover the artist’s studio as a collaborative space, and make your own links and associations between the different studio sections. I am sure viewers will find interesting or frustrating connections, but at least what they will find will make them think and become part of the exhibition themselves, because of the sense it creates of being within a living studio space. It is static, since artworks are fixed in sections, but potentially moveable because it is possible to imagine them in different sections. This is Iwona Blazwick’s last exhibition as Director of the Whitechapel Gallery; and it is a good one for her to close out her time with the Gallery.

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