BOXCARS

One could tell a crude history of art by following the places where it was made: the walls of caves, the ceilings of churches, a back room, en plein air, a garret in Montmartre, a converted industrial space in New York, and then other lofts and studios just like this last, but scattered around the world, an imaginary archipelago, an interrupted nation. There, all walls are white and all floors are bare, carpeting and moldings and sconces have been banned; all ceilings are high and all angles are orthogonal; the lights are bright and ceiling mounted, and there's very little furniture. There's even a distinct soundscape, the long echoes of a large, bare room, and the intoxicating smell of chemicals, glue, solvents, linseed oil.

Virtually every studio space is like this, to one degree or another, as are most galleries and contemporary museums. The uniformity is startling, and of course it hasn't gone unnoticed or unexamined. A curator who was around at the time once told me that the "white box" studio and gallery spaces that we think of as standard are, in fact, a relatively recent development. They arose in the 1950s and were modeled after the rooms where Ben Heller showed his collection, the galleries of Sidney Janis and Betty Parsons, and Mark Rothko's studio. In the mid-'70s, the critic and artist Brian O'Doherty named and analyzed the effect in a series of brilliant essays titled *Inside the White Cube*. That kind of room, he wrote, "subtracts from the artwork all cues that interfere with the fact that it is 'art.' The work is isolated from everything that would detract from its own evaluation of itself…. Some of the sanctity of the church, the formality of the courtroom, the mystique of the experimental laboratory joins with chic design to produce a unique chamber of esthetics." It's all very elemental, Euclidian, efficient, a perfectly rational and ordered environment, separate from the world outside.

And yet, very irrational and disorderly things are made there: paintings, for example, and sculptures. Alchemy is practiced there. Culture is created in all sorts of places, but few of them are quite as engaging as an artist's studio. Writers' offices are private and messy; there's nothing much to see, since all the work takes place in the writer's mind. Movie sets and recording studios seem boring and mechanical; you can spend hours there watching people set up and adjust equipment, and if you don't have a job to do, you're just in the way. The average architectural office looks positively Dickensian, with rows of junior partners bent over desks for

sixteen hours at a time. But a visual artist's studio lies at the absolute dead center of his or her life, and is often indistinguishable from it.

Some are relatively austere, but most are filled with things: books and magazines, records and overflowing ashtrays, toys, jigsaw puzzles, paint tubes, pictures, instructions and cryptic signs tacked to the wall, a sheaf of sketches, a camera lying on a table, some animal skulls, a stack of DVDs, a computer printer, along with idiosyncratic souvenirs and totems – cf., David Hockney's floppy white hat, Raymond Pettibon's unassembled drum kit, Robert Therrien's fly swatter. There's almost always something going on. It's a public-private, private-public space, as convivial and businesslike as a barbershop (the coffee is invariably excellent, though there's rarely anyplace comfortable to sit with it). Assistants run around, packages are delivered, lunch is prepared, visitors hosted, phone calls made, things are wrapped and unwrapped, boxed and unboxed; sometimes there's music playing, and in the midst of it all, at the center of it all, art is made.

And then a pause comes, a communal lunch perhaps, or simply a break, and Deblonde steps in with his camera and photographs the empty room, in that curious hole in time, the stasis at the center of the tempest, just after something has happened and just before the next thing begins.

Human beings are known as *Homo sapiens*, with the adjective meaning "wise" or "thoughtful," but there are other ways of describing or defining ourselves. The French philosopher Henri Bergson once proposed the term *Homo faber*, with the idea that it was not intelligence that created us so much as it was work, in particular the labor of using tools to make things. Later, *Homo ludens* was added to the candidate list – that is, human beings as creatures who play. They needn't be exclusive, for surely we each partake of all three, at one time or another; but artists, at their best anyway, perform them all at once, thinking, working, and playing simultaneously. That's why these studios look the way they do, sometimes serene and contemplative, sometimes as focused as a foundry, and sometimes (I'm thinking of, for example, Baldessari) papered with apparent distractions. The studio is not a factory so much as an inventor's workshop, full of little pieces of things, ideas and models, tryouts and test runs. It's an incubator for nascent art-machines, some of which run marvelously, and some of which self-destruct, and that's pretty much the way it goes. For all its high-tech trappings, its track lighting and computer monitors, a studio is as old-fashioned as a cobbler's shop. You don't

realize how seldom you see such things, especially these days, when work is more intangible and where it is – say, in automobile or furniture factories – less a calling than merely a job.

Something is being presented here, the boundaries of a certain kind of activity – a stage, of sorts. There is a theatrical air about the pictures, a sense that a curtain has just been lifted. They turn you into an audience, captive at one end of a three-sided box, and you get the impression that outside the edges of these images, nothing is happening at all. But there's something anti-theatrical about them too, because the objects and elements don't feel as if they've been blocked out, arranged or presented to you. There's nothing fussy or affected about them, no playing to the crowd.

Everywhere, *Atelier* is almost, but not quite, just about, but then again. Do we shelve it with studies of architectural interiors? No, these rooms are too distinct, too lived in for that. An artist's studio is not, strictly speaking, a private place, but neither is it an exhibition hall. There are no guards, but a certain heightened respect is in order: at least, you want to be careful where you put down your things. Though the studio may have visitors all day, it isn't made to be visited, nor expressly designed to be photographed. Indeed, they're generally not designed at all, not by professionals, anyway. For all their luxuries of space they're a kind of folk architecture; these photographs aren't made to slavered over, like interiors in a glossy magazine. There's nothing aspirational about them.

Nor are they portraits, since there's no human form; nor even portraits in absentia. It's often difficult to tell whose studio any given picture shows without reading the name listed below. Nor are they images of art, reproductions or installation shots. Many of the photographs don't have any recognizable work in them at all, and as pleasing as it is to come across a Richter or a Kelly in these pages, it's just as interesting to see Matthew Barney's studio, which looks like an abandoned mattress factory.

In short, you will rarely find, within any of these pictures, a deliberate and overt expression of taste. By this I don't mean that the pictures themselves are tasteless, but that in photographing artist's studios, rather than the artists themselves or the things that they make, Deblonde has managed to give us an account of the art world – of what it's like, on the ground – that manages to sidestep aesthetics. I put it to you that this is no easy task, and quite true to the experience. Because if you spend a lot of time in artists' studios, you find that it is very much that way: there is a great amount of labor involved, and a certain amount of play, but the homilies of art – beauty, meaning, style, personality – emerge from that labor and are beholden

to it, not the other way around; and when they emerge, they do so slowly, in piecemeal, and often indirectly.

If these are not pictures of beautiful things – not directly, anyway – are they nonetheless beautiful pictures? Representation and represented: the one tends to come forward as the other recedes. There's a balance that must be struck, and Deblonde's photographs, with their muted colors and patient details, strike it elegantly. The pictures are gentle and somewhat pensive, and as delicately poised as a ballet dancer. As nimble as a dancer too, on the level where photography really proves itself: in the negotiation of ego, craving, homage, and dignity. None of those things are inflated here, and none of them are denied, but the photographs constantly give a little and take a little. I like the Serra photo, for example, in this regard. I like the way it renders unto Serra those things which are Serra's: the monumentality, the gloominess, the assurance, the self-imposed privation without being sycophantic or overbearing, leaving those of us who look at it a little room to breathe.

They're deceptively self-effacing, these pictures; they mediate between the viewer and studios so gently that it's an effort to focus on them, on their inherent qualities as photographs. I would like to point out, among other things, what a feat this book is as a whole. To shoot seventy or so interiors, of such vastly different sizes and styles, all at roughly the same scale, and in an unforgiving format; to have each photograph be engaging in itself, and the whole assembly function as a collection – this is an extraordinary feat, the birth of a discrete and singular machine, as precise as a mathematical proof. All of which is to say that *Atelier* is a book, after all, by which I mean not simply a block of bound paper. The volume itself is a single work of art, unified and coherent. It's not a catalog, or the record of an exhibition: it *is* the exhibition.

This does not always happen, nor need it. Photography exists in several kinds of spaces simultaneously: the print, the gallery wall, the screen, the mind, the page. Even classic publications are often put together long after the work is done, to serve as the record of a subject, style, or time period. *Atelier* feels to me like it was conceived as a book, made to be flipped through, varied elements linked together to produce a specific effect – like a clock or a card trick, a few Bach partitas, or perhaps a Japanese rock garden.

Like this or like that, but especially like this: if you live in the American West, every so often you'll find yourself sitting in your car, waiting at a railroad crossing as a freight train

passes. The individual cars are uniform in size – several times as long as they are high – endlessly concatenated and carrying who knows what: Chinese circuit boards or children's furniture, sheets of glass or a few shovels of coal, maybe even a hobo or a freighthopper. Inside them lie entire lives, effort and abundance, and if the train is long you can sit there for a while, square on, watching them go by, noting the variations among the sameness, different styles, different companies, different markings, different destinations; but above all, a sense of energy and purpose. If you're not in a hurry and have nowhere to be, you'll wind up in a happy, trance-like state, watching the parade go by. After a while, it all gets mixed up: the beauty of the train, the neat, rhythmic repetitions of the boxcars, and the mystery of what they carry.

Jim Lewis