San Francisco Nova, 1979



Robert Bechtle has been a seminal force in the development of the Photo Realist approach to representational painting, one which presents a relentlessly factual depiction of a subject that has been first photographically recorded, then painstakingly translated into paint on canvas. Bechtle began painting directly from the photograph in the early 60s as an alternative to the personal expressionism of the Bay Area Figurative tradition. As in the work of other Photo Realists--Richard Estes, Ralph Goings, Richard McLean, among others --Bechtle's paintings depict typical images of the modern American landscape with a cool, almost dispassionate photographic precision. "I try to avoid composing too much," states Bechtle, "trying instead for a kind of 'real estate photo' look ... I try for a kind of neutrality or transparency of style that minimizes any artfulness that might prevent the viewer from responding directly to the subject matter. I would like someone looking at the picture to have to deal with the subject without any clues as to just what his reaction should be." (Robert Bechtle: A Retrospective Exhibition, Sacramento: E.B. Crocker Art Gallery, 1973).

Since the camera's invention, photographs have served as stimuli and ancillary source material for painters. The photographic image, however, has never been as unabashedly integrated into the painting process as it has been in the paintings of the Photo Realists. The photograph does not just allow Bechtle and his contemporaries to represent the world with new precision, it motivates

them to see it in a different way, challenging them to manipulate new visual information provided by the camera's merciless consumption of facts.

For the Photo Realist, the photograph both creates new subject matter and becomes a subject itself. In documenting their environment through the intermediary use of photography, these artists are also documenting our primary means of documentation, recognizing the fact that photographs have, to a considerable extent, intervened between us and our direct experience of reality. The cool character of Photo Realist imagery reflects a kind of photographic existentialism; a desire to move away from an idealized interpretation of the world in favor of simply presenting the facts. Given the pedestrian character of their subject matter, it is this very factualness that at times makes Photo Realist paintings difficult to look at.

Robert Bechtle's subjects-manicured suburban lawns. undistinguished stucco homes, backyard Bar B-Q's, parking lots and parked cars, all basking in an unrelenting California sunshine--are oddly impenetrable. What he singles out for attention are not exotic curiosities, but something rarer: the complexion of a scene we fail to notice because the objects in it are too familiar. If, on the other hand, we find them cruelly typical, it is perhaps because we are unwilling to accept the reality we have made for ourselves. As Linda Chase has aptly pointed out, "Photo Realism is an art which joys in cutting through pretenses. In presenting us with their

lovingly rendered bits of trashy reality, they are not only forcing us to confront the ubiquity of these images, they are forcing us to ask ourselves if we really are as affronted as we like to seem. We do after all build these places. We live in and among them. We buy the cars and the hamburgers." ("Photo Realism: Post Modernist Illusionism," Art International, March/April '76).

There is, however, a subtle

humanism to Bechtle's subjects that separates them from the harsher and often more satirical styles of other artists working within this genre. Almost all of Bechtle's paintings depict people or places intimately a part of his life--growing up and then settling in a suburban Bay Area neighborhood: '60 T-Bird presents a bland stucco facade from Bechtle's old neighborhood and the artist's brother caught in a regal pose next to his parked Thunderbird; Watsonville Chairs captures the artist's father-in-law enjoying a sunny day on his backyard deck; Stinson Beach Cookout depicts a get together with old friends. While such information is peripheral to our appreciation of the paintings, it nonetheless points out that Bechtle's viewpoint is not that of a critical outsider somehow removed from the everyday world his paintings represent. Bechtle: "The sunlit sameness of those streets in Alameda and Oakland suddenly seemed important to me, and they provided a motif that no one else was using... My interest in these subjects has nothing to do with satire or social comment as some people have supposed. I paint them

because they are a part of what I know and as such I have an affection for them; I am interested in their commonness and in the challenge of making art from such ordinary fare."

(Op. cit.).

Accepted in all their banality, however, Bechtle's subjects are transformed by a subtle sense of composition, color and surface that is the domain of painting alone. While taking advantage of the photograph's unique qualities, Bechtle also points out the aesthetic limitations of that medium. The soft, feathery brushstroke he layers on his canvases to modulate the effect of light on objects and atmosphere give what appears to be an interior luminosity to the seemingly antiseptic suburban neighborhoods he paints. It is difficult to think of any contemporary photographer or painter who has captured with such eloquence and integrity the visual essence of car paint reflections or stucco walls hit by long light.

Bechtle's paintings are alive with contradictory forces. His paintings reflect the casual immediacy of a snap shot, yet have a painterly individuality that transcends the photographic and is the result of months of work. As observer, he is fascinated by and personally involved in what he sees, but remains objective about recording it. Bechtle's approach is perhaps best described as one of involved neutrality. Sensitive, but unsentimental, his depictions of suburban California offer a contemporary parallel to Vermeer's insightful renderings of Dutch middleclass life.

Michael Auping Associate Curator Robert Bechtle was born in San Francisco in 1923. He studied art at the California College of Arts and Crafts (B.A. 1954, M.F.A. 1958) and education and literature at the University of California, Berkeley (1960-61). He has taught art at the University of California, Berkeley and Davis and has been Associate Professor of Art at San Francisco State University since 1968. Robert Bechtle lives in Berkeley, California.

Works in MATRIX:

San Francisco Nova, 1979, oil on canvas, 48" x 69". Lent by the San Francisco Art Commission.

Stinson Beach Cookout, 1979, oil on canvas, 48" x 69".
Lent by O. K. Harris Works of Art, New York.

Gran Torino, 1974, oil on canvas, 48" x 69". Lent by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

'60 T-Bird, 1968, oil on canvas, 72" x 96". Collection University Art Museum, Berkeley.

Warm Springs Patio, 1979, watercolor, 10" x 14". Lent by the John Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco.

Ingleside House, 1975,
watercolor, 8" x 11". Lent
by the Oakland Museum of Art.

Watsonville Chairs, 1975, watercolor, 10" x 14". Lent by the artist.

Newstands, 1973, watercolor, 10" x 14". Lent by the artist.

'60 T-Bird, 1968, watercolor, 10" x 14". Lent by John Berggruen, San Francisco.

Selected one-person exhibitions:
San Francisco Museum of Art,
'59 & '64; Berkeley Gallery,
'65; Richmond Art Center, CA
'65; E. B. Crocker Art Gallery,
Sacramento, CA '66; UC Davis,
'67; San Francisco Museum of
Art '67; Achenbach Foundation

for Graphic Arts, San
Francisco '69; O. K. Harris
Gallery, NYC '71; Crocker
Art Gallery, Sacramento, CA
'73; O. K. Harris Glalery,
NYC '74 & '76.

Selected group exhibitions:
San Francisco Art Institute,
East Bay Realists, '66;
Whitney Museum, NYC, American
Painting 1967, '67; Vassar
College, Poughkeepsie, NY,
Realism Now, '68; Milwaukee
Art Center, WI, '69; Whitney
Museum, NYC, 22 Realists, '70;
Museum of Contemporary Art,
Chicago, Radical Realism, '71;
Kassel, West Germany,
Documenta 5, '72.

Selected bibliography about Bechtle:

O'Doherty, Brian. "Robert Bechtle: Interview," Art in America, vol. 60 (Nov./Dec. 172) pp. 73-74.

Seitz, William. "The Real and the Artificial," Art in America, vol. 60 (Nov./Dec. 172) pp. 58-61

McKillip, Susan. Robert

Bechtle: A Retrospective

Exhibition (Sacramento: E.B.

Crocker Art Gallery '73).

Battcock, Gregory, Super Realism: A Critical Anthology (New York: E. P. Dutton '75).

Chase, Linda. "Photo
Realism: Post-Modernist
Illusionism," Art International,
vol. 20 (March/April '76) pp.
15-17.

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