

# MODERN PAINTERS

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## ARTISTS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JASON SCHMIDT

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"I don't know why anyone would be interested in what an artist looks like or what they have to say about their appearance, except that appearance is often all that matters," writes Philip-Lorca diCorcia below his portrait in Jason Schmidt's *Artists*. The book compiles 131 photographs, each accompanied by a brief statement by the subject. (A disclaimer: I posed for Schmidt, too late for inclusion, in July of this year. As a consolation, I get to discuss the book here.)

Schmidt has sought out smart young prospects in their outer-borough studios, established players at work, and veterans in their glory: Ed Ruscha in a two-page spread on Sunset Boulevard, the Bechers in a clean white viewing room. It is a pleasure to see ordinary humans step out from behind the curtains of a life's work. For other subjects, Schmidt orchestrates depictions of our fantasies of the contemporary artist's life: Andreas Gursky on a lift high above the lights of Times Square; a grinning Jeff Koons flanked by dozens of assistants; Laura Owens sitting primly in her tidy LA studio; Julian LaVerdiere, poised in a dark power suit with a massive imperial eagle swinging behind him. Given that so many artists these days come with readymade myths, some of the photos cross from elucidation of work

to illustration of persona. "Tonight I called my favorite girl to be here with me," writes Nobuyoshi Araki, nudging up against a topless, smiling young woman—"It's a great idea, isn't it?" Rita Ackermann glowers, "All I can say . . . is that 'art is not a mirror, it's a fucking hammer.' And I live it." Dan Graham, ornery in the old Chelsea Dia's (Graham-designed) rooftop café, mutters about Khrushchev's shoe.

Some artists appear to exist in their dream landscape: Matthew Barney in northeast Brazil, hanging mysteriously under the spinning wheels of a mining machine; Keith Mayerson, hard at work in a room dense with paintings: "This is me playing Velázquez." Others, more matter-of-factly, stand like shopkeepers, with their finest wares arrayed about them. Most of the book's images were originally published in *V* magazine, from spring 1997 to spring 2006. Even looking back over this brief span of time, familiar artists look strikingly young, and familiar names have unfamiliar faces. A few already demand a "where are they now" feature (see the September 2000 photograph of Stephen Hendee in his glowing Hoboken studio).

Always with an eye to his own amusement, Schmidt has carefully selected these artworld household names. In the midst of superstars, the odd subject such as Jeremy Deller—floating shaggy-haired in a patron's pool—deflates pretense: "Andy Stillpass . . . is my biggest collector (I think), in so far as he has at least two of my works." Schmidt's grasp of art ritual, combined with his skill as a portraitist, result in enough character studies to populate a Balzac novel; he has compiled a wry index to self-invention. Bearing in mind diCorcia's caution about appearances, *Artists* makes for a delightful, bizarre study of a motley family.

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