

# Bottled Magic: Photographing Artists in Their Studios

BY LAURA GRENNING



For 17 years now, I have been lucky to have a job that requires me to visit artists' studios in Florence. Each and every year, I find myself mesmerized by the strong link between an artist, his or her space, and the artworks that emerge from their symbiotic relationship. Whether it is the extra bedroom in an apartment, an old factory with vaulted ceilings and free-standing walls, or an entire farm, a studio inevitably reflects the soul of the artist who inhabits it.

When I hang a show of luscious studio interiors painted by Ramiro (b. 1974), rich with the deep reds and browns of his Oriental rugs and brick-colored walls, I am instantly transported back to his quiet, intellectually charged studio — even while I am adjusting bright electric lights on my gray gallery walls. Gazing at one of his paintings for years to come, I will always be able to hear the Bach concerto that was playing on the stereo and taste the delicious coffee we sipped when Ramiro originally showed that work to me.

Not surprisingly, I have always wanted to somehow bottle the feelings I get from being in these sacred workspaces. Early last year, when I was delivering one of Ramiro's portrait commissions to a dear collector friend on Long Island, a chance encounter led to the realization of my dream, and to the creation of the evocative photographs illustrated here.

The photograph of Ben Fenske (b. 1978) sitting in the kitchen of his Chianti farmhouse is one of my favorites. The light streaming through the door, the work gloves hanging over his shoulder, and the lumberjack boots are details that perfectly distill the essence of this brilliant, hard-working artist. This image reflects Fenske's diligent adherence to his process, which is focused solely on capturing light effects, regardless of subject. His practical nature is revealed in this shot, since the kitchen is both his studio for still lifes and the subject of many paintings. Patrizia Genovesi also took several pictures of Fenske outdoors — his primary studio since he paints *en plein air* year-round.





With light pouring down on him, Nelson H. White (b. 1932) stands proudly before an Olympian plaster that hints at his own Herculean energy. Patrizia Genovesi's decision to shoot this crisp, organized portrait from below deftly underscores the respect that White commands as the senior artist working at the Florence Academy of Art. Descended from a long line of New England artists and art historians, White is an important link to early 20th-century American art, and he generously shares his firsthand stories with younger colleagues. The photograph at right shows White contemplating his female model, who is posed before his own landscape painting. Visible between them is another artist's sightsize exercise, a technical challenge White has also mastered.

At dinner with the collector and her friends on the night the portrait was unveiled, I happened to sit beside a Roman financier. He was very curious about this painting, the artist, and the whole creative process. I explained that Ramiro is part of a group in Florence who work only from life, and who paint only in natural light. The Roman's face lit up with a smile and he started to tell me about his wife at home. She is the fine art photographer Patrizia Genovesi (b. 1962), and also the person who created these portraits of five painters associated with my gallery.

On my way to their studios last April, I decided to fly through Rome to meet Genovesi and see her art in person. Having worked as a professional photographer for the last 30 years, she showed me many fine images, but I was most impressed with her recent photographs of Nobel Prize laureates. On that sunny day in Rome, I realized I had finally found someone who would do justice to capturing the beauty and importance of my artist friends in their studios. What closed the deal was the realization that Genovesi, just like these painters, uses only



Patrizia Genovesi captured the Norwegian-born artist Hege Elisabeth Haugen (b. 1979) with her wistful yet intense self-portraits standing guard. Somehow these permanent records of her sensitive soul seem to prop up Haugen's physical self in her spartan studio.



Patrizia Genovesi hits her mark by showing Venezuelan-born Ramiro as he explains something in his animated way. Another photograph, of Ramiro at work, evokes the tone of his paintings, replete with mystery, energy, balance, design, and action.

natural light. Moreover, she only shoots her subjects while they are going about their daily lives, not posed in unfamiliar settings. Indeed, Genovesi studied with no less than Leonard Freed and Richard Kalvar at Magnum Photos, where she learned to take fine art photographs with a journalistic honesty.

During my studio visits in Florence, I asked each artist if he or she would allow Genovesi to spend most of a day there. Sometimes circumspectly, all of them agreed; a month after I left Florence, Genovesi arrived there and miraculously “bottled” the magic I had been experiencing for years. Her curious and refined eye has captured the essence of each painter, without any prompting from me.

In Genovesi’s words, “When I met these great painters and was wondering how to photograph them, I couldn’t help but feel that, in a very profound and genuine sense, an artist ‘is’ his work, and that his work is a part of him. Therefore I aimed at obtaining pictures in which the painters would merge with their working environments in tone, and in a consistently well-defined atmosphere, where they would not simply appear as the principal subjects of the composition, but rather as integral parts of it. I wanted to visually express the fact that their work is not just surrounding them, but is actually something that flows from them. At the same time, I understood that the pictures must be consistent with the kind of art the painters made: I used color palettes similar to theirs, used the light they work in (nothing artificial), and even mirrored some of their subjects — still life compositions recalling their set-ups, portraits inspired by their own self-portraits, and country landscapes similar to those they paint.”

Born in England, quiet, organized, and strong, Melissa Franklin Sanchez (b. 1984) sits comfortably surrounded by her elements of interest. Patrizia Genovesi deftly juxtaposes the artist with her painted self-portrait, visible on the easel at right.



As we admire Genovesi’s photographs of painters who study nature and themselves as energetically as she does, we participate in the beautiful circle of human curiosity and the seeking after truth. ■

LAURA GRENNING founded *Grenning Gallery* on Long Island in 1997, and recently expanded it to Wellington, Florida. Previously, she worked in finance in both New York City and Hong Kong, then studied briefly at the Florence Academy of Art. A collector herself, Grenning also works as an art consultant and represents Patrizia Genovesi in the U.S.

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