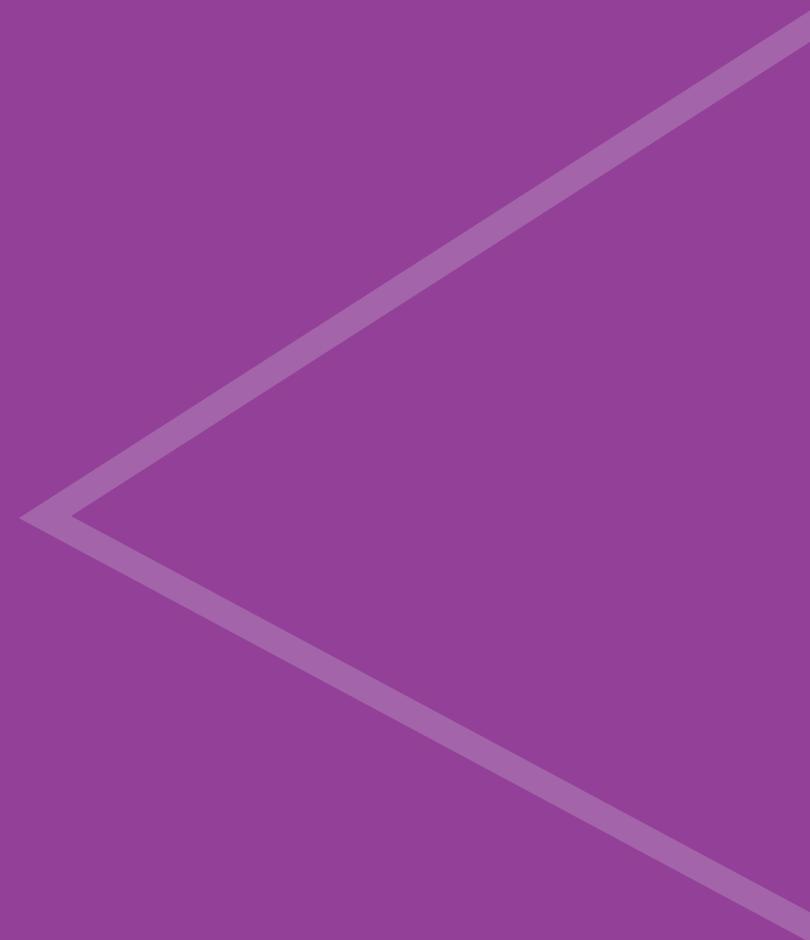




Where the Art Is

STATE OF THE ART AND
THE POWER OF PLACE



**Chad
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ASSISTANT
CURATOR



"It was so nice of you to come by. Now, who are you and what are you doing here?" Artist Catalina Delgado-Trunk's polite but probing question was a good one: my co-curator Don Bacigalupi and I had traveled hundreds of miles, from Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in the lush Ozark hills, to her doorstep in the high Albuquerque desert. We had come prepared with a hand-held video camera and digital voice recorder, as we had hundreds of times before in

other cities, along with a rigorous schedule of other artists to visit in the area. In her gracious and hospitable manner, Delgado-Trunk had already shepherded us through her lively home and studio, shown us her collection of Southwestern-inspired art, and unearthed numerous masterful examples of her own papel picado works before she thought, finally, to ask that question as we headed to the door. Indeed, what were we doing there?

Meeting artists face to face in the spaces where they create their work—the “studio visit,” in art-world lingo—can provide powerful insights, both through extended interaction with artists and through first-hand experience of their art. These insights, in turn, can radically inform how that work is presented and interpreted by institutions and ultimately received by its viewers. This conviction, which I share with Don Bacigalupi, motivated our extensive travels for *State of the Art: Discovering American Art Now*, a project that took us all over the United States to the studios of nearly 1,000 artists. The impulse to discovery emerged from our frustration at the prevailing idea of the American art world, which focuses on art production in urban centers such as New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles at the expense of the many other vital and dynamic contexts in which art is made across this country. Our process stemmed from our belief that working artists worthy of national attention form an integral part of communities everywhere, not just in the so-called capitals of the art world. Though curators often conduct studio visits to stay abreast of contemporary art currents, never has a curatorial team committed to so many visits across such a wide geographic sweep. The resulting exhibition showcases the astonishing spectrum of artwork being produced in studios across America at this very moment.

Although the sheer scope of the project breaks new ground, our research method of conducting in-person studio visits takes inspiration from a much earlier era of exhibition-making—and, of culture. In our current technology-mediated environment, instant availability, intuitive ease-of-use, and internet click-through rates rule the way we process and consume images and information. Twitter promises real-time musings in 140 characters or less.

Snapchat combines text and image into seamless, instantaneous bite-size messages. Instagram collapses location-based data and photographs into a single continuous feed. The mainstream art world eagerly mirrors the immediate gratification guaranteed by these forms of digital communication. Colorful abstract paintings and aesthetically-arranged piles of junk, some seemingly more beautiful and at home on a touchscreen than in the physical world, fill the galleries of SoHo and Chelsea, at once immediately recognizable as “arty” and totally forgettable as an experience. Mammoth, iconic sculptural installations take over abandoned warehouses and public squares, seemingly tailor-made for posting on social media but little else. Increasingly, an artwork’s complicity in the fast and furious secondary market, alongside its collusion with the digital-image economy, drives its popularity, price, and potential for inclusion in large shows of contemporary art. Curating naturally responds to such trends; as exhibition budgets tighten, curators increasingly rely on the digital image to provide them with the modes of discovery that were formerly rooted in real-space experience.

In privileging the space of the studio and the extended, real-life encounter with the art and artist, *State of the Art* seeks an alternative to this state of affairs. This exhibition argues that being there—where the art is—remains a vital and integral tool for the discovery and meaning-making inherent to the art experience. Further, as we found again and again on our travels, art still claims a power to transform space and to create local epicenters for the transmission of thought, feeling, and ideas. These locations—at times bound to brick-and-mortar buildings while at others completely contingent and shifting in physical space—in turn can trigger collaboration, development, and

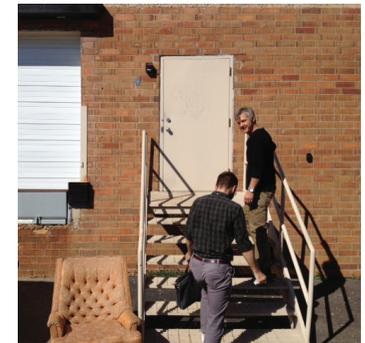
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perceptible change in local communities. Art, in short, wields real influence—an influence most fully experienced in person, in place, and in time. Bringing together these myriad studio visits through the art we experienced, the exhibition forms yet a new space for inquiry and discovery within (and without) the walls of Crystal Bridges' galleries. Like our in-person encounters with the art and artists included here, *State of the Art* must be seen to be believed.

Predicating our research process on the studio visit indicates a trust in the studio as a site of artistic production. The artist's studio, of course, occupies a peculiar place in the history of artists in the West. Tradition since the Renaissance has defined the artist's studio as a mysterious laboratory of artistic genius, a solitary space pregnant with the possibility of discovery through the sometimes agonized production of those privileged mediums: painting and sculpture. This mythologized view of the artist and his working practice emerged, at least in part, from the artists themselves: Leonardo da Vinci famously claimed that "the painter or draughtsman ought to be solitary....If you are alone you belong entirely to yourself."¹ The triumph of the work of art produced in the studio coincided with the triumph of the singular hand that brought it into being and, critically, the individual mind that conceived it. Later artists codified the importance of the studio by depicting it directly in their work. In the US, the image of the genius artist alone at work in the studio crystallized most tellingly in Hans Namuth's iconic photographs of Jackson Pollock, in which the artist adroitly dips, turns, and gesticulates while creating his drip-painted canvases.

After Pollock, however, the integrity of this heroic image began to degrade as artists increasingly looked outside of traditional studio space for sources of inspiration, innovation, and collaboration. In the 1960s, Andy Warhol's studio—called the Factory—enacted a collaborative enterprise with multiple non-artists assisting in his silk-screening painting process. Concurrently, Minimalist and Conceptual modes of artistic inquiry



de-emphasized the touch of the artist's hand—and, by extension, the primacy of the studio-based approach. In 1970, John Baldessari taught a now-legendary class at California Institute of the Arts titled "Post-Studio Art" consisting of contingent, unstructured assignments completed and documented outside of the studio—an apparent death knell for the studio as a relevant site for the production of art.

And yet, in recent years, a revival of attention to folk traditions, craft-based practices, and do-it-yourself approaches has, at least in part, precipitated renewed interest in the space of making. Everywhere on our travels, the concept of the studio persisted, from artists working in rural areas and small towns to those in more densely



populated urban centers. Notably, the studio as a site took many forms. Artists typically have specific needs that must be met on a limited budget; according to statistics compiled by the National Endowment for the Arts, median yearly wages for fine artists total nearly 14% less than the median of the US labor force as a whole.²

Given the limited resources at their disposal, artists often appropriate seemingly unlikely spaces to meet their needs. In their unlikelyness, however, these places can provide integral fodder and direction for the creation of the artists' work. In Minneapolis, for example, Chris Larson occupies the formerly vacant upper level of a mattress warehouse, where the high ceilings, ample space, and relative remoteness enabled the noisy and elaborate multi-room construction featured in his video *Heavy Rotation*. Or consider Isabella Kirkland: from her studio in a houseboat docked in a far-flung marina on San Francisco Bay, the artist paints minutely detailed renderings of innumerable animal species; her views of nature through the open doors at one end of the boat directly inspire the work. In his studio in a decommissioned church on the east side of San Antonio, Chris Sauter uses the left-behind pews and hymnals as material for his sculptural explorations of spirituality and science. Our initial trepidation on arrival at these locations—*"Can this really be the right place?"*—dissipated once the artists greeted us at the door (or the dock), welcoming us into their own unique spaces of creative work.

The studios came in as many varieties as the artists themselves. Some were littered with paint rags, half-empty beer bottles, and furious sketches, while others were diligently organized and immaculately clean. Some were situated in tiny attics thick with oppressive heat, while others were found in dank basements with low ceilings and cobwebbed corners. Many artists across this country, stymied by the expense and hassle of maintaining a separate place for art-making outside the home, instead carve out discrete parcels of their domestic space, setting up workstations in spare bedrooms abutting laundry hampers and long-forgotten home workout equipment. And some artists,

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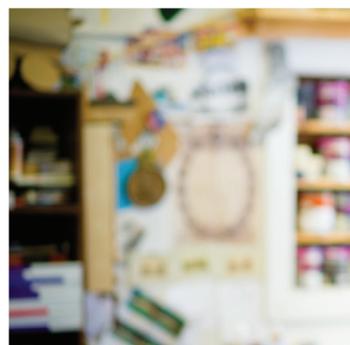
OPTION A

of the community, and seeing her remarkable sculptural works and the ARThouse in person—radically changed our perspective. Physically being there forced us to recognize the inherent potential for activism latent within her sculptural practice—a fact we could plainly have ignored in simply viewing the works online—and to face the real curatorial challenge of communicating that potential to our visitors within the space of the gallery. In this case, as it was in many others, our visit to the studio became a visit to a full and textured life, lived through creative inquiry, within the essential context of the local community.

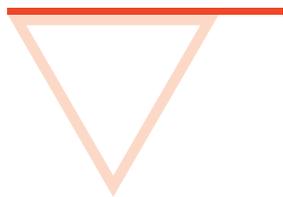
Other artists also demonstrated how they deploy their studio practice to specifically target social issues within their local communities. The Twin Cities-based team of Colin Kloecker and Shanai Matteson, working under the collaborative moniker Works Progress, strives to facilitate interaction and understanding within communities through public-facing art and design projects. Entering their shared studio felt more like entering a meeting space at a community center: many chairs surrounded a central grouping of well-worn tables arranged to facilitate conversation, while informative ephemera from previous projects sat in stacks waiting to be perused. In fact, their studio doubles as an event and meeting space for the collaborative projects they often manage. In their project *Neighbor Makers*, for example, Works Progress built wearable conversation tables from plywood and chalkboard paint that were designed to be shared by groups of two or more people at community events. Once worn, the tables facilitate collaboration and conversation by bringing people together and asking them to complete tasks on *Neighbor Maker* activity cards. Though Kloecker and Matteson's studio practice does sometimes result in the production of objects, these objects are the means to an end of facilitated social interaction, not an end in themselves. In place of da Vinci's isolated, individual triumph through the production of singular objects of aesthetic beauty, artists like Works Progress ultimately seek collaborative meaning-making outside the traditional physical parameters of the artistic studio.

Finally, some studios we visited weren't permanent physical spaces at all. Some artists complete the bulk of their creative work solely in the digital realm, realizing their projects in physical materials only when necessary, if at all. For these artists, the "studio" becomes any place they can find a comfy chair, a cup of coffee, and free, reliable Wi-Fi. Still others complete the bulk of





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their artistic research and making “in the field,” taking inspiration and literal material from the world at large. These non-permanent, yet no less real, manifestations of the studio recall Svetlana Alpers’s account of the contemporary artist’s “studio as a state of mind”⁴—a framework for approaching the work of being an artist unmoored from an actual physical site. Encountering that “state of mind” in person through the hundreds of studio visits we conducted formed the core of our research for this project. The one consistency among the studios of artists selected for *State of the Art* was the charged atmosphere of creative energy, the unmistakable feeling that we had encountered a space made for making.

Early on in our research process, we determined that the *State of the Art* exhibition would include artworks created since Crystal Bridges opened in 2011. This constraint on the date of creation serves a dual purpose: on the one hand, the exhibition represents a snapshot of American art production right now, reflecting the immediacy and time-sensitive nature of our studio visits. On the other, we sought to extend the story of American art and culture that already exists in the permanent collection at Crystal Bridges. From Martin Johnson Heade’s intimate depictions of the natural world to Asher B. Durand’s poignant reflection on friendship and loss to Nick Cave’s lively celebration of creativity and movement, the Crystal Bridges collection demonstrates themes that speak to a distinctly American point of view and the context in which each work was made. We visited the studios of American artists who make work that elaborates on similar narratives using innovative materials and methods. There is no better place to bring them together in conversation than the galleries of Crystal Bridges, where they can be viewed and understood in the context of the themes, narratives, and historical moments that underpin the cultural heritage of our country.

Our challenge as curators, then, was to harness the energy of that immediate, palpable encounter in the studio and communicate its vitality to our Museum guests. We hope to have achieved this by the considered juxtaposition of different works within the galleries, bringing artists from possibly radically different locales and contexts together to spark discussion and inquiry around similar (or emphatically different) themes, materials, and methods. As we traveled the country in our research, we endeavored always to remain open to the immediate encounter, not pursuing an overarching thematic agenda or thesis to be substantiated through the selection of work. This proved a difficult task, especially near the end of our travels, as certain commonalities and resonances had already naturally emerged among groups of artists and works. Further, in a reflection of our studio visits, we have included the voice of the artist—which we recorded in each visit along the way—as one potential source for meaning-making; you will find portions of our transcribed studio interviews in this catalog.

When Catalina Delgado-Trunk, standing in her foyer bidding us goodbye, asked us what we were doing there, I’m sure that we explained our journey up until that point, told her all about the Museum, and laid out the timeline and purpose for the exhibition. But, just as truthfully, we could have said, “We’re here because you’re here; we’re here because this is where the art is.” This project, at every turn, has been a monumental challenge to get beyond the comfort of what we know, to try to see beyond the received wisdom of contemporary critical discourse, to explore and endeavor to understand the vibrant local contexts in which contemporary American art is made. To face that challenge, we had to be there, physically and experientially, in the presence of the art and the artists. Through the exhibition and this catalog, we now share that challenge with you. Be here. Bring your curiosity and your wonder. Be here in the present time and space. Be here, with open hearts and minds—this is where the art is.

¹ Leonardo da Vinci, *Leonardo da Vinci’s note-books* (New York: Scribner, 1906), 166.

² National Endowment for the Arts, *NEA Research Note #105: Artists and Art Workers in the United States: Findings from the American Community Survey (2005-2009) and the Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (2010)* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2011), 10.

³ Lenka Clayton, “Artist’s Statement,” *Artist Residency in Motherhood*, Accessed June 27, 2014, <http://residencyinmotherhood.com/about-the-artist-residency/>.

⁴ Svetlana Alpers, *The Vexations of Art: Velazquez and Others* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 44.

p 24 Lenka Clayton, *63 Objects Taken Out of My Son’s Mouth*, 2013, acorn, bolt, bubblegum, buttons, carbon paper, chalk, Christmas decoration, cigarette butt, coins (GBP, USD, EURO), cotton reel, holly leaf, little wooden man, sharp metal pieces, metro ticket, nuts, plastic “O”, polystyrene, rat poison (missing), seeds, slide, small rocks, specimen vial, sponge animal, sticks, teabag, wire caps, wooden block, 30 x 36 x 36 in. overall.

p 25 Isabella Kirkland, *Emergent*, 2011, oil and alkyd on polyester over panel, 60 x 48 in.

p 26 Vanessa German, *White Naptha Soap or, Contemporary Lessons in Shapeshifting*, 2013, mixed media assemblage, 55 x 15 x 26 in.