

Some of the world's leading artists have allowed the American photographer Jason Schmidt to reveal how they go about their work. By Drusilla Beyfus

## CAUGHT IN THE ACT

Jason Schmidt is a New York photographer who for the past six years has focused his camera on artists at work. The coverage is New York-centric, the subjects represent the sharp end of contemporary art – and it goes without saying that the Brits are strongly in the loop. Schmidt's efforts are collected in a new book, *Artists 2000-2006*, and there will also be a show in New York in February next year.

Working with a Linhof 4x5 camera, and always in colour, he has pursued his quarry in studios, galleries and in those environments that are dear to the heart of the artist in question. His background as a photographer in magazine journalism – he has worked for *Telegraph Magazine*, the *New York Times*, *Vanity Fair* and the *New Yorker* among others – gives his project something of the air of a scoop.

His proposition is straightforward: observers are intrigued by the process of creating art. Witness our affection for a maquette or sketch of a work in progress from the past. But we do not get many opportunities to have the veil lifted on living artists doing their stuff. Schmidt, 32, says, 'Everybody gets to see the finished work. My pictures show the moments in between, which I think is more than a mere voyeuristic thing. The situation can be very revealing – to see how an artist gets from point A to point B. I always aim to

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show the artist interacting with their work. With photographers the situation was always ideal – to get their reaction while they were shooting. Similarly with video artists, I could capture them while they were making the picture. In most cases I showed up at the studio of my subject and we would come up with a solution on how to shoot the picture.'

Not everyone was co-operative. Some of his sitters screamed at him, Schmidt says. The great American sculptor Richard Serra told him, 'I'm not a fashion model. Don't bark commands at me, or I'll kick you out of here.' 'But I got a great shot,' Schmidt says.

He noticed a generational divide in his sitters' attitudes. 'The younger artists in their thirties were apt to play the game, to be entertained by being

**Right** the sculptor Richard Serra's *Four*, said to engender 'anticipation, dislocation, disorientation'





photographed for a magazine. But the more senior practitioners were less interested in being portrayed, holding that the work was all that mattered.'

The captions in the book add to the picture. Explanatory, spiky or humorous, they are contributed by the artist photographed (as a general rule). What we see is a collection of individual artists – no clones or 'class of' can be detected – up to their creative tricks and devices. Matthew Barney, famous for his autobiographical *Cremaster Cycle* of films, is depicted crouching beneath a Caterpillar 988 mining machine. Cecily Brown sits in her studio in New York surrounded by canvases, musing that she likes her work 'to be an argument, full of interruptions, disruptions and illogical decisions'. Jeff Koons captions Schmidt's group shot, 'the Koons studio family portrait with our friend the Hulk', a reference to the cartoon character. Adam Fuss, the British-born New York practitioner, is caught as he creates a photogram of a baby, a process that dispenses with a camera. Baby Ariele is shown lying on a sheet of colour and light-sensitive photographic paper that is under water. 'Each child has a unique way of moving its limbs and body,' Fuss says. 'The resultant waves in the water express its life force. The paper, water and baby are exposed to a flash of coloured light, and a moment is captured.'

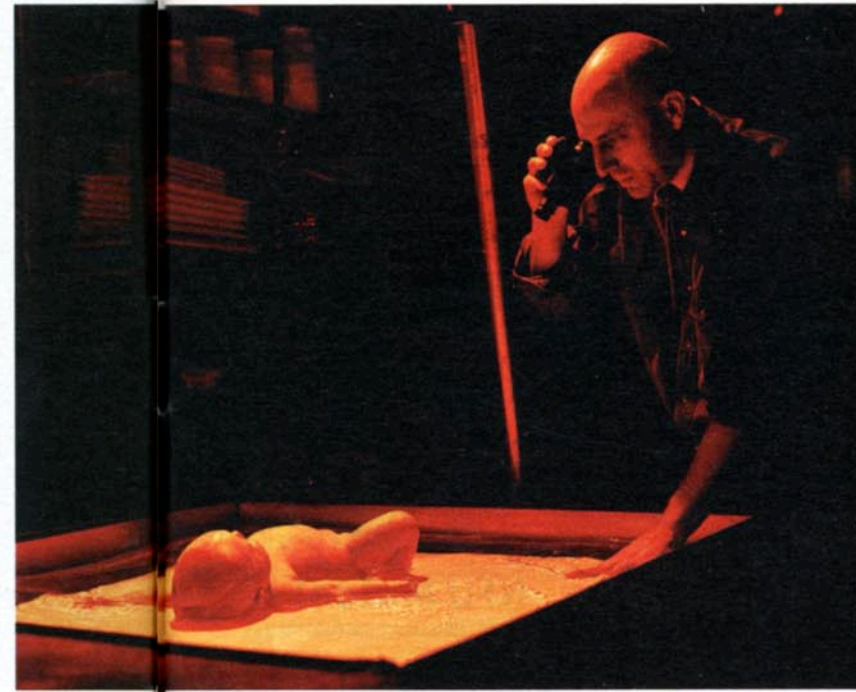
Richard Serra is seen in the final stages of installing his huge torqued spiral, *Four* (a torque is a rotational force). Of the interior, he says, '... a curvilinear path opens, closes and leans inward and outward as one walks through... The effects are anticipation, dislocation, disorientation.'

Andreas Gursky, whose photography sets records at auctions, is captured at the top of a gantry in Times Square, New York. He is shooting from various perspectives in order to snap the parts which eventually he will compose as one image. Gursky notes that the famous location 'doesn't reveal itself to the observer at a glance, because its spatial arrangement is too complex. The multi-layered composition is revealed only through movement – by walking or driving past – and the image that is recalled is of stunning impressions.' Schmidt's shot suggests the scale of the problem.

The German artist Thomas Demand, who exhibited recently at the Serpentine Gallery, stands half-hidden beside what he describes as 'a wallpaper' depicting an artificial forest set in a woodland glade. Using his favoured medium of 1970s photo-wallpaper, the leafy scene blurs the distinctions between nature and artifice. The piece comprises 280,000 leaves made of paper, offset printed in 18 separate parts. His print of a tree trunk within the design is cunningly placed in the copse to seem to extend into a real tree.

Action shots became surreal, as in case of the British artist and White Cube gallery exhibitor Gavin Turk. Turk is preoccupied with questions of authenticity and is influenced by Marcel Duchamp. Turk's shot is titled *Trying to Hit the Nail on the Head*, as he wields a hammer over a nail that itself rests on one of his series of eggshells. The latter are said to be influenced by Giorgio De Chirico. 'Using the style of Dada and surrealism as glue,' Turk says, 'cultural traditions of the past are bonded with moments of the present.'

In the book, humour keeps breaking through, and Schmidt lets the camera roll. Ed Ruscha, an American artist famous for his deadpan juxtaposition of word and image, is shot walking down Sunset Boulevard in the middle of the road, a location that is typical of his own photography. 'There I am,' he says, 'being just another bump on the highway.' Sam Taylor-Wood, the British video artist who is often her own subject, is shot upside-down as she pole-dances in her London studio. She adds a cheeky postscript: 'If all else fails, there is always the option of a career change.'



The Afro-American Kehinde Wiley, who creates pastiche classical frescos, is pictured as seen from below, peering out of a corner of a composition that echoes the 18th-century artist Giovanni Battista Tiepolo. In the portrait he waves a paintbrush at fluffy white clouds and at one of his characters, a cavorting male in modern dress, wearing trainers. 'I try to capture the grandeur of Venetian painting while poking fun at the master narrative,' Wiley says.

Personal insights slip into the story. The pop painter Alex Katz reveals his love of the image of the seated figure. He is shot sitting (not altogether comfortably it seems) on his studio floor, in order to paint his subject – also seated – from a shared eyeline. He is doing a small oil of David Salle, the celebrated American pasticheur. Overlooking them both is Katz's picture of four women in differing positions of rest.

Tracey Emin is caught during a fractious moment setting up her show at Oxford in 2002, and is photographed beneath one of her pieces featuring a four-letter word in an inscription. The intervention of the photographer changed the picture.

'EACH CHILD HAS A UNIQUE WAY OF MOVING ITS LIMBS AND BODY – THE WAVES IN THE WATER EXPRESS THE BABY'S LIFE FORCE'

**Clockwise, from top left** Jason Schmidt's shot of Gavin Turk *Trying to Hit the Nail on the Head*; Thomas Demand half-hidden behind his 'wallpaper' forest; Adam Fuss records baby Ariele making waves; Alex Katz sits as he paints David Salle; Kehinde Wiley puts a figure among the clouds



'Just having to sit still for two minutes calmed me down and put a smile on my face,' Emin says.

This expansion of the definition of an artist might have astonished a photographer working on a comparable brief in the mid-20th century. When Hans Namuth snapped the abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock for *Life* magazine in the 1960s – black-and-white photographs that came to symbolise the artist's work – his portfolio was defined by painting. Similarly, Snowdon's *Private View*, published in 1965, was dedicated to the fine arts and people who supported them. In Schmidt's update, there are video-makers, computer animators, performance artists, installation makers, model-makers, still photographers and embroiderers who embellish photographic images, in addition to painters and sculptors.

Tony Oursler, a performer who animates non-living objects by using a projector, conveys the new scope. 'You can see two of my newest works getting to know each other,' he says of Schmidt's portrait. 'They are part of a group of characters made by computer animating the video I shoot... and projecting it on to three-dimensional sculptures. In this picture you can't see them either move or hear what they are saying. Perhaps when Jason and I work together 10 years from now, that will be possible.'

*'Jason Schmidt: Artists 2000-2006' (Editions 7L) is available for £31 (rrp £35) plus £1.25 p&p from Telegraph Books (0870-428 4112)*

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**Above** Tony Oursler pictured in his studio. **Below** Andreas Gursky at work on his Times Square project

