

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Glen Helfand, "Robert Bechtle," *Artforum*, September 2005, p. 310-311.



Robert Bechtle, *Watsonville Olympia*, 1977, oil on canvas, 46 x 69".

SAN FRANCISCO

ROBERT BECHTLE

SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM
OF MODERN ART

The midday sun beats down mercilessly in Robert Bechtle's signature 1960s Photorealist canvases of solitary American cars sitting on the hot asphalt alongside California stucco homes or in empty parking lots. It's a clean, hard light that Bechtle renders with uncanny veracity. This illumination even seems to brighten his interior scenes such as *Xmas in Gilroy*, 1971, a painting of three women in a nondescript living room. The flash blurs the faces, which belong to the artist's relations, but there is no doubt that the scene is a generic American family function. It is difficult to see, yet somehow already familiar.

One of the pleasurable revelations of this expansive exhibition was how it revealed subtle shifts in light and perspective taking place over a four-decade oeuvre focused on a singular milieu. Even in the Bay Area, where Bechtle has lived, worked, and taught his whole life, his art hasn't been exhibited in depth since 1973. While *Alameda Gran Torino*, 1974, a painting of a green, faux-woodgrain-sided station wagon, is an often-displayed highlight of SF MOMA's permanent collection (and a work that Charles Ray, in the show's catalogue, cites as one of his three all-time favorites), there's been little opportunity to see most of the more than one hundred other oils, watercolors, drawings, photographs, and supplementary artifacts featured here. These lesser-known works (and others in a separate show of prints at Crown Point Press that complemented the retrospective) often bring to mind Ed Ruscha's classic photo books and Gerhard Richter's realist paintings: Each artist adds rich ambivalence to visions of middle-class banality.

There is both glory and ennui in Bechtle's empty, isolated vehicles, and in works like *Fosters Freeze Alameda*, 1970, in which his first wife and young children sit solemnly eating ice cream. The older works resonate with nostalgia for the styles of the '70s, yet few feel dated, tempered as they are by graphic and psychological complexity. Still, there's a wry edge to works such as *Watsonville Olympia*, 1977, a portrait of a woman in a T-shirt, short shorts, and big round sunglasses in a meticulously landscaped backyard, holding an Olympia-brand beer. She stands alone but smiles gleefully, and her expression invokes a very particular relationship between artist and model—she is clearly posing for a family photograph, not a painting.

The confusion between art and life suggested in *Watsonville Olympia* is another provocative element of a show with a clear autobiographical bent. Though the faces mature, the locations change, and the light shifts, this is work by an artist candidly picturing environments that are particular to his life. The sequence of the exhibition is chronological, though there tends to be thematic unity in the artist's particular focus at any given moment, and self-portraits appear with more regularity at the beginning and end of the show. The first, formative works are moody interiors and self-portraits in bathroom and bedroom mirrors that reflect the painter's perennially bearded face. In more recent images, like *RB on De Haro Street*, 2004, a charcoal night interior, Bechtle looks forward with earnestness. It's a darker vision, yet one communicated with the same clarity that distinguished this retrospective as a whole.

—Glen Helfand