

## Close Reading

# Just Like Courbet's. Except for a Few Tiny Details.

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AN artist's life is supposed to be riddled with isolation and despair, but for the multimedia artist Tony Oursler, inspired ideas are sparked by thoughtful collaborations. So, when the Musée d'Orsay in Paris invited him to create a work in response to any painting in its collection last year, Mr. Oursler's wife, Jacqueline Humphries, an accomplished painter in her own right, suggested that he take a look at Courbet's 1855 masterwork, "The Artist's Studio: A Real Allegory of a Seven-Year Phase in My Artistic and Moral Life."



[CAPTION: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource  
"The Artist's Studio," the 1855 painting by Courbet, and a  
creative springboard today.]

Mr. Oursler was immediately struck by the scale and intricacies of Courbet's crowded studioscape, peopled by supporters and patrons on one side of the canvas and caricatures of political leaders on the opposite end of the studio. He went to work on his own mythological version of his working-environment, a 21st-century studio filled with projectors, computers and surveillance cameras, and invited friends, colleagues, supporters and his dealer to make guest appearances in his piece.

When Gary Tinterow, head of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's new department of 19th-century, modern and contemporary art, saw Mr. Oursler's installation at the Musée d'Orsay museum in Paris, he immediately invited him to bring it to the Met, where a revamped version is on view through Sept. 18, called "Studio: Seven Months of My Aesthetic Education (Plus Some)." With a reproduction of the Courbet on one wall, it is easy to compare and contrast the two artists' very different approaches to the classic subject of the studio.

Courbet takes a decidedly egocentric view - the painter is at the center of the canvas, overseen by an adoring female model - whereas Mr. Oursler shares the stage with a community of people who in one way or another have contributed to his art production. Despite the obvious differences in philosophy, temperament and medium, however, Mr. Oursler manages to convey the spirit and complexity of the 19th-century painting, using multiple video projections and borrowing artworks from a score of colleagues to construct an equally rich social environment.



Metropolitan Museum of Art

**PENITENTO**

The installation compresses decades of Mr. Oursler's aesthetic education into a single stage set by incorporating works by artists from every phase of his development. The far left wall is covered by a mural-size canvas, "Skrik," painted by Kaare Rafoss, a community college teacher who encouraged Mr. Oursler to apply to Cal Arts in 1975. Across the room, to the far right, is a portrait of the artist's mother painted by his great-aunt Zita Mellon in 1954.

**THE BOY**

In lieu of the admiring boy in Courbet's painting, mesmerized by the artist's work, Mr. Oursler offers a video of his son, Jack, chewing away at the camera lens, displayed on a monitor toward the rear of the left side of his installation.

**THE FLOOR**

To hide the wires from myriad video projections and monitors on view, the Met built a false floor from plywood, replicating the flooring in Mr. Oursler's studio. Installed on a diagonal, the floor was inspired by a design by the architect Rem Koolhaas, who invited Mr. Oursler to contribute an installation to one of his own exhibitions in 2003. Models by the architect are found on the floor between the video projection and the green blob.

**THE ARTIST**

Mr. Oursler appears not as a dashing bohemian but as an acidic green blob covered with eyes that blink, stare and peer at approaching viewers. The anthropomorphic fiberglass form, titled "Jeloid," seems alive, thanks to the magic of the artist's video projections.

**THE WINDOW**

Joshua Thorson's "Omega-Lomania," an acrylic painting on plexiglass, covers an actual window at the Met that fortuitously is in more or less the same spot as a window in Courbet's original. Mr. Thorson, a fabricator in Mr. Oursler's studio, is one of several assistants to the artist who are featured in the installation, including Scarlett Hooft Graafland and Jesse Hamerman.

**THE MUSE**

Standing in for the adoring nude in Courbet's painting is "Cold Call," a fluorescent painting on a light box by the artist's wife, Jacqueline Humphries — a far more influential type of muse.

**THE EASEL**

In his atelier, Courbet depicts himself as a master of concentration, ignoring the many people there so he can finish a hyper-realistic painting of a landscape. In contrast, Mr. Oursler filled his canvas — technically a vertical screen at the center of the installation — with a video loop of some of his favorite people and influences, ranging from John Baldessari (with whom he studied at Cal Arts in the late 1970's) to Janelle Reiring, co-owner of Metro Pictures, which has represented his work since 1994.