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PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A STUDIO

For his new book, 10 years in the making, Gautier Deblonde has photographed the working spaces of artists around the world. *Liz Jobey* interviews him about this revealing project

In keeping with the photographer's intention, the studios are presented without identifying captions. The list of the artists to whom they belong is left until the end.



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About 15 years ago, the photographer Gautier Deblonde published a group of photographs taken in the sculptor Antony Gormley's studio. Gormley had given the young Frenchman use of his darkroom, and when the studio was empty, Deblonde took pictures of the plaster casts Gormley used for his human-scale metal figures. Many were cast from the artist's own body, and they stood around the studio like ghostly sentinels, some bent, some broken, some apparently in conversation with each other. Deblonde had kept company with them in the building long after the artist had left.

A few years later, when Gormley moved into a studio in King's Cross, London, designed for him by the architect David Chipperfield, Deblonde went along to photograph it. The scale of the huge space led him to experiment with a panoramic camera,

which produced a wide, shallow rectangular image – 6x17cm, three times the width of a standard medium-format shot – and (unlike a wide-angle lens) gave no distortion across the picture plane.

"That was the first photograph," Deblonde says. He means it was the first of more than 60 individual artists' studios that he has photographed, using that same panoramic format, which are collected in a new book to be published next month.

"I have always been fascinated by how an artist tries to make work rather than seeing a piece in a museum," he explains. His idea was to make a portrait of the artist through his or her studio, exploring the space and the conditions in which the work was made.

He discovered his method almost by accident during the experiments at Gormley's studio. "At first I did shots with people walking in and out; people moved, people were blurred. So I waited.

People left for lunch, I stayed there for the hour. And that time became incredibly precious to me. It set the key to the project, in a way. I could arrive in the morning, set up, try to find my corner, and then you have an hour, sometimes two, but two is quite rare. The artist has just left but is coming back, so you have this time of floating.

"Nothing is finished. That was really important. You don't clean up the studio before lunch. It stops for an hour and then starts again. It's almost like you watch a film and then you have a still image for an hour and then you start again."

Deblonde continues: "After that, looking back at that first picture, I've been taking the same photograph for the last 10 years."

At first, though, he did them for pleasure. "I was just really taken by it," he says. "I contacted the British artists I knew – Gary Hume, Howard Hodgkin, Paula Rego, Ron Mueck..." When he ►



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◀ wanted to go further, he asked for help. Hume offered to contact some of the artists he knew in the US.

"Basically, he took the time to write to Jasper Johns, Nan Goldin, Brice Marden, Jeff Koons, and they all said yes. That first trip to New York, I had five key American artists, all different generations, all different kinds of work." The fifth was Richard Prince, a meeting the gallery owner Sadie Coles helped set up.

"Richard Prince was expecting me," Deblonde says. "He came up and I said, 'I'm sorry but I don't want you in the photograph.' That was the plan."

A lot of the artists he wrote to liked the idea that he wasn't asking for their time.

"Jasper Johns said yes but come on that day 'because I won't be in the studio'. Gerhard Richter said, 'You can come to my studio but you can only come when the paintings I am working on now are

finished. Work in progress – you cannot photograph that.' He greeted me, said 'Hi, welcome,' and then he left and I never saw him again."

Others refused point blank. "They just said, 'No, it's too private. It's too personal.'"

What interested him was the degree to which the artist prepared the studio for the photograph. "When you have your portrait taken, you go to the hairdresser, you put on make-up, or not, you think about it," Deblonde says. "And I guess in some respect the studio is the same. You have an idea of how you want to show people the world of your studio, how your work looks there."

The American abstract painter Ellsworth Kelly had decided in advance how his studio would look. "His is a big space, like a museum space, really. It had three white walls and on each wall was a painting. He wanted me to photograph it like that." But in one corner of the studio was a different scene:

good, let's do something. But I don't have a studio.' I'd come just for him. I'd paid the flight with my own money. But then he said, 'If I'd said to you, I don't have a studio, you wouldn't be here.' And he was right.

"Then he said, 'I have this print which just came back from the darkroom, it hasn't been on show yet, we can take a photograph in my neighbourhood.' So I chose the location but, in a way, the idea was from him. It was difficult because my camera was in the road and you had to make sure no people were going by. But in the end I felt, like, great! It fitted his persona."

In the book there are no captions to identify the individual pictures until you get to a list at the back. This was a deliberate decision by the photographer and his publisher to encourage people to look hard at each picture and not to be unduly influenced by big names.



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'I have always been fascinated by how an artist tries to make work rather than seeing a piece in a museum'

"His mess, in a way, his paints and brushes, the marks on the wall.

"When I arrived he was very nice but he said, 'I don't want that corner to be photographed.' But that was the one I wanted. Then he left, and I was on my own for a while, and I took the photographs. I went back home, printed the pictures, and I knew this was the one that I liked: you have the process on the right and the finished image on the left. So I sent the photographs to Kelly, not just this one, others as well, but I said, 'This is the one I like. I know you said that I shouldn't...' And I got a reply from his assistant saying, 'That's fine. No problem.'"

Not everyone prepared. Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan, who works in New York, agreed to take part but when Deblonde arrived, there was a surprise in store. "We sat on the pavement. He looked at a small box of prints that I had, and he said, 'That's

"I didn't want people to look at the photograph longer because it was Damien Hirst, or turn the page because it was an artist they had not heard of," Deblonde says. Nevertheless, it's hard to avoid the game of Spot the Artist. And in that spirit, on these pages, you will not find the names of the artists until the end. **FT**

"Atelier" by Gautier Deblonde, will be published by SteidlDangin in September (www.steidl.com)

The artists' studios

1 Gerhard Richter, Cologne, 2006 2 David Hockney, London, 2004 3 Gary Hume, London, 2006 4 Pina Bausch, Wuppertal, 2007 5 Callum Innes, Edinburgh, 2006 6 Antony Gormley, London, 2004 7 Jeff Koons, New York City, 2005 8 Ellsworth Kelly, Spencertown, New York, 2005 9 Zhang Dali, Beijing, 2009 10 Maurizio Cattelan, New York City, 2007