

Artscapes in miniature: Joe Fig's intimate look at artists' studios



By Michael Abatemarco | November 6, 2015

One of the questions Joe Fig asked artists when he interviewed them for his new book, *Inside the Artist's Studio*, was if they would “describe a typical day, being as specific as possible.” Sculptor Tony Oursler is up by 7 a.m., eats breakfast, works out, makes a list of things he needs to do, answers his emails, and then makes a plan for the rest of the day. Tom Friedman, also a sculptor, begins his day with coffee in bed and gives his golden retriever Jemmy a belly rub. Multimedia artist Roxy Paine used to be a night owl, but these days he gets up early. “Kids do not let you sleep past seven o’clock, so if you stay up late, it means you’re going to be getting very little sleep, and that gets tiring,” Paine told Fig.

What *Inside the Artist's Studio* reveals about the artists themselves — their childhood, education, domestic life, and career — is refreshingly candid and down-to-earth. But it isn’t just the interviews that make this an intriguing book, and it isn’t just the photographs that, rather than depicting the artists at work, are focused more on the interiors of their studios. Rather, it’s Fig’s creative responses to each studio visit — catalysts for his own artistic practice. Fig determines whether a meeting will result in a painting of a studio or a to-scale miniature, depicting in minute detail a scene that’s almost indistinguishable from the photographs on which they’re based. “It’s very daunting to a studio visit,” he told *Pasatiempo*. “I always feel, if you were to go in cold, you have to look at the work and think of something smart to say. In a way I lucked out with this list of questions I have, especially this go-around.”

He starts by asking each artist where they grew up, what their high school arts program was like, and if they remember their first work of art. “A number of them still have those pieces with them,” he said. “For me, not being smart enough to say something about

their work right away, it's kind of a way in. Through that process of them talking about their childhood, how they set up their space, and if they listen to music, I start to get a glimpse into their work and through that I get an understanding of it."

This is the second book Fig has written about artists in their studios — the first was *Inside the Painter's Studio*. He opened the new book up to artists working in different mediums. "I didn't want to just do an *Inside the Painter's Studio 2*. There are a handful of painters in this book, but the majority of the artists work in sculpture, video, photography, installation, or a combination of all that stuff."

Fig, whose *Self Portrait: Collinsville* opens the book, sees each studio he captures as a picture of the artist. So much of artists' time and energy is spent in kind of a sacred space that's rarely seen by outsiders, and the artists surround themselves with objects for use in their work, for inspiration, or just because they collect things. Oursler has a mermaid figurine on a table in his studio and a bust of E.T. the Extraterrestrial on a bookshelf. Multimedia artist Eve Sussman keeps an old film projector in hers. Installation artist Laurie Simmons has a canister full of lipsticks. Painter Philip Taaffe, who listens to Mozart when he's stuck for ideas, has a studio divided into several rooms, each with a dedicated purpose. One of them has a billiard table. "When I do a studio visit, I'm sitting there talking with the artist and while I'm interviewing them I'm looking around and seeing how things function, looking for the little things in the corner and what little things they have on their walls," Fig said.

Some artists, like Carroll Dunham, who places plastic tarps over his painting tables to keep the surfaces clean, maintain neat and organized studios, and others, like sculptor Leonardo Drew, whose bins and shelves are stuffed to overflowing, not so much. Multimedia artist Red Grooms keeps his colored pencils in decades-old Alpo dog food cans. "I thought they were beautiful and said to him, 'These cans are just gorgeous, aren't they?' And he said, 'I didn't even know I had those.'" Fig's miniature *Red Grooms: April 4, 2014* measures only 15 x 22½ x 15¾ inches but there, depicted on one of the artist's tables is an Alpo can fashioned out of polymer clay.

Most of the artists interviewed in the book live and work in New York and surrounding states. Fig wrote this second book after moving away from New York five years ago to his current home in Connecticut, two hours from the metropolis. "After my last show in New York I was sort of going through the post-show blues and thinking, What should I do next? I had visited a friend of mine who's a video artist, and I realized that I missed that interaction with other artists. I started thinking at that point of the possibility of doing a follow-up book." Fig has used the artist studio as a subject for more than a decade. For a series begun in 2002, he focused on painting tables, those surfaces found in nearly every studio that are scarred and pitted and accumulate layer after layer of paint, reflecting the full spectrum of an artist's palette. "Gregory Amenoff [who is not included in the book] had two tables: one on the left side and one on the right side. He kept paints on one table and brushes on the other. Where all the paints were, there was just years and years of caked-on paint. It was on all his tools and the table surface, and it

was just beautiful. He would say that when collectors came over to his studio, they would gravitate toward his painting table over his work.”

It’s these details that make *Inside the Artist’s Studio* so revealing. Not only is it a cross-section of artist portraits, but it’s an intimate one at that. His portrait of Judy Pfaff — a watercolor of a small kitchen, including a rendering of her dog and hanging items in a multitude of bright colors — is not a studio image, but it captures the place where she spends most of her time. “I found out her dog passed away about a year ago,” Fig said. “It still upsets her. She has a huge compound in upstate New York that used to belong to the Snapple iced-tea drink company. It’s this big, beautiful setting with lots of different outbuildings. But her kitchen, which is not that large of a room, was really the control center. The kitchen itself, even though the ceiling was unfinished, had all these hanging lights and colorful Chinese ornaments. I think it was in the fall so there were pumpkins on the table, and all the pots were orange and green. It was just like her work.”

Polymer clay, or Sculpey, is one medium Fig uses to realize his small-scale visions. He also uses bits of wood, plastic dowels, and paints, among other materials. In the case of his portrait of Drew, splattered paint cans, a box with Styrofoam peanuts, a stack of wood, and even a roll of masking tape, are all rendered with exactitude in hyperrealist sculptural form. “The hardest part is doing the tools on the tables, but in some of the sculptures it’s really getting the surface of the floor correct because there’s paint droppings and to get it to the right scale is a lot harder than it looks. You can’t just flick paint on the floor.”

Fig sees the studio visit as a kind of privilege. A visitor is afforded the opportunity to see behind the veil, into a kind of alchemical laboratory where artists turn their visions into gold. “Most people see the artwork on the walls of museums and galleries, but the studio is where everything happens. For the artist, it’s probably where you look at your work the most.” ◀

“Inside the Artist’s Studio” by Joe Fig was published in October by Princeton Architectural Press; images courtesy the publisher.