



TO WATCH

MATTHIAS BECKMANN

BY SHONQUIS MORENO

Entitled “Artists’ Studios in Berlin,” the Berlin-based artist Matthias Beckmann’s April exhibition of 88 graphite-on-paper drawings at Galerie Laurent Mueller in Paris was frugal in line but generous in detail. (The catalogue, worth owning, was published by the Kunsthalle Ravensburg/Columbus Foundation.) Beckmann, no stranger to large series of unusual studies, started with places where art is shown—museums from Bonn and Bremen to Paris and Cologne, galleries in Berlin, and cabinets of curiosities in Germany and Austria—and became curious about where art is made.

Beckmann made at least three drawings of each studio, including loads of practical and personal objects but not necessarily the artists themselves. An image of the multimedia artist Alicja Kwade’s studio shows a blank area around a tangled cord and two table lamps—but no table. The media artist Bjørn Melhus is pictured only in a fly poster, pointing a gun to his own head. Not just mundane and spare, but filtered through Beckmann’s eyes, the scenes become compelling.

Today, the artist is drawing ballet rehearsals, making animations from nature drawings and old family photo albums, and hoping to document the production of a TV crime series. (“Crime and the art of drawing have to be precise,” Beckmann says.) His work may one day become historical record, but beware, he warns, “What seems objective and neutral is my personal approach to reality.”

WHITEWALL: *Why make this such an extensive project?*

MATTHIAS BECKMANN: I like exploring new places, like an ethnographer who documents meticulously the artifacts of a foreign culture. On the other hand, the instruments of a draftsman and the precise lines lead to abstraction and concentration on selected details. I was also curious to see how other artists work, and it’s easier to get into places when you tell people that you want to make drawings. Taking photos or making films seems more aggressive. A draftsman always keeps a distance, and the voyeuristic view is filtered by the reduction to the line.

WW: *Were you making portraits of artists or of artists’ spaces in this project?*

MB: A studio is a place where an artist spends a certain part of his life. Sometimes I saw an intense correlation between the studio and the artist and the work. Sometimes I could not imagine one. My aim was not to portray the artists, but the studios. Of course, the studios are also portraits of the artists.

WW: *What does “artist’s studio” mean to you?*

MB: The artist’s studio is a myth and a secret place. Only collectors, curators, and close friends are allowed to enter it. Many people are convinced they will find a path there to understand the artist and art. But you can only get some hints.

I don’t believe in myths; I prefer seeing things with my own eyes. Even in places with a

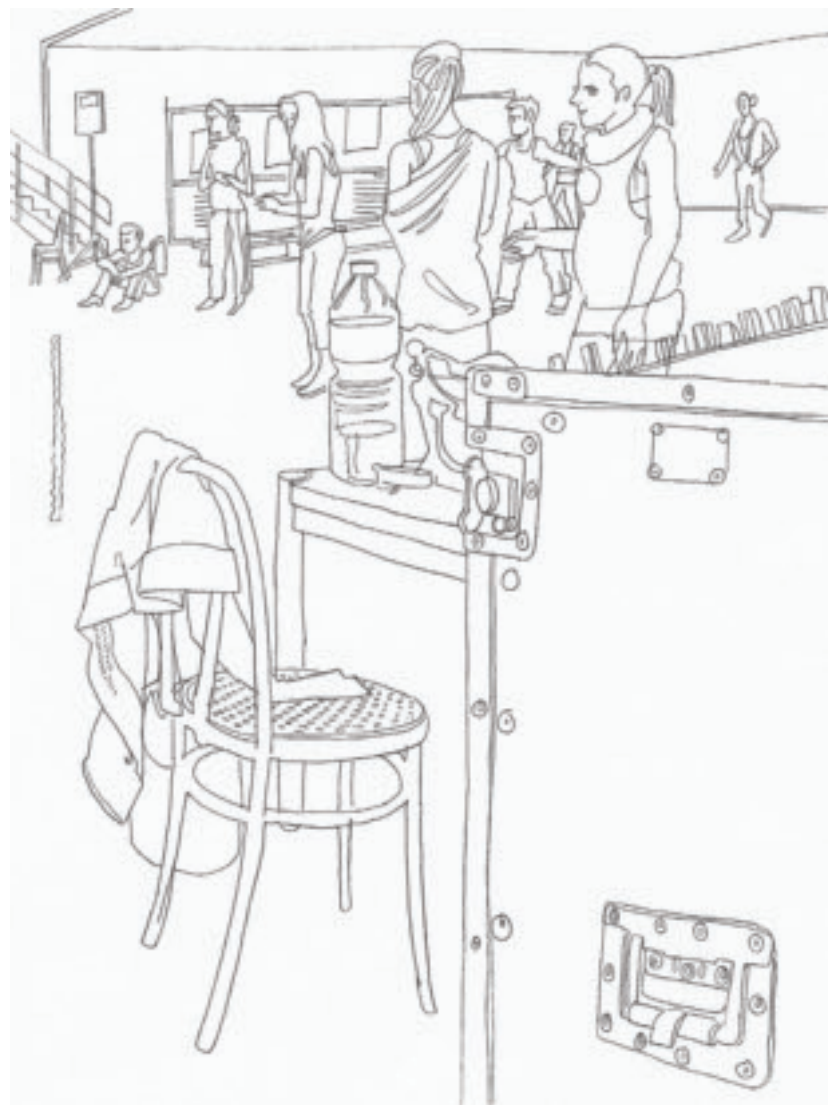
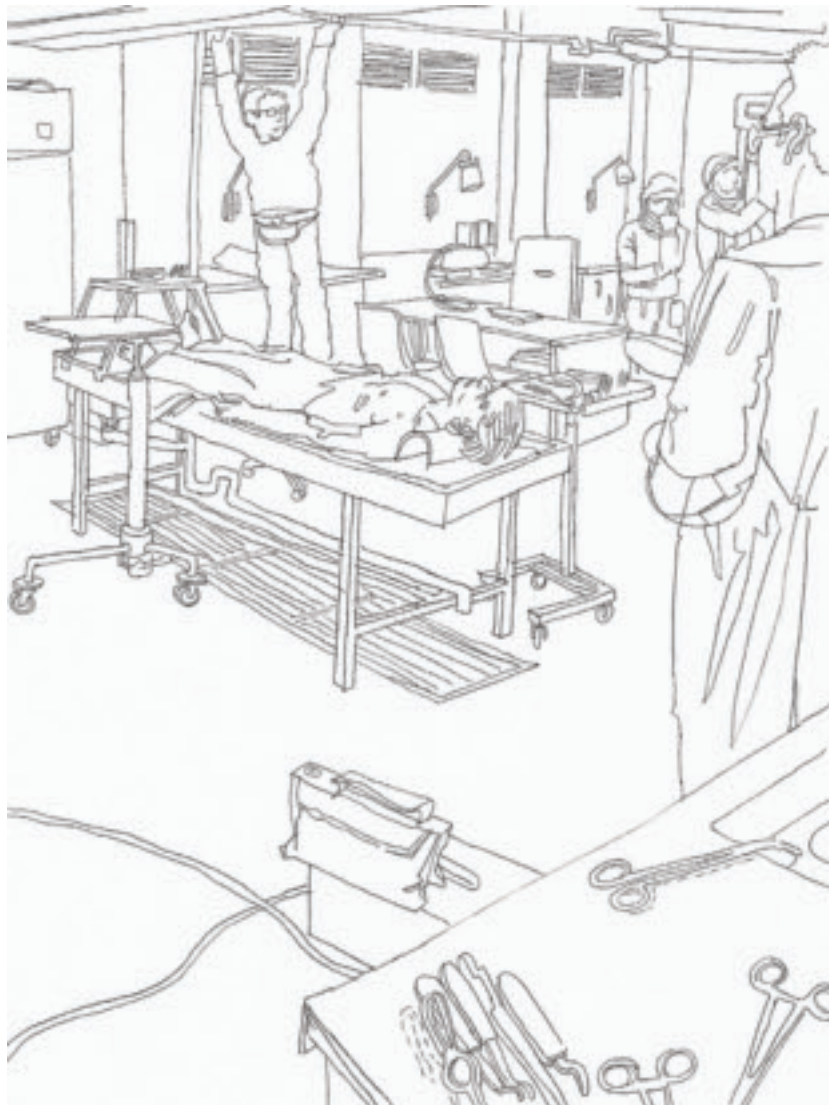
symbolic aura, you find traces of everyday life: a bucket of water and a scrubbing brush in a church, the fire alarm in a museum, window cleaners in the German parliament. The baker works in a bakery, the artist in his studio. A studio is a place just like any other. There is nothing mysterious about it.

WW: *How do you choose which details to show?*

MB: Malte Spohr is a draftsman and an important artist. His drawings consist only of horizontal lines in black, gray, and a small range of colors. I saw parallels between his drawings and the way his pencils are arranged in a very orderly fashion. Even the view through the horizontal gaps of the jalousie looked like one of his works. The window drawing I did is a special homage to him. The third drawing shows a photocopy of a cartoon on the studio wall, probably from the *New Yorker*. A hot dog vendor in the street is saying: “That’s my studio. You know, where I work on the hot dogs.” I like its wise humor. Making art is like making hot dogs. Quality counts.

For me, it’s important to show different perspectives of a place to produce a kaleidoscope of views. One picture would not be enough for the complexity of a situation. I also like imitating cinematographic techniques with the old fashioned instruments of a draftsman. I don’t use photographs for my work, but I use a photographic style. It is like saying, “I am sorry. I lost my camera so I have to do everything by hand.”

My work is also inspired by storyboards.



I make a drawing of the whole place and then return to a detail. After that, I stand up to see things from a bird's-eye perspective. When I change my position in space, I always get a totally different picture. Making drawings is a nice way to think about our perception of reality.

WW: *If you were to draw your own studio, what would you draw?*

MB: I would use three mirrors reflecting each other and producing a complex view of the place. I would combine strange details and perspectives with a focus on small things, like the models I use for my animated films. I like these plastic toys: a pig, a rhinoceros, a farmer with a pitchfork. I could place them on my work table in an artificial landscape of glasses, knives, pencils, and scissors. Surrealism is not above reality; it is only the consequence of putting common things together in a new arrangement. In one of the drawings, you could discover my right hand holding the pencil while drawing the scene. But drawing is always more fun than talking about it. And following a line is always nicer than thinking about it. So I take my pencil and a sketchbook and I leave the apartment .

Opposite page,
clockwise, from left:
Matthias Beckmann
TV Studio, rbb
2012
Graphite on paper
13.9 x 10.6 inches
Courtesy of the artist

Matthias Beckmann
Film Still of the animation film
"Family Photo Album"
2013
Graphite on paper
Courtesy of the artist

Matthias Beckmann
Film Still of the animation film
"Family Photo Album"
2013
Graphite on paper
Courtesy of the artist

Above, left to right:
Matthias Beckmann
TV Crime Series "Tatort"
2013
Graphite on paper
13.9 x 10.6 inches
Courtesy of the artist

Matthias Beckmann
Deutsches Fernsehballt TV
Ballet Rehearsal
2013
Graphite on paper
13.9 x 10.6 inches
Courtesy of the artist