



Portrait of the Artist

Jason Schmidt has been photographing artists at work for the past 15 years, capturing a unique insight into their creative practice. Diane Smyth meets him

Above: Paul MacCarthy.

Left: Gregory Crewdson.

Top left: Phillip-Lorcía diCorcia. All pictures © Jason Schmidt.

'If you have a camera you have a licence to go to places you wouldn't normally access,' says New York-based photographer Jason Schmidt. 'It's a means to an end. It's very exciting to be able to go into strangers' studios and, essentially, I photographed

people because I wanted to meet them.'

Schmidt is perhaps best known for his fashion and advertising work, but in this case he's talking about *Artists*, a book of portraits just published by Steidl.

'I started taking photographs

of artists very early on in my career, largely because I had a lot of friends who were artists,' he explains. 'Their studios are really great. I'm a sucker for the atmosphere and the aura that imbues them. So I made a reason to go to see more.'

Recording history

In 2000 Alix Browne gave Schmidt a watertight reason to do just that, commissioning him to shoot a couple of artists for *V* magazine. Schmidt suggested making it a regular item, and a year into the project decided it

had the potential to become a great book.

'I realised I was recording a little bit of history and started building up an archive,' he says. 'It's a well-established theme in photography. I have a whole shelf of books. There's Johnnie Shand Kydd's portraits of the Young British Artists, Hans Namuth's portraits of the US action painters, and Robert Mapplethorpe's great work on the New York artists in the 1970s and 80s. It's fun to continue that and document the artists of my time.'

'A photographer can't hope for anything better than to create an archive of something from their time,' he continues. 'I get to be the keeper of this history in my own small, subjective way. Ten years on it will be interesting to see which artists have become part of the canon, and to say "Whatever happened to X?".'

Collaborator

Schmidt emphasises the subjective nature of the project, pointing out that his choice of artists was very personal, and that all photography is a subjective reaction to a moment in time. But he's also aware that it's a kind of catalogue of contemporary art, describing his images as 'journalistic or documentary', and neither overly positive or negative.

This isn't the same as saying that they're candid shots though: many were very carefully posed. Schmidt collaborated with the artists, talking through the shoot and agreeing on the best approach with them. He used a Linhof 5x4 for most of the images, meaning that he worked slowly and edited extensively before he shot.

'It's a good camera to collaborate with because you take big Polaroids first and work in a studied, rather than frenetic, way. And my abilities tend towards that style rather than firing away and catching a moment. I love that style, but it's not an approach I'm good at.'

'Some of the artists had strong ideas of what they wanted, and their images are very posed,' he continues. 'I didn't mind doing that at all. I wanted the images to be as authentic as possible, and how they chose to present themselves was an important aspect of that. I also showed them their images afterwards. It

Right: Andreas Gursky.

never came up, but I wouldn't have used a portrait if they hadn't liked it. I'd feel like I was misportraying them.'

In fact, Schmidt says he tried to 'disappear into the artist's world', and he adapting his style to fit each person. Most of the images include pieces of their work, and many even emulate the artist's own style. His photograph of Philip-Lorca diCorcia emulates one of the artist's *Heads* shots, for example, while his portrait of Wolfgang Tillmans is shot in front of the studio window that has featured repeatedly in the artist's work.

'When I walked into his studio I instantly recognised the space,' he says. 'I felt like I was walking into a Tillmans photograph. We talked about more literal artist-at-work shots but when I asked if I could take this picture he said "Perfect" – he'd taken a picture of a friend there the day before. I tried to make the picture look the way he treats his subjects, but it's not an exact copy. It's a reference.'

Art worlds

Many of Schmidt's images were taken in the artists' studios and, he says, these spaces were also an important part of the project. Partly, this is just his approach – his fashion and advertising shoots are usually environmental portraits, studying peoples' interaction with their surroundings. But for this project, he says, it added another layer of portraiture.

'I'm as interested in their space and work as I am in their faces,' he says. 'The person in the space is the most informative thing, and that combination is what excites me. Sometimes their faces are surprising, other times they fit the work perfectly.'

In addition, he asked the subjects to provide their own extended captions to the portraits. 'We'd send and email asking them to describe the photograph, but we left the brief very open-ended. Some people described it literally, others wrote something more abstract, but all the captions very telling. It was another way for them to project themselves and added something really special to the book.'

The book deal was initiated by



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Top: Matthew Barney.
Above: Wolfgang Tillmans.
Left: Nobuyoshi Araki.

Browne – she mentioned Schmidt's work to Gerhard Steidl whilst discussing an entirely separate V project – but Schmidt says Steidl would have been top of his publisher list anyway. He had to shape a book of 131 portraits out of hundreds of images, and deliberately avoided making a straight catalogue by choosing images for their aesthetic appeal

and putting them into quite an arbitrary sequence.

'The images aren't in alphabetical or chronological order,' he says. 'I didn't want to make the book too systematic because the project was more organic than that. I wanted the book to have the same kind of feeling I had when I went to the studios. It was like going from one world to the next.'

'I feel very honoured to have been published by the same company as Robert Frank and

Brassai,' he continues. 'But I'm also really proud of all the pictures in this book. I'm still working on the project and I'm still really enjoying it. It's a labour of love.' **BJP**

In print

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