Joe Fig: A Book, a Show and a Talk

By PAUL LASTER, OCT. 2015

With the current solo show “Inside the Artist’s Studio” at Cristin Tierney Gallery in Chelsea and an eponymously titled book, recently published by Princeton Architectural Press, Joe Fig was a natural choice for the Art Talks at the 92nd Street Y.
Joining the ranks of Jewish Museum Deputy Director Jens Hoffmann, Serpentine Gallery Director of International Projects Hans Ulrich Obrist and New York Magazine art critic Jerry Saltz, who will all be speaking at the Y later this fall, Fig put together a panel of artists that he interviewed in the book for a talk this past Monday.

When Fig visited the studios of the 24 artists featured in the book, he was less interested in the work hanging on the walls than he was in their practice itself. Taking photos and talking to the artists, he focused on how they made the work, where they made it and the daily routines that produced it.

His goal was to understand each artist’s creative process and to analyze the spot where it happens. Besides the interviews and photographs, Fig made paintings and drawings of the artists at work in their studios and small-scale sculptures of their workspaces, which are reproduced in the book and exhibited in his show.

Joe Fig, *Kate Gilmore: June 25, 2013*, 2013. mixed media. 14 1/2 x 12 3/8 x 9 13/16 inches (36.8 x 31.4 x 24.9 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York.
Sharing the stage with Fig at the Y were sculptors Tara Donovan and Leonardo Drew, video and performance artist Kate Gilmore and Brooklyn Rail art critic Jonathan T.D. Neil, who wrote the introduction for the book and moderated the panel.

“Primarily through an intricate dialogue between sculpture, photography and painting, Fig has offered one of the most sustained and intensive engagements with the artist’s studio and the creative process that happens in it,” said Neil in his introduction.

Since 2002, Fig has interviewed more than 120 artists. In 2009 Princeton Architectural Press published his first book, *Inside the Painter’s Studio*. The new book—which also takes readers into the studios of Carroll Dunham, Philip Taaffe and Hillary Harkness, amongst others—was three years in the making.

When asked about college, Tara Donovan, a recipient of the MacArthur Foundation “Genius” Award, said “There wasn’t a great deal of encouragement from my family to attend art school. If I wanted to go to art school, I had to live at home, commute and get good grades. But my mom didn’t realize that it’s not hard to get good grades in art school, so I excelled.”

Donovan, who is repped by Pace Gallery, makes large-scale installations and sculptures from everyday objects.

“I made art out of my place in Washington Heights,” Leonardo Drew said about his beginnings in the art world. “I slept in the bathtub and made art in all of the rooms. Then people hear the story about this guy sleeping in his bathtub…that’s a story. People came from the New Museum, curators, other artists—everybody’s coming to see my work in Washington Heights.”

After eight years of exhibiting with Mary Boone Gallery—from 1996 to 2004—Drew joined Sikkema Jenkins & Co, where he continues to show.

Quizzed about when she started to consider herself a professional artist, Kate Gilmore, who just won the coveted ArtPrize competition in Grand Rapids, Michigan said, “Well, I’ve never been a full-time artist. I’ve been a full-time
artist in my head, but I’ve always had jobs. When I was first starting out I taught continuing ed, then I worked in arts administration, and then in the past seven years I’ve been a professor. I’ve always had some other income.”

The ArtPrize comes with a $200,000 award, which may give Gilmore more time to just think about her art.

After the talk, a group of panelists and gallery staff and friends went to the nearby Italian restaurant Paola’s in Carnegie Hill for dinner and drinks.

Queried at Paola’s about what first drew her to Fig’s artwork, gallerist Cristin Tierney said, “I was first attracted to Joe's work because it was so engaged with portraiture—unusual in the 21st century. And even though there were often figures in those early works, it was the studios themselves that "stood in" for the artists.”
“Joe frequently returns to the notion of surrogate portraiture,” she continued. “The Kate Gilmore sculpture, for example, has no overt trace of her as a person/figure. The corner of Kate's studio, that tell-tale fragment, becomes her surrogate self. I’m reminded of Manet's portraits of Morisot—his small still life of violets was always the most evocative and resonant of all those portraits for me.”

The sculptural model of Gilmore’s studio—along with small 3D versions of the studios of Roxy Paine and Ursula von Rydingsvard—and paintings of the studios of Leonardo Drew, Tom Friedman, Tom Otterness, Eve Sussman and Philip Taaffe are all part of Fig’s third solo show at the gallery.

Joe Fig, Contemplation: Carroll Dunham, 2015. oil on canvas. 22 5/8 x 28 1/2 inches (57.5 x 72.4 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York.
Joe Fig, *Working: Hilary Harkness*, 2015. graphite on watercolor paper. 18 x 24 inches (45.7 x 61 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York.

Installation view: Joe Fig: Inside the Artist's Studio, 2015. Photo John Muggenborg.

Joe Fig, Studio: Philip Taaffe, 2015. oil on canvas. 48 1/2 x 60 5/8 inches (123.2 x 154 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York.
Joe Fig, Roxy Paine: April 10, 2014, 2014. mixed media. 16 1/4 x 15 x 9 1/4 inches (41.3 x 38.1 x 23.5 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York. Photo John Muggenborg.

Installation view: Joe Fig: Inside the Artist's Studio, 2015. Photo John Muggenborg.
Joe Fig, Contemplation: Eve Sussman, 2015. oil on canvas. 36 1/2 x 48 1/2 inches (92.7 x 123.2 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York.

Installation view: Joe Fig: Inside the Artist's Studio, 2015. Photo John Muggenborg.