

Art School

Lucy Hogg

Having spent over thirty years of my life in art schools, as student and then teacher, I've realized that the most common documentation of what is supposed to be going on is found in recruitment brochures. As an insider, it always struck me that their promotional photographs often told less than the whole truth. The brochures are generally aimed at anxious parents deciding what institution their child might go to—having gotten over their initial reservations about their child going to art school at all—and they'd be looking for images that confirm their idea of what a successful life in the visual arts might look like.

These photographs often show students clustered around a nude model, learning how to draw from life, or in a rapt group with their instructors, sitting cross-legged in front of a big colored canvas while they engage in philosophical critique. Other photos depict one-on-one instruction in media labs with the latest technologies, or tidy woodshops with technicians hovering as students attempt ambitious sculpture.

A more realistic view might depict students signing up for systemic instability in a profession that functions much like a pyramid scheme, with the vast majority of its participants ending up as a support system for the 1% of artists who actually 'make it'. The most likely future that art students face is as studio assistants, exhibition technicians, gallerists, educators, board members, window dressers, art therapists, collectors, writers, and last but not least, an informed audience. But in art school, the operating premise is that everyone will be in that artistic top 1%.

With information on current trends at hand as never before, students' studios—and

even the detritus left behind in them—reveal how quickly the most junior artist can now absorb the *zeitgeist* of contemporary production and career ambitions. Just as Louise Lawler documented the crucial dynamic between artworks, museums and collectors, the photographs in this project reflect upon the ever-tightening feedback loop between the art school and the market—both the commercial world *per se*, but also the market for institutional success.

But even with all that in play, in these student spaces I often felt like I was photographing an idyll. At any point, but especially in their senior and grad years, students can actually *do whatever they want*, without the pressure of an ultimate goal. These are the conditions in which uncalculated innovation can occur, but they come coupled with performance anxiety, procrastination, and the inevitable grad-show deadlines, ending in an evaluation whose criteria are often ill-defined. And even a successful graduate who manages to rise, phoenix-like, out of the *mélange* can still take several years to actualize a practice in the unprotected real world.

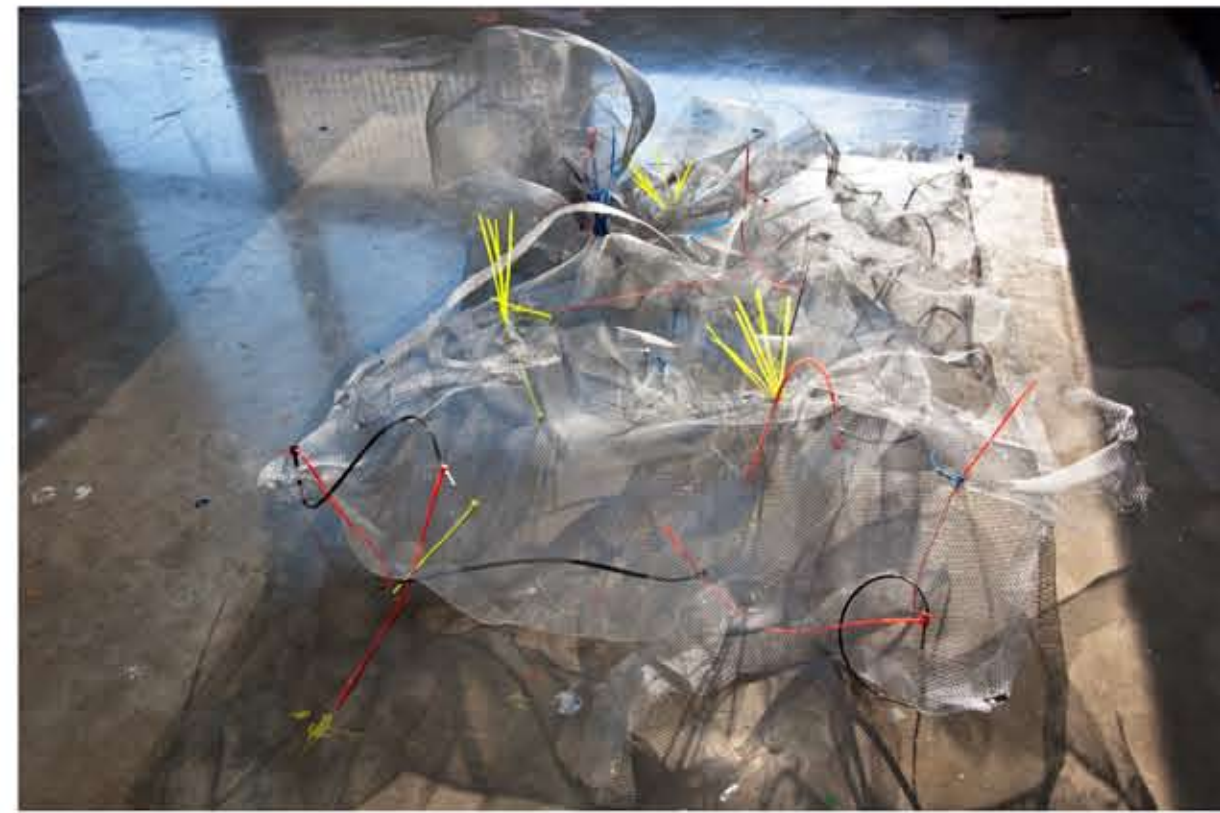
Anyone who has spent time in an art school in the last thirty years knows that most of what goes on in a studio program can seem like a strange journey, with no definable career outcomes. Art school is a place where people learn to explore languages they are newly acquiring, but also languages they are newly inventing. The emphasis is on the means to an end but the end often isn't in sight. In the best-case scenario, the students are setting themselves up for a lifelong inquiry into what art could be.

Most art professors will admit that in any class of twenty students they would find two or three in the running for becoming the new artist that everyone is hoping to see emerge. But strangely enough, those students who excel in a school's programmed setting aren't always the ones who succeed in the professional world—and often students who seemed low-functioning can later flower. There is no way of knowing what course to follow, or what qualities and talents are required, to become a successful artist. As Thomas McEvilley has written convincingly, "art cannot be taught." A good art school creates the educational conditions and social milieu that all types of student can adapt to, so as to teach themselves what they will need to know.

Yet in the glare of departmental cutbacks and learner-outcome evaluations, the undirected experimentation promoted in art school may start to seem like a lost romantic landscape. Spending time in these studios with my camera, I came to feel like Eugène Atget in his fading Paris—I might just be documenting a model of artmaking that would disappear in the twenty-first century. The hyper-materiality present in these studios may reflect (and only if we are very lucky may critique) the current excesses of mass production and consumption laying waste to our fragile environment. With world economic malaise seeming to have settled in for good and environmental collapse floating on the horizon, we can only hope that these students go on to be our most inventive survivors. —**Lucy Hogg**





















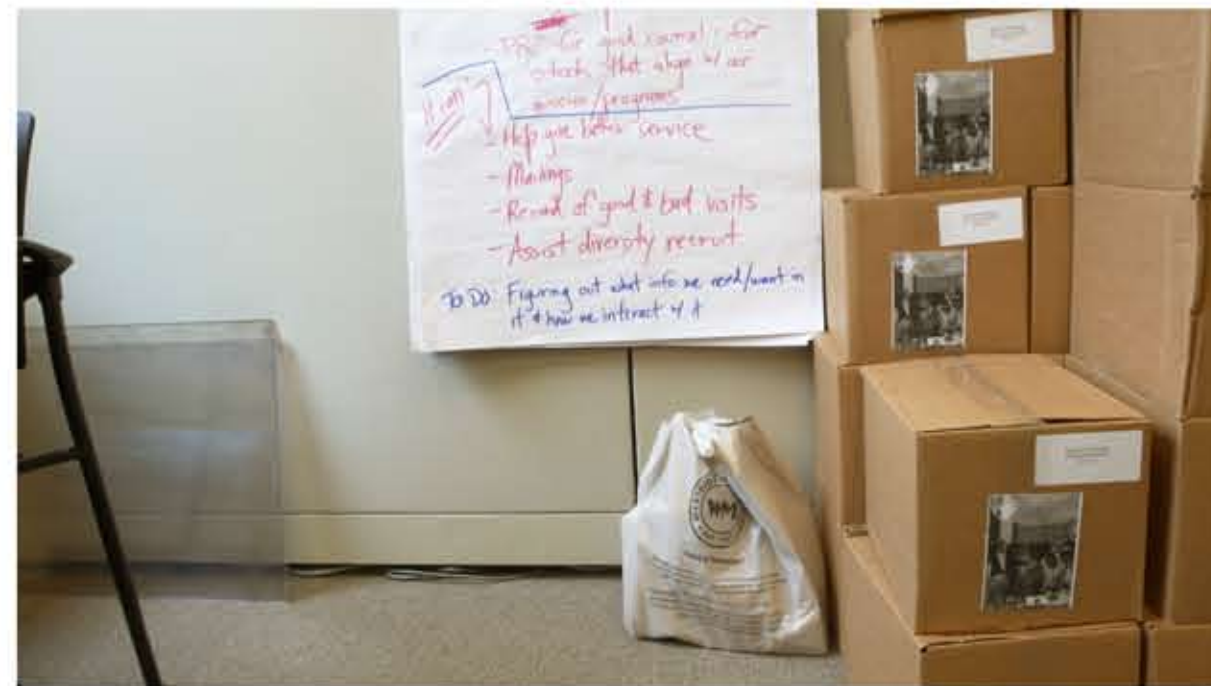






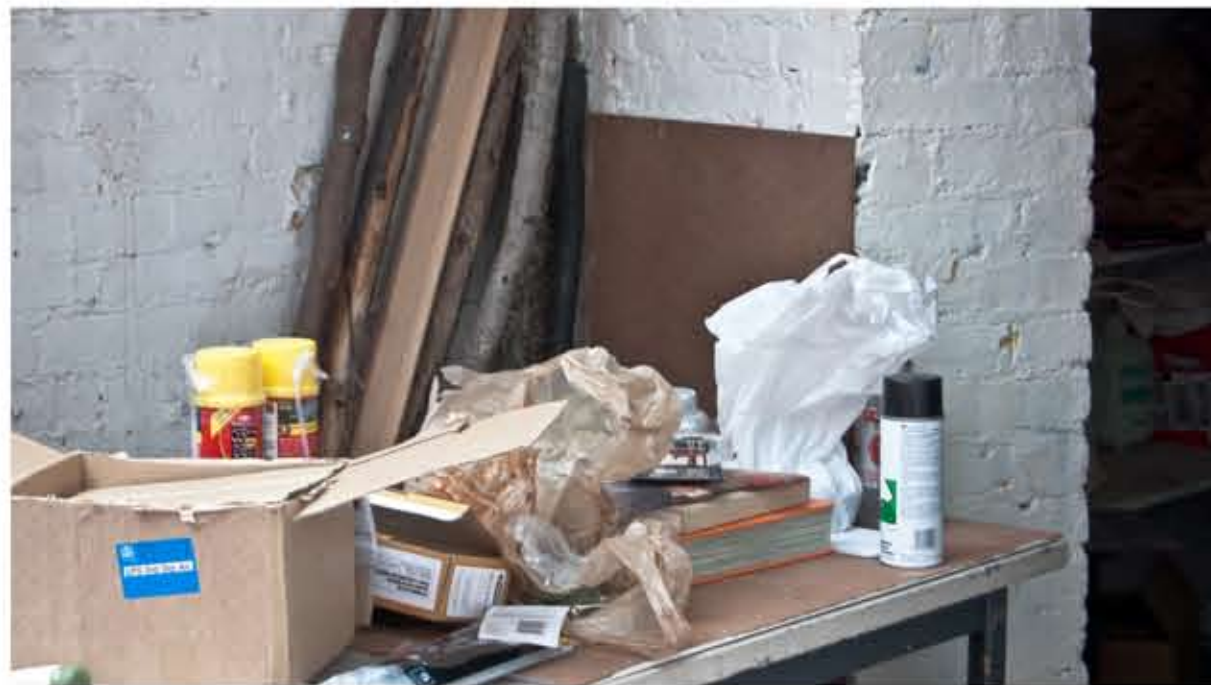










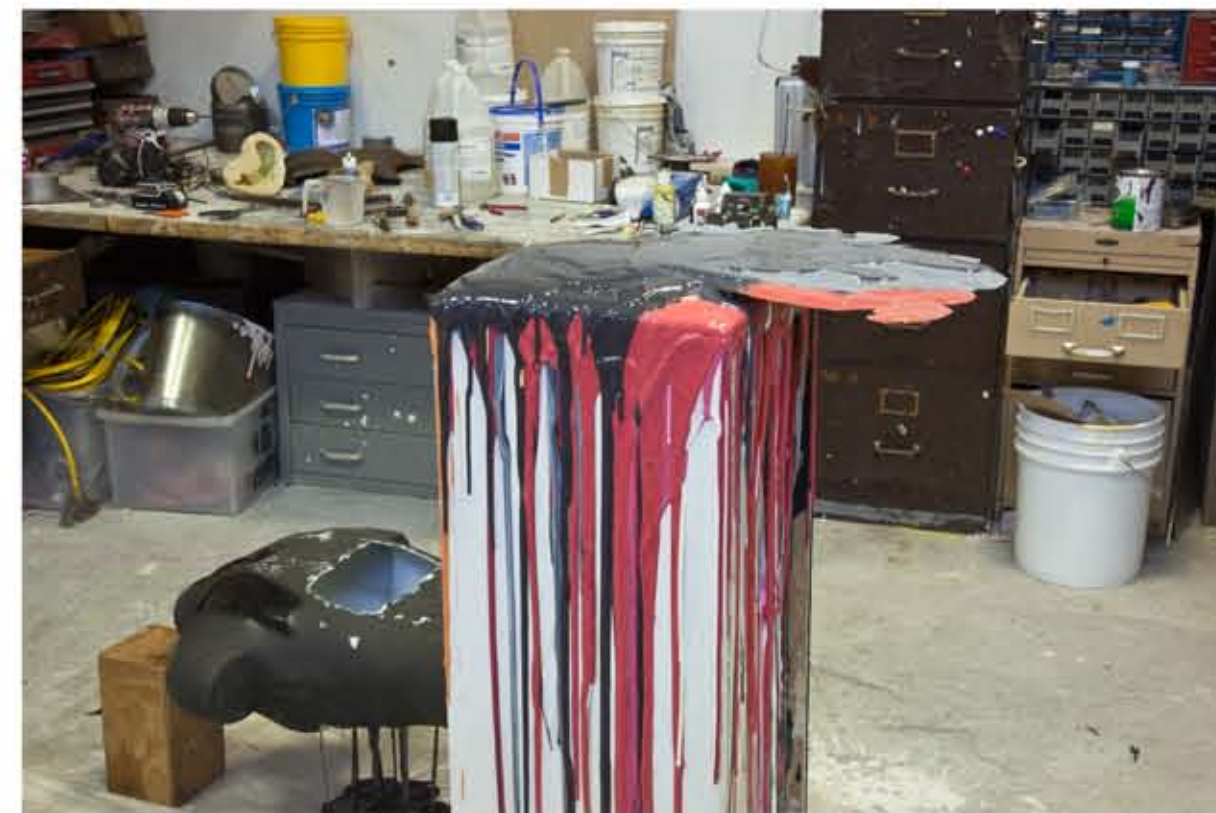




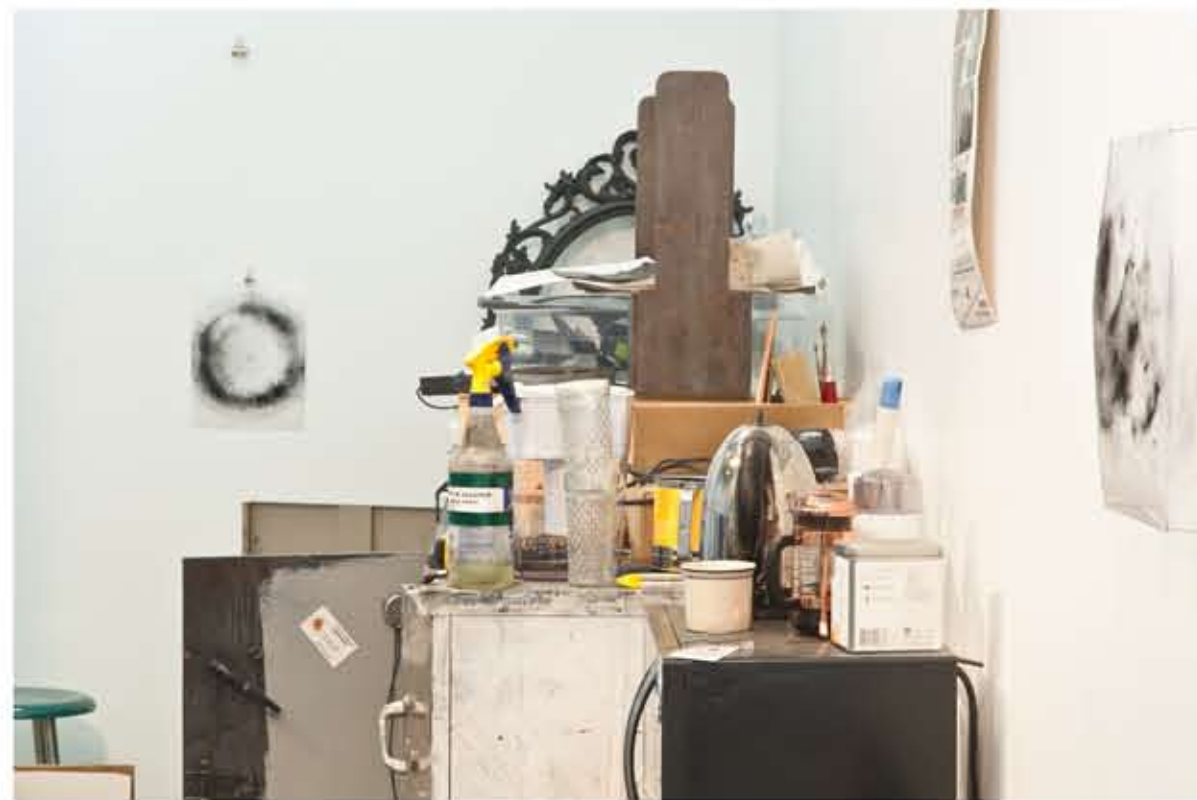






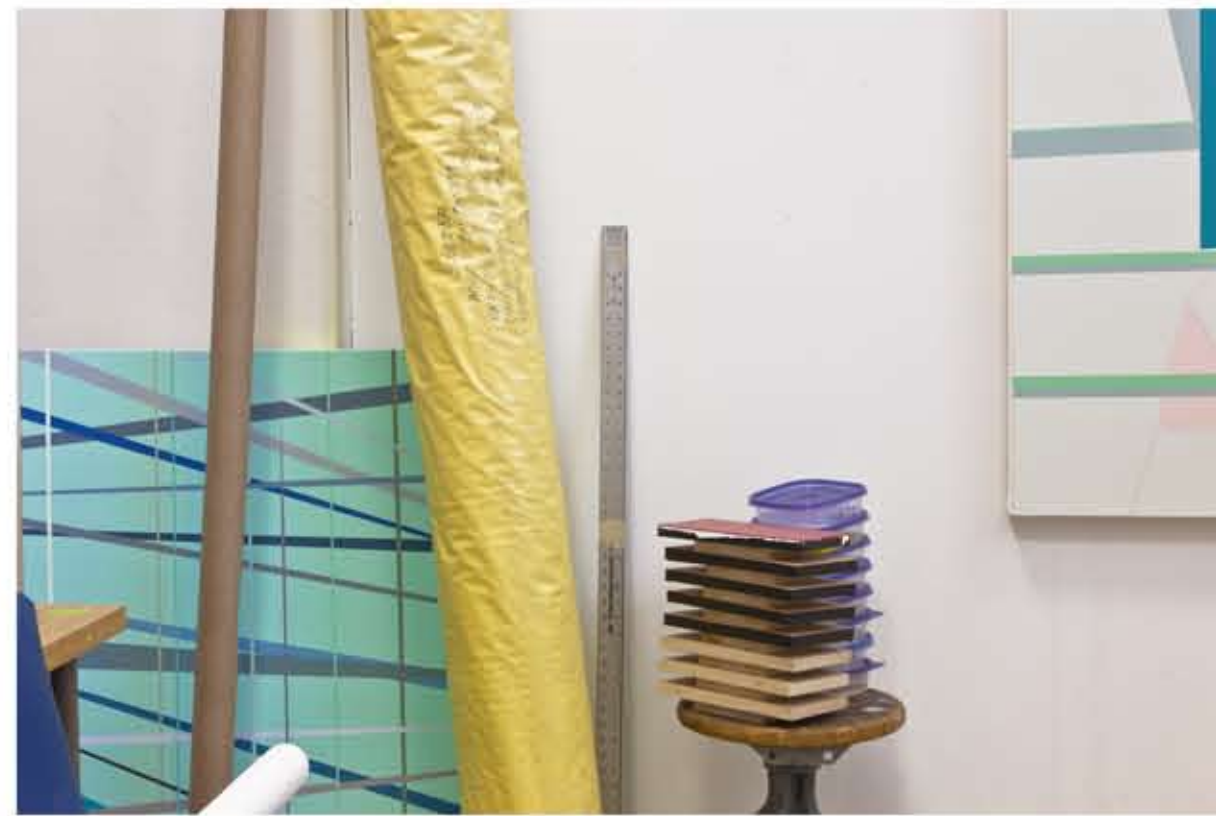










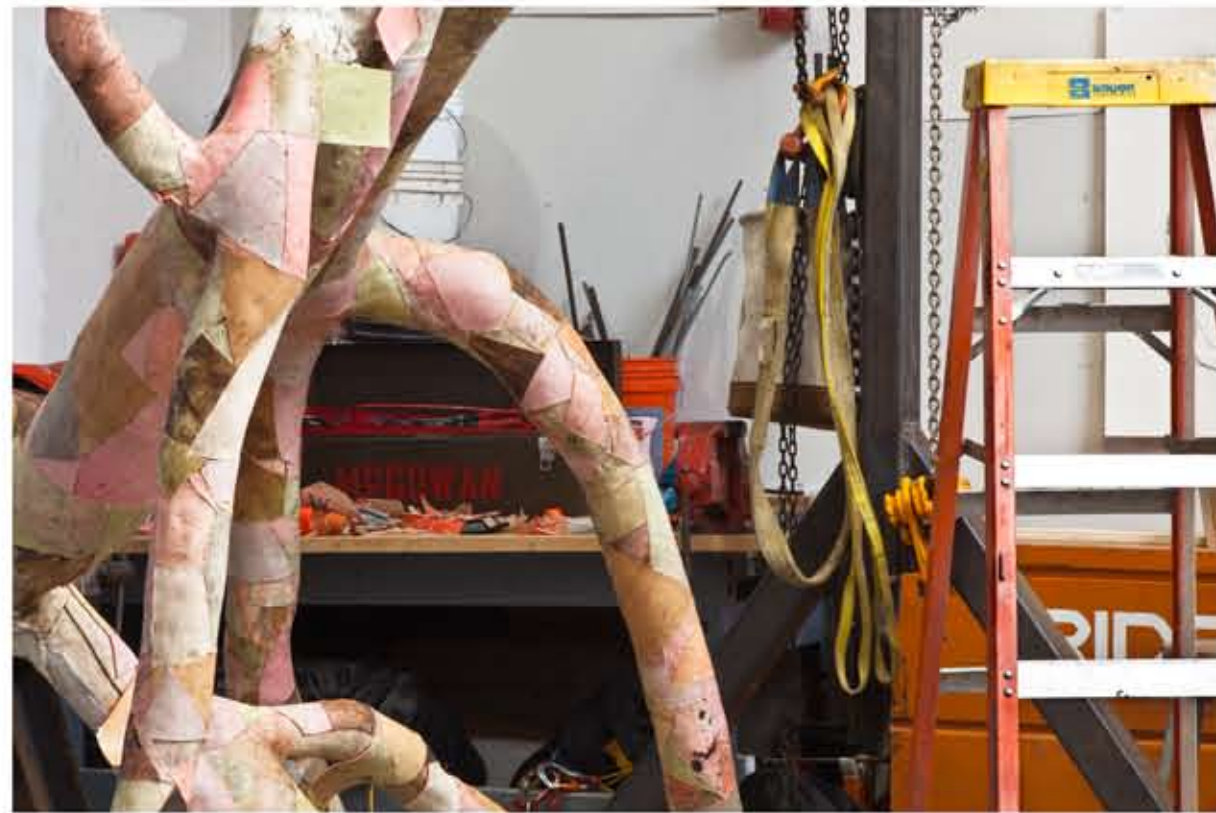
















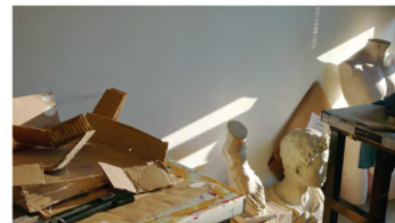
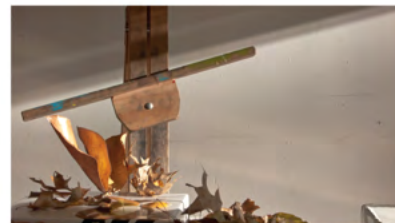


Plate 05 *Laura/Gillian/John*

In *Art School* Lucy Hogg makes art from the edges and the discards of art. She makes an art of not-quite art.

Note the alchemy in *Laura/Gillian/John* (Plate 05). The studio is normally the support, the laboratory from which the finished art object should spring. But Hogg fashions an ingenious short circuit around this effort, making a modest monument of the studio itself, and of its disordered materials. Here she grasps a cluster of momentary circumstances, rhymes them, and makes them permanent. In the right panel, she draws a correspondence between the strips of raking white sunlight and the strips of cardboard—similar in size and shape—on the table. These angles and tones are then echoed, in the central panel, by a triangle of sunlight, itself in perfect synchrony with the loose crossbar of an empty easel. Cardboard and easel share a common color and origin in wood, a resemblance that is then set off by the crunchy cheapness of a spontaneous sculpture (or is it a maquette for something more serious?) made of plastic cutlery. White light baptizes even this.

The students who let Hogg into their studios want to make good art. The aim is to finish something, to generate an object meaningful enough to others that it permanently leaves the studio, landing in a prominent exhibition or even in a collection. Such success, however, is extremely unlikely. And even if a young artist makes a minor hit, she immediately faces another problem, for the vitality of art is extremely fragile. To arrive at finished work is also to cut the art object off from the creative laboratory that gave birth to it. Once it has been exhibited for a while, art easily looks moribund

and empty. This is why Claes Oldenburg brusquely complained that most prominent art does nothing more than “sit on its ass in a museum,” while Marcel Duchamp simply cried, “Use a Rembrandt as an ironing board!”

Anyone who has framed their own art has felt this paradox: a sense of satisfying completion that is also a form of death. Hogg’s preferred handling of *Art School* triptychs performs a delicate balance against this threat. The prints on her wall are unframed, matte paper held in place by standard white office pins. They retain the feeling of being freshly printed, and of possibly being reworked and reprinted at any time. This hanging reenacts the double-move of *Art School* as a whole, the ingenious way in which it glories in the perpetual irresolution of art-making even while also handsomely enclosing and tidying the mess.

One aspect of this series’ powerful dynamic, then, is familiar. From the beginning, photography has tidied and preserved a reality that is forever messy and fleeting. A photograph takes a momentary happenstance, cuts it out from the world, and cleans it for all time. But Hogg, who trains this capacity on the art studio itself, accomplishes something unique. Her work on the studio is less like Eliot Porter’s loving approach to an autumn leaf or Ansel Adams’ meditation on a tree trunk than it is a comment upon them. What is captured here—what is interrupted and isolated—is the very process of trying to make an artwork. The topic is the magic moment of getting art right, and the tragic fragility of that success.

One painful effect of these works, then, is that they shyly perform a withering

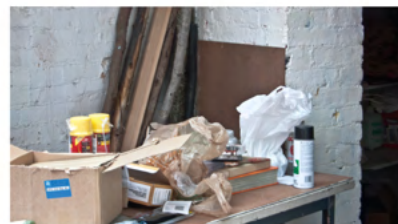


Plate 19 *Jessika/Kate/Missy*

triumph over the art in the studios. Hogg creates the balance of order and disorder, of perfection and entropy, that eludes the plaster casts and fork sculptures themselves. The magic moment, the just-so quasi-resolution, is here in Hogg's triptychs only. We are left to imagine how few of these students have gone on to manage a life in the arts.

The triptych is a classic form of Christian altar painting, one that places the key image—Mary and Child, often, or the crucifixion—at its center. *Art School*, picks up this format but rejects its hierarchy, refusing to order things according to their importance. At the same time, however, Hogg's series is constantly offering fragile little possibilities of coherence, by delicately rhyming colors and shapes. Notice, for example, the way strong verticals organize *Jessika/Kate/Missy* (Plate 19). We get, from left to right, a bundle of branches, a dark wall edge, a strap, a mesh bag, a door frame, a sheet of insulation, and, finally, a table leg and a few paint cans. These verticals are set



Plate 21 *Jonathan/Amanda/Joseph*

off by a smattering of loose round forms, including two plastic bags and a loop of white electrical cord. The *Psycho* poster also fits wittily, and darkly, with the paint smears beside it. Most of all, though, everything is lightly held together here by the suggestion of coherent architecture: the wall at far left is angled to point in toward the center, while the objects at right do the same from the other side. The frontal point of view is saved for the middle. Hogg refuses a central message, but she also reminds us that artworks used to have one. She gleefully peddles past the fantasy of an organized universe, while leaving behind a hint of longing.

Jonathan/Amanda/Joseph (Plate 21), which likewise uses converging geometry to suggest a fictional room, contains a rich detail that encapsulates the spirit of the whole series. The blue Plexiglas puddle on the table at left is at once a spill and a gleaming fetish. Intensified by reverberating blotches of similar blue in the other two

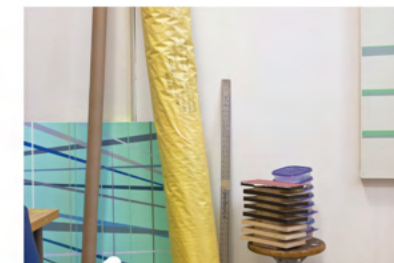


Plate 29 *Tim x 3*

photographs, it is both a glorious aesthetic achievement and a scrap of trash. It is process and product all at once, chaos and revelation.

For all the intense freshness of these works, they are also rich with art-historical references. As a group, they are fellow travellers with Isa Genzken, Thomas Hirschhorn, and Rachel Harrison, contemporary sculptors whose disorderly work channels the energy of art still in the making. But individual works also echo many other artists, including Félix González-Torres (Plate 23), Marcel Duchamp and Richard Serra (Plate 27), Claes Oldenburg (Plates 28 and 31), and Eva Hesse (Plates 30 and 31). Sometimes Hogg builds these references through her selective points of view, and sometimes they are readymades, there to be found in the students' work.

The gorgeous array of paint cans in the left panel of *Adam/Stewart/Tim* (Plate 29) recalls Frank Stella's indelible remark that he tried, when painting, to keep the

paint “as good as it was in the can.” The feat is not easy—most art is less affecting than the aisles of a good supply store. And there is pain in the likelihood that none of the paintings made from these cans came out half as lovely and intense as this photograph. But here again, Hogg departs from her predecessors. Stella’s early art was a landmark of antihumanism—a 1960s attack on the intentionality, expression, and fussiness of the entire history of art. Hogg’s work, on the other hand, is soaked with feeling. Her art preserves not just the pristine paint can but also the messy period of making, when art is still in its crafter’s hands, surrounded by excessive material that might or might not come into it.

Both the striking beauty and the satisfying depth of *Art School* derive from its painful-joyful balance along the knife-edge of meaning, of adding up. Human activity here is a Herculean effort to make something revealing and expressive, something worthwhile. We never see the artists doing that—they are stuck trying—and Hogg implicitly asks us whether her work, too, will matter. The resignation and the celebration in this series are one and the same: it turns out, just about, that the messy effort was the thing all along. Not a single one of these studios, thank god, is cleaned up and packed away.

—Joshua Shannon is Professor of contemporary art history and theory in the Department of Art History & Archaeology at the University of Maryland



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- 01** Lauren/Bryan/Dylan (American University, Studio Experience 100, 2010)
- 02** Gillian/Bryan/Laura (American University, DC, Studio Experience 100, 2010)
- 03** Alia/Christina/Katlyn (American University, DC, Studio Experience 100, 2010)
- 04** Melissa/John/Charles (American University, DC, Studio Experience 100, 2010)
- 05** Laura/Gillian/John (American University, DC, Studio Experience 100, 2010)
- 06** Kate/Russell/Laura H. (Senior Thesis, Corcoran College of Art and Design, DC, 2007–2010)
- 07** David/Nick/Bethany (Senior Thesis, Corcoran College of Art and Design, DC, 2007–2010)
- 08** Russell/Kate/Bonnie (Senior Thesis, Corcoran College of Art and Design, DC, 2007–2010)
- 09** Breht/Andy/Breht (Senior Thesis, Corcoran College of Art and Design, DC, 2007–2010)
- 10** Andy/Ivi/Lorraine (Senior Thesis, Corcoran College of Art and Design, DC, 2007–2010)
- 11** Joseph O./Nick/Missy (Senior Thesis, Corcoran College of Art and Design, DC, 2007–2010)
- 12** Missy/Joseph B./Nick (Senior Thesis, Corcoran College of Art and Design, DC, 2007–2010)
- 13** David x 3 (Senior Thesis, Corcoran College of Art and Design, DC, 2007–2010)
- 14** Andy/Ivi/Andy (Senior Thesis, Corcoran College of Art and Design, DC, 2007–2010)
- 15** Amber/Andy/Common Area (Senior Thesis, Corcoran College of Art and Design, DC, 2007–2010)
- 16** Breht/Andy (Senior Thesis, Corcoran College of Art and Design, DC, 2007–2010)/Portfolio Admissions Day, School of Visual Arts, NYC, 2009
- 17** David/Unoccupied Cubicle/Mia (Corcoran College of Art and Design, DC, 2007–2010)
- 18** Painting Studios, Annie Smith Arts Centre, University of Toronto Mississauga Art and Art History Program, 2010

- 19** Jessika/Kate/Missy (Senior Thesis, Corcoran College of Art and Design, DC, 2007–2010)
- 20** Felicia/Michael/Stewart (MFA Graduate Colloquium, University of Maryland, 2010)
- 21** Jonathan/Amanda/Joseph (MFA Graduate Colloquium, University of Maryland, 2010)
- 22** Joseph/Stewart/Jack (MFA Graduate Colloquium, University of Maryland, 2010)
- 23** Tim/Felicia/Selin (MFA Graduate Colloquium, University of Maryland, 2010)
- 24** Adam/Alex/Zachary (MFA Graduate Colloquium, University of Maryland, 2010)
- 25** Porter/Sarah/Jesse (MFA Graduate Colloquium, University of Maryland, 2010)
- 26** Lauren L./Patrick/Lauren L. (MFA Graduate Colloquium, University of Maryland, 2013)
- 27** Mark/Aydin/Janelle (MFA Graduate Colloquium, University of Maryland, 2013)
- 28** Adam/Stewart/Tim (MFA Graduate Colloquium, University of Maryland, 2010)
- 29** Tim x 3 (MFA Graduate Colloquium, University of Maryland, 2010)
- 30** Adam/Peter/Michael (MFA Graduate Colloquium, University of Maryland, 2010)
- 31** Lauren M./Mark/Lauren M. (MFA Graduate Colloquium, University of Maryland, 2013)
- 32** Mark/Janelle/Bahar (MFA Graduate Colloquium, University of Maryland, 2013)
- 33** Rob/Bahar/Patrick (MFA Graduate Colloquium, University of Maryland, 2013)
- 34** Bahar/Patrick/Janelle (MFA Graduate Colloquium, University of Maryland, 2013)
- 35** Rob/Bahar/Aydin (MFA Graduate Colloquium, University of Maryland, 2013)
- 36** Lauren L./Lauren M./Lauren L. (MFA Graduate Colloquium, University of Maryland, 2013)

Lucy Hogg's work as a painter was immersed in the history of painted images, in the service of a feminist critique. Her current photographic work is also dependent on the work of others, as she situates details of contemporary artists' production alongside more quotidian observations in domestic, natural, and architectural settings; an attempt at seeing how the components of art production and dissemination reflect the patterns of materiality in the larger world.

She currently lives in New York City, after having moved from Vancouver, Canada, where she taught full time at Emily Carr University from 1989–2003. From 2004–2013 she taught at the Corcoran Museum of Art and Design, University of Maryland, American University, and the Maryland Institute College of Art in graduate and undergraduate programs. Her work is included in the public collections of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Hirshhorn Museum, and the Confederation Centre Art Gallery (Prince Edward Island), among others. In addition to her art practice, she has written about other artists' work for catalogues and art publications, curated exhibitions for non-profit galleries and has published photos in *The Washington Post*, *The Daily Beast*, and *Newsweek* to accompany their arts coverage.

www.lucyhogg.com