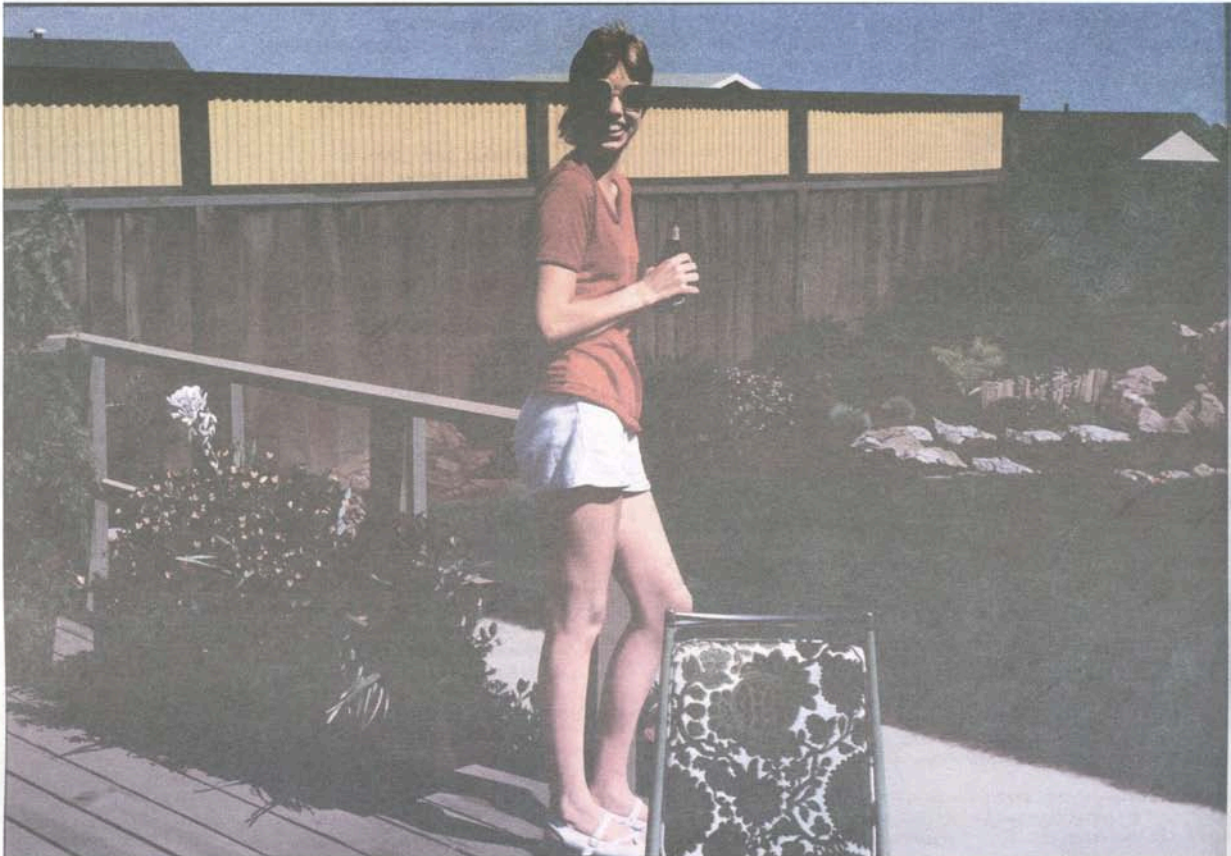


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John Held, Jr., "Robert Bechtle," *SFAQ*, Fall 2013, Issue 14, p. 40-47.

ROBERT BECHTLE

Interviewed by JOHN HELD, JR.



"Watsonville Olympia" 1977. Oil on canvas; 48 x 69 in. Collection SFMOMA; Accessions Committee Fund purchase; © Robert Bechtle.

Bob Bechtle and I have been acquainted for the past fifteen or so years through our mutual participation in Tom Marioni's weekly "meetings" of the Society of Independent Artists. Just as he relates in the following conversation, conducted at his home/studio in Potrero Hill, that he was intimidated by the elder Robert Diebenkorn, I've equally been in awe of Bechtle all these years, finding it awkward to inquire of him the many facets of his life I find so intriguing. The occasion of this interview gave me the opportunity to put forth some of the questions I'd held in reserve. Having completed an article on Diebenkorn in the previous issue of *San Francisco Arts Quarterly*, it seems more than appropriate to follow it with this interrogation of Bechtle, who so notably followed the progression of Bay Area Figuration with his own distinguished brand of Realism.

You came of age during mid-century when you entered the California College of Arts and Crafts, as it was called at that time, now the California College of Art, and as opposed to other families of emerging artists, your mother and siblings seemed all for your stepping into the art world.

They were very encouraging. They didn't know what it meant. I didn't know what it meant. You gradually learn as you go along. From the outside I think a lot of parents think it's great that their children have talents and can be an artist or musician, but to follow through and deal with the reality of it is sometimes more difficult. My dad died when I was twelve, and so all the potential opposition that might have come from that direction didn't. Sometimes I think about that – what difference that might have made on my potential career tract.

You were leaning towards art in high school and were on the yearbook committee. The family had bought you an easel. You won a National Scholastic

magazine scholarship that enabled you to go to your first year at California College of the Arts and Crafts.

(laughs) You've done your homework. Actually, I was interested in art, painting and drawing as a kid. I did drawings of current automobiles in the 1930s. It was always sort of amazing to the family that they could look and tell what year it was – this is a '36 Ford – this is a '37 Ford, and so on. As I got older, going into the 7th grade, 8th grade, and so on, I was interested in art enough to spend a lot of time at the library going through the art book collection. Actually, the Alameda Public Library had a fairly decent library of art books. I identified with stories of artists like Giotto. My vision of being an artist was to be a painter like the Renaissance painters. Gradually, I got interested in more contemporary art, but I didn't really start being attracted to modern art, abstract art, until I was at CCAC.

One of your teachers there was a Mr. Lederer. You said in a previous interview that you weren't so much influenced by the technique he taught you at the time, as what it meant to be an artist. But you never explained that fully, and I wondered what was your first exposure after Alameda and high school to the art world?

Well, Lederer came later. Wolfgang Lederer was the head of the design program, and I think I was a junior by the time I took my first class with him. What he stressed was the process that made sense for doing graphic design, which involved doing a lot of scribbles, thumbnail sketches of ideas for solving a particular design problem when submitting these in class. His procedure would be that you would show him a bunch of sketches for the project, and then he would ask questions and make suggestions, and had you do more sketches. But the whole point was that you made a lot of studies. You didn't just do one solution to the question of

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"Alameda Gran Torino" 1974. Oil on canvas; 48 x 69 in. Collection SFMOMA; T.B. Walker Foundation Fund purchase in honor of John Humphrey; © Robert Bechtle.

the visual problem, but a lot of possible answers, knowing there were always more possibilities out there, and that eventually choosing one didn't necessarily mean that the one you choose was better than any of the others. It's just that you eventually choose to develop. I found that extremely useful as an attitude. There are elements of it that are still part of my working process, in that I tend often to revisit images that I've used before to see if I can change something, crop differently, or find that there's more than one work possible from that particular image.

You've mentioned in previous interviews as well, that during this time period, there was a marionette project where you worked with a group of students, and it was the first time you started drinking beer and getting into the artistic life.

Yeah, that's true. (laughs) It was weird. From my freshman year on I had a student job working in the supply shop, which was in the same building on campus that also contained a stage and little theater. Over the course of one summer, probably my first summer there, I was working every day doing inventory and that sort of thing, and there was a bunch of students who were taking a course from a man named Ralph Cornell Seigle, a person who was interested in show biz type of stuff. And there was a class on puppet making, marionette making, and they decided to do a play, so they got together and Clay Pinkerton wrote the music and the play. When they decided to actually produce this thing, they needed puppeteers, so they came down and asked me if I would be interested in being a puppeteer, and I said sure why not (laughs). It was sort of an entree to Bay Area art student life.

Because previous to this you had aspirations as a commercial artist.

Yeah, to the extent that I knew what that meant. I was majoring in commercial art because

it seemed practical to learn those skills. So, the puppet thing didn't fit into it in any way. I was up for any number of different projects or course directions. The program at CCAC was set up so that the lower division classes were taken in common by everyone, regardless of what their major was. You didn't start to specialize until the end of your second year. So, puppeteering seemed like an interesting thing to try, and I had gotten to know several people involved in the class project from being around in the supply shop. I remember a number of parties over somebody's house in Sausalito that seemed quite magical. The school had a war surplus truck that was kind of an all purpose workhorse, and one of the guys involved with the marionette show had a key to it, which he had probably copied at some point. He would take the school truck, and on a couple of occasions we would go over to Stinson Beach arriving around midnight and camping out, and so on. It was a lot of fun. We did stuff like that in high school occasionally, but mostly middle-class Alameda was pretty straightforward.

This is around 1950, 1952, and as you say, you grew up in Alameda. At the same time, there was a lot going on at the California School of Fine Art, now the Art Institute, with well known Abstract Expressionist painters teaching there, but it seems to me that you didn't give too much thought to straying too far from Alameda. Did you ever give the California School of Fine Arts a thought?

Oh, yeah. I was getting what I considered all new information at CCAC. The School of Fine Arts was on my list of places to go if I hadn't gotten the scholarship to CCAC. I listed CCAC first, the School of Fine Arts second and Berkeley third. I was accepted at CCAC, so I went there. I put it at number one because it was closest. I was tied to Alameda. I used to go to Berkeley periodically, but Berkeley was our big athletic rival, so sometimes going to Berkeley meant going to football games - high school stuff. Once at CCAC, there was a lot of faculty

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"Late Afternoon - Albany, California", 2009. Watercolor on paper 10 x 14 inches (25.4 x 35.6 cm). © Robert Bechtle. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

At this time, Bob, you did pass the committee and graduate, and you decided to go to Europe again. And from the accounts I've read, you would sit in cafés – it was a loose period, you weren't in the Army anymore, you were on your own, going to museums – and would sit and draw what was on the table.
That's true.

It was the beginning of dealing with everyday objects, painting in a realistic way, predominantly with watercolors, I believe.

In the beginning of the trip, I was using a medium that I had gotten used to working with, in which I used pastel sticks, not the soft ones, slightly harder ones, similar to chalks that commercial artists use. I scribbled down color in a very rough way with the chalks, and then would take a brush with water and start smearing them together – the powder of the chalk would move around for you – and then I would paint into that with white gouache poster paint. The pastel would transform it into tints of pink, purple, gray and so on. At first it was kind of freewheeling, but as I used it, I began to achieve a fair amount of control over it. At the same time, I was sort of realizing that the sketchbooks were just for me, and they weren't supposed to be art in a public sense, and therefore, I could do whatever I wanted. I started slowing it all down – not using the marking system of the Bay Area Figurative artists – and took up the challenge of painting what I was seeing. In some cases it was objects on a table, or objects in a hotel room, the view out of a window, that sort of thing, but in other cases, I would just work outside – sit on a riverbank and paint the landscape. I began to think of them as my postcards from Europe, and they became increasingly accurate the way they looked. When I got back to the States and started painting in the studio, I got very interested very quickly in the idea of trying to paint accurately what I was seeing just to see if I could do it. Always in the back of my head, was the feeling at some point I was going to stop this – this academic stuff – and become a modern artist and maybe go back to abstraction, or something like that. But it never happened. I began to see possibilities in what was going on, and it kept luring me in.

In addition to the Diebenkorn connection and the beginning of your teaching career in graduate school, you met your first wife, Nancy, and married her after returning from Europe. You began using her as a subject, and this is where the sharp focus realism started coming into play.

The paintings that I was doing at that point, 1963-1964, were painted largely from life, from observation, and they were fairly rough but definitely based on looking carefully. I was trying to figure out how to do it, since we never really got taught that in art school. We did a lot of drawing. I had many semesters of figure drawing, etc., but the idea of sitting down and making a real painting that was meant to be shown as a painting, and do it in this old fashioned way, never occurred.

When you were going to school in the late fifties, realism in American painting had come to mean...

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Thomas Hart Benton, the Regionalist School – which went out of fashion after the Abstract Expressionists arrived. It was old school, but there was one realist, Edward Hopper, that did have an effect on Diebenkorn and on yourself as well, I believe.

Although, I didn't pay much attention to Hopper at that stage, but I always liked his work. I remember seeing it in grade school.

Were there any other Realists that caught your fancy at this time?

In a funny way, the French painter Vuillard, who was best known for doing very simplified domestic interiors with all the patterns, women sewing and whatever. He did unfashionable realist paintings in the 1920s. I had never seen them before. I saw them in Paris. There was one really wonderful one of a dentist operating on a patient. The dentist was a friend of his. He did several versions of that. There was a whole series of paintings and drawings that he did. They had a wonderful light touch, very convincing but not photographic. That sort of spun my head around when I saw them around the same time as I saw Vermeer. All of a sudden I made connections that were very useful to me. I think as late as the mid or even late sixties, there was still a split in the art world between abstract art and figurative art, not necessarily just realism but figuration. It's sort of a non-issue now. No one gives a damn whether it's realist or abstract. But that made it seem slightly old fashioned to be working realistically. It was wide open in the sense that there wasn't an established process for doing it anymore. The techniques of realism from the twenties and the thirties, the way they would

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that lived in Berkeley. There was much more reason to go, and so Berkeley became the main socializing area in the early 50s. We'd go to San Francisco periodically, usually on weekends – go over to museums and have dinner in Chinatown, Fisherman's Wharf... favorite haunts of tourists.

You were beginning to branch out, going beyond the confines of Alameda, and when you graduated from your undergraduate coursework at CCAC you entered the Army and had an opportunity to travel to Europe.

It gave me an opportunity (laughs) - three square meals and a place to sleep. Yeah, I had a couple of boat rides. The period from 1950, starting in the fall at CCAC and graduating four years later was a great transformation in terms of knowing what I wanted to do. I was still committed to the commercial art path, but I really was much more interested in painting. I was basically a hobby painter. I went through school on deferments, and I could have applied to graduate school and probably got another couple of deferments and got my MFA, but I was tired of the idea of being a student and going to school, and I figured the Army was going to get me anyway. There was no reason to escape to Canada at that time period. You didn't think in those terms. You just did it. The shooting war in Korea had stopped. The armistice had taken effect. I fully expected to be in the infantry sitting in the hills in Korea near the DMZ. But the company that I trained with at Fort Ord was sent as replacements to Berlin. I had a year and a half of being stationed in Berlin, which was a great eye opener. I always wanted to go to Europe, and the army was kind enough to send me there.

Were you sketching while you were there?

To some degree. Mostly when you're in the Army, you just want to escape and go to bars and drink beer.

But you did a mural project while you were over there.

I did do some art. I was in a Line Infantry Company. Technically I was a rifleman, but I managed to be the Company mail clerk. Every Saturday morning there was an information meeting when the Company commander would talk to the troops. But there was always a training aids person who was assigned to those meetings, and I got stuck with that job. Being in Berlin was wonderful. It's a very interesting city. At that time, 1950's, it was still very close to the end of the war – the Berlin airlift. There were still vast areas of the city that had scars from battles. There was a kind of melancholy to it that is part of the flavor of the city. Part of it had to do with remnants of the war. I was fascinated by this and did sketches of some of the destroyed architecture.

...and visited museums as well.

Most of the museums, famous museums in Berlin, were in the East. The East was not exactly off limits, but they didn't encourage you to go over there. It was interesting in a negative way to go over there. The idea of going over there and seeing the museums wasn't too appealing, but one of the museums was in West Berlin, the American sector, that had a number of famous works like the Nefertiti headdress, Rembrandt's "Man with a Golden Helmet" – apparently it wasn't really a Rembrandt, but we thought it was at the time. There was a museum of modern art in the British sector, which was kind of interesting. Karl Hofer was the main modern artist that they showed. Do you know who Karl Hofer is? (laughs)

No.

Not too many people do. He was sort of big at the time. He was a follower of Picasso.

Did you leave Germany at this point to travel in other countries?

Yeah, I did. Whenever I got leave I was able to take off for a week or two weeks. The first trip I made was to go to Italy. That's where all the art is, right? I spent two weeks traveling. Subsequently, I went to Paris, of course. And then I went to Spain, which was unusual at that time, because Spain had just opened up to having tourists come. It was still Franco's thing – it was all locked down. It was like stepping back fifty years. The way people lived – the kind of cars you saw, motor scooters, and so on. It was kind of what you expected to see in Europe, but Europe had already caught up in many ways to post-war modernization. But not Spain. Spain was like a nineteenth century country.

Was that your first exposure to Velasquez? He's been an influence on your work, I believe?

I think I might have seen an exhibition of works from the German museums right after the war at the DeYoung, and there may or may not have been a Velasquez. I can't remember. But it was certainly the first time I actually saw the real thing - things like "Las Meñinas" – the big paintings.

So, after this first trip to Europe in the Army, you came back to CCAC to attend graduate school. Were you still in the design department?

No, I switched. I applied for painting, which was one of the rationalizations for going back to the same school. You could get out of the Army a couple of months early if you had an acceptance at a college or school, and I knew I would be accepted at CCAC, so that was another rational for going to the same school. It was not the smartest thing to do, but as it turned out it worked out to be a smart thing, because that's when I bumped up against Diebenkorn and the Bay Area Figurative movement.

This was a critical time for you, I think. Not only for the Diebenkorn connection, which we'll get to, but Lederer, again, allowed you to teach a class while you were a graduate student, so it was the beginning of your teaching career as well.

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Yes, that's true. If I was at a different school, things might have unfolded differently. Who knows? Just before going in the Army, graduating in 1954, and going in the service in late November 1954, I worked at Kaiser as a commercial artist. They had a graphic arts company that was part of their family of Kaiser companies that did publications for the different companies. So, in that first summer of working at Kaiser I was doing production stuff, working at a light table doing paste-up and an occasional little drawing. Then when I got out of the Army, I went to Kaiser to say hello, check in with everybody, and one of the designers had just left and they were having a going away party for him that evening. They said, "Would you like to come in?" So, I came in as a designer, not as a production person. I did that off and on while I was doing my graduate work and for a couple of summers after that, until around 1960-61. I ended up art directing one of the small magazines – the one for Kaiser engineers. It was fun. I wanted to see if I could handle these things, whether I could cut it working for money doing design on demand, etc. Once I knew I could do it, I began to lose interest in it, because I was much more interested in painting. Lederer called me because he saw me as a successful graduate, because I was doing this thing for Kaiser. I saw it as a potential way of changing career paths. It was lucky I liked teaching. I could have hated it.

You began teaching design at CCAC, but then you asked Lederer for additional instructional work? I believe in printmaking?

That didn't have anything to do with Lederer. I was hired to teach a design class at first, and Lederer had pretty well worked out syllabi for all the courses in the design department, so basically I was working with his syllabus. The lithography was a separate thing. While still an undergraduate, Charlie Gill, who was a year behind me, was taking lithography from Nate Olivera, and I was kind of fascinated by the whole thing. The lithography shop was in the same building as the student supply shop, and I was very familiar with the set up. I would hang out there periodically when Charlie was taking a class. He showed me what to do, how to do it and so on. When I went back to do graduate work, I took lithography for units as a part of my graduate program. I had the equivalent of a minor in printmaking. When Nate went to the Art Institute, George Miyasaki, who was in my graduate class, became the lithography teacher, and I had free use of the shop as faculty and interested bystander. When George went to Berkeley, I put in my two cents worth and became the lithography teacher. That was parallel to the design work, so I gradually dropped design. During the time that I taught at CCAC, I only taught drawing and or painting once. If you were hired to be a design teacher, then you taught design and no one thought of you in other terms. I managed to shift that over to teaching lithography, and I was considered a printmaking teacher. But I wasn't a painting teacher, even though I was beginning to gain a certain amount of recognition for painting. I had guest-teaching gigs at Berkeley and at UC Davis. In some cases I was teaching painting and or drawing, but not at CCAC.

You were teaching at CCAC, but you were also a graduate student, and on your graduate committee was Richard Diebenkorn. I think this was a really interesting period for you. Number one, the Bay Area Figurative movement was in full bloom. Richard Diebenkorn, when he was a student at the California School of Fine Arts, was there with Clifford Still, who he resisted studying with to avoid his sway, so to speak. They did butt heads, here and there. It was the same thing with you at CCAC. You could have studied with Diebenkorn, but you didn't.

It was sort of stupid on my part. (laughs) Those are things that have a way of working out sometimes. Yeah, because he ended up being a tremendous influence, and it might have been useful to have gotten the word from the horse's mouth instead of having to intuit it. But on the other hand, maybe I learned different things by having to guess what I thought he was doing.

It pushed you in a different direction, didn't it? Here he was with these abstract figurations. His thing was art that was "abstracted from," and you very soon after became concerned with "the thing in and of itself."

It wasn't quite that smooth. The stuff that I was doing, or trying to do, when I first started at CCAC in the graduate program, was based on remembered images from Europe, and they were painted in a freely painted abstract expressionist style. I would start out with just a vague idea of what I wanted and put paint on the canvas based over a rough yellow ochre drawing. I had no idea what the final result was going to be. It was subject matter oriented, but it had nothing to do with the actual appearance of the subject matter. Diebenkorn, at that point, was getting into the figurative stuff, and all my fellow students were caught up, certainly the majority, were trying to paint like Diebenkorn, and I was determined that I wasn't going to do that. Of course, I did... over a period of time, but it evolved from these things that I was describing. I think the transition was gradual. I became caught up in the subject matter of Diebenkorn and Bay Area figurative art – the middle class domestic interior. I gradually toned down the European subject matter. But I would also do things that were totally abstract, and I had no... I hadn't made a decision at that point. I was basically kind of stumbling. And that was one of the things, when Diebenkorn was on my graduating committee that he called me on. Sort of like, "This piece is totally abstract, and this piece has figures in it... Make up your mind." Of course, he – I didn't realize it at the time - but he was probably also struggling with that and thinking it through...

Exactly. That was the period where he was shifting from abstraction to figuration himself. He went back to abstraction later on, so I think he was voicing his own concerns as much as voicing a criticism of your work.

Well, certainly it was the criticism I used talking to my own graduate students further on.

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"Late Afternoon - Albany, California", 2009. Watercolor on paper 10 x 14 inches (25.4 x 35.6 cm). © Robert Bechtle. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

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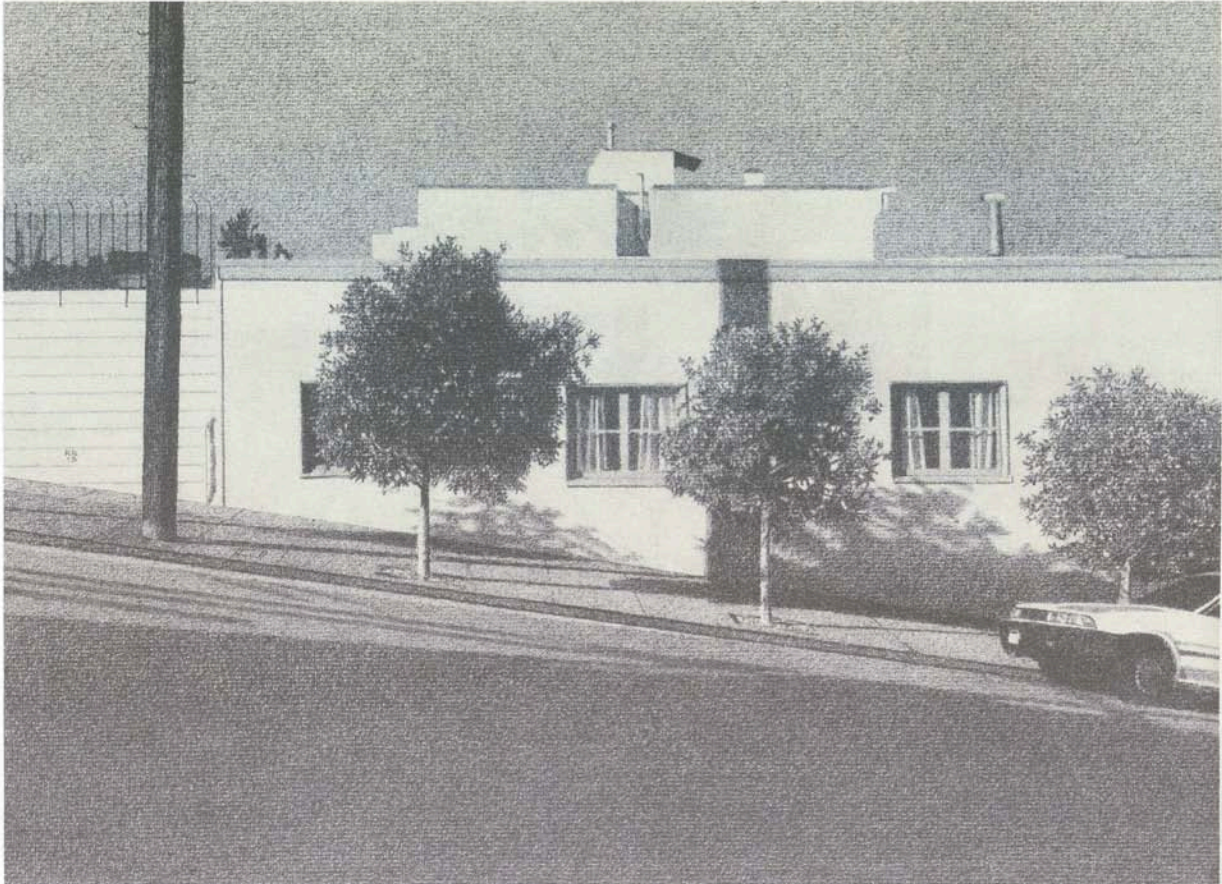
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Were there any other Realists that caught your fancy at this time?

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"Three Trees" 2010. Charcoal on paper, 19 3/4" x 27 1/2" (paper). Courtesy of Gallery Paule Anglim.

go about building the paintings, were very different from what I thought I was doing, which was more low-keyed. I consciously started trying to avoid using colors like yellow ochre, burnt sienna, standard earth colors which I saw as leading to making oil paintings that looked old fashioned. So, I had to figure out, not a color theory so much, but a color system that involved the use of primary colors and secondary color oppositions. If I needed a burnt sienna color, I'd make it out of blue and orange and red. The paintings I was doing at that time were quite pale. I somehow got it into my head that you never wanted to get completely black, or completely dark, and you never wanted to go completely white, except for maybe little highlights here and there. So, it ended up making for a lot of grey paintings, but I managed to get that out of my system fairly early.

I've always thought you were more interested in technique than subject matter, but soon after the early "Nancy" paintings, you became typecast for painting cars on streets. The "car on the street" paintings, the colors were - maybe this is a poor choice of words - washed out, without shadows, maybe high noon. A very Bay Area color, for when you look at houses from a distance in San Francisco, they're all white.
Surprisingly, when you get closer, you see how much color there is.

I think those paintings reflect that, but let's backtrack, because those paintings with your first wife Nancy - "Nancy Sitting," "Nancy Reading," - were the first time you began using photographs, because she tired of posing. Yeah, it was sort of used as an aid de memoire. I knew from commercial art training that artists used photographs. Illustrators, particularly, used photographs all the time as reference. But it still felt like I was being bad - doing something I wasn't supposed to do - drawing from photographs. It opened up further possibilities when I started doing that, and I started getting interested in the difference between the way you see three dimensionally and the way you see photographically in two dimensions. The subject matter - "Nancy Sitting," "Nancy Reading," etc. - was really based on Bay Area Figurative subject matter. It was a way of getting away from trying to paint Europe, which by that time I had decided was not a very good idea. That one should stay closer to home, and having been in Europe for a year and a

half, wandering around, I had gotten a lot of it out of my system. I basically said goodbye to Europe. I didn't go back to Europe again for another ten years after that, and I had a totally different attitude towards it by then. The choice of American vernacular middle class daily life as a subject matter came in via the Bay Area Figurative movement, but it also came in through Pop Art, which I was very aware of coming back in 1962. I saw English Pop when I was in Europe, and I was thinking about subject matter in that direction. And then when I came through New York on the way home there was a big Pop Art show at the Sidney Janis Gallery, and I saw a lot of that stuff - Warhol, Oldenburg, Segal - all those people for the first time.

"The New Realism" show [1962].

I was very taken by it, and I was very pleased that I had sort of anticipated it while in Europe. My thinking was kind of going in that direction, and yet I realized I was like five years behind them, and I had to do something different.

You mentioned that you had been anticipating this switch to realism, but it's funny because you had a couple of colleagues at CCAC, Ralph Goings and Richard McLean, that were headed in a similar direction.

Ralph was a couple of years ahead of me in school, so I didn't really know him at CCAC. I got to know him later. I was not really aware of what he was doing until I saw the first of the pick-up trucks parked at a gas station. By that time, I knew Ed Ruscha's "Standard Station," and Dick [McLean] was working his way through a kind of collage of photographic elements where he was painting the various parts in very realistic ways. Charlie Gill was also in some ways ahead of where I was, in terms of using subject matter but in a much more painterly way. He was using Pop orientated subject matter - people listening to a radio, sitting in a car, things like that. So, I guess I got interested in the idea of painting a car, because it just seemed like a very Pop thing to do, but also a kind of dumb thing to do. A car that was fairly accurately painted, but without any Pop overtones, not trying to make it look like advertising art, but make it look just like it is as it sits in the street. The first one I did, I parked my own car in front of the studio windows and worked on it from life, as it were. Then when I wanted to do another one, I had to figure out a way of doing it that didn't involve having

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the car actually there. So, I started out making sketches of cars, which turned out not to be accurate enough to work in the way I wanted.

Which painting was this?

My brother had this Thunderbird - a 1960 Thunderbird, that I thought was ludicrous, very ostentatious and showy. So, I thought, "Wouldn't it be great to do a painting of a Thunderbird life size." So, I had my sketches, and I built a big stretcher for it - it was about six by eight feet - not life size, but giving the impression of life size, and I painted it in about two weeks. So needless to say, it was very rough, (laughs) and not terribly convincing. So, awhile after that, working on smaller paintings, I started using color slides instead of black and white photographs, and I started projecting the image onto the canvas rather than eyeballing it. I started to evolve a painting style close to what I'm doing now. Then I decided to give another try to the Thunderbird, and that one took a year to paint instead of two weeks. But I got something, and that sort of gave a kind of assurance that what I was doing had possibilities, and I began to find that the use of the camera opened up the world to being possible subject matter, not just what was in my house or out in front of it.

It seems it provided a structure for you, from which you could progress technically. In that, you didn't have to worry as you did as an art student, "Should I paint this...or that?" You didn't have to worry about subject matter, the right direction, or style. It seems like you had found yourself and could just hone in on the technical issues of painting.

Well, that's certainly part of it. There have been changes in technique that have involved in the framework over the years. I saw it as being a way of not thinking how other artists are working. As a student, you're always thinking about things in those terms. You can't do this, because someone does it. You're kind of looking over your shoulder all the time. Once I had broached that whole subject matter of American middle class life, I didn't look over my shoulder anymore. I mean, I knew its relationship with Diebenkorn, with Vermeer, with Vuillard - with all the history - but I wasn't trying to paint like that. I didn't care how they might have done it. I had my own way to do it. I could just paint with blinders. That was a good thing.

You were beginning to be recognized for your work. I guess the first big show was the Linda Nochlin curated exhibition, "Realism Now," in 1968, which gathered painters who had begun working with the camera. It attracted the attention of Ivan Karp, who had been associated with Leo Castelli.

He had input there. Several of the artists that showed at Castelli were his discoveries - Warhol and Lichtenstein, were both people who Ivan discovered, while at Castelli. Yeah, all of a sudden, out of the woodwork, there were a few artists who were working in the same vein, and it was very nice to bump into them. I got to know [Ralph] Goings a bit at that point - Bob Cottingham, [Richard] Estes, [Chuck] Close... who else, I don't know. John Salt...

...Audrey Flack. By that time you must have thought you were on the right track. Ivan Karp picked you up and started giving you shows, and in 1972 you exhibited at "Documenta 5," which at that time was the biggest show in the world.

Right. The style had solidified and had a name by then. It was shown quite a bit. There were a lot of European group shows and still are. So, Ivan was behind Pop Art. That was one of the things he was picking up on very early on, and why people like Warhol and Lichtenstein attracted his attention.

[Jasper] Johns, too?

Johns was at Castelli as well. The Realist work was important to Ivan, because he saw it as the next manifestation of it [Pop]. The subject matter was very important to him. In his view, it had to be American, out there... I remember a letter I got from him early on, he said something about my work going towards where American art had to go - "into the dread heartland of America with all its stark regalia." (laughs) It's a wonderful quote. A wonderful way to characterize it. Maybe that ultimately was a limitation that he had, in terms of growing beyond that, so that as a lot of newer art things came along, he passed on it. He had a terrific eye and found terrific artists. I know a number of people, his friends, that still show at OK Harris. But life moves on, so I guess I've been in position (where) I've been able to live my eighty years being discovered several times. (laughs) Discovered and dismissed, and discovered again.

Well exactly, that's the beauty of it. Photorealism, Hyperrealism, call it what you may... I interviewed Allan Kaprow, who had grown tired of the word Happenings, with which he was associated but was unable to unhinge himself from. Someone would always tell him, "Mr., you dropped something," and he would always have to pick it up again. There have been certain critics like Peter Schjeldahl that have welcomed it and saw what you were doing, but others like Robert Hughes...

... that had no use for it. (laughs)

...or for you. How do you take to that type of criticism?

I shrugged it off, I guess. I figure there's room for all kinds of art out there, and I'm not going to worry whether mine is appreciated by everyone. There's no way that it could be. You'd like them to say nice things, and there are enough people who say nice things, and there are people who say nice things that I would just as soon they didn't, because I don't know that they get it either. Sometimes the people who don't say nice things have a point, and you can learn from it and that's happened several times.

One thing I'd like to talk about, and you're such a modest person I hate to say this, but you are a successful artist... I mean, most art school graduates aren't even involved in the field after five years... It's such a difficult thing, and I don't really personally know that many successful artists. To be a successful artist - it's not a straight uphill climb. I realize that. I know it's a very circuitous route, but I wonder how you feel about that? You've built on your teaching for a steady foundation on which to paint for sixty years.

I've been extremely fortunate. Very thankful. The various pieces have fit together and made a life that... I certainly can't complain. At the same time, I think I'm realistic about my place in the hierarchy of artists. I'm not Pablo, I'm not Henri, I'm not Jasper. I'm not Dick. But given the nature of the endeavor, I can't complain. I think the teaching provided - because you have to rethink things all the time - I think it provided a basis to see the work in a way that goes beyond the pure physical act of making a painting. It questions the motives and the divisions... I'm not sure that makes any sense.

You've gone through several phases. The sixties and seventies, when you were raising children - you included them in the work. Max, your son, has gone on to be an artist as well. You mentioned an emphasis on the middle class life, and the fact of being married and raising children reflected that?

It was part of the realization... the lesson of Europe was that the grass is always greener, until you realize that you're looking at the wrong grass. It could be somewhere else. Looking at family, looking at the middle class world... I think I realize, that as Americans, we're all middle class. It's out there for use, the knowledge of that. As an artist, I began to make those connections. I began to see how my work relates to other artists from the past who were also mining the same vineyards. Does one mine vineyards? No, one doesn't. (laughs)

What other artists are you referring to in this way?

Oh, anybody that's painting - the Impressionists - Degas, Manet - the painting of modern life.

I've always been impressed that you've acknowledged the writer Theodore Dreiser as an example of someone you emulate, in that he deals with the simple everyday things of life and finds some mystery and beauty in it.

Yeah, well poetry. I took a course during a summer session at Berkeley. I was picking up some spare units for a community college teaching credential I thought I might need at one point. So, I went back to school to do that. They had a course in the American novel, and Dreiser's "An American Tragedy" was one of the things we had to read. It was an eye opener. I did nothing but read that summer, because Dreiser was fairly thick, and I had "Moby Dick" to wade through. Henry James. I loved all of it. Dreiser's straight forward story telling made a connection with my work.

When you talked about not being up to par with certain artists - I would dicker with that myself. I see you as a continuation of the Bay Area's finest. I don't know if you've been compared, but certainly another contemporary artist of yours that has reached a similar level of success is Wayne Thiebaud, and I wonder if you relate to his work at all?

Oh, yeah. I'm a great admirer of Wayne and his work. I think he's a really tremendous artist. I don't relate to it in terms of pulling things out of it. Well, in some ways. There's something about the simplicity of the choices - the simplicity of what comes out of the choices he's made; the simplicity of the objects and the focus. So, in certain ways, we're mining the same turf, but he's working out of a different set of assumptions about how to go about doing it. His own life, and his own training in the medium, is a different place than I could go.

In regard to Diebenkorn, and yourself as a continuing heritage of Bay Area painting - the both of you worked at Crown Point Press. Did you ever bump into him there?

Well, I tried not to bump into him. (laughs) Yeah, a little bit. I mean, I didn't drop in or hang out with him, but there would be times when he would be there, and I had some reason to be there.

Did you meet him at parties and talk to him?

Occasionally.

"Do you remember me from graduate school?"

I was totally in awe of him. I'm still in awe of him as a painter. I think he's one of the great American painters. So, aside from small talk, I always felt somewhat embarrassed. I'm doing this thing, and I keep saying, it's in its own way related to Diebenkorn, and I keep thinking he must hate it. He doesn't want to hear that. Although he was always very gracious. (laughs)

One of the artists you have been friendly with in the Bay Area is Tom Marioni who's had an afternoon salon for a number of years which you've been a patron of. I go there for the camaraderie, and I wonder if that's the appeal for you as well?

(laughs) Of course. I wouldn't go otherwise. I like the people there - the range of people. It's kind of interesting to be in the "enemies" camp - all those Conceptual Artists. I'm practically the only painter who shows up. There are a few others.

Well, thank you for this in depth conversation, especially since I know you're off to Massachusetts shortly, where you maintain a summer home. You've been doing this for a while?

Since 1984. It's about twenty-five years. It sort of grew out of a trip to Europe. On my way to

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Europe in 1961, I called a friend, who was one of my teachers from CCAC, Jason Schoener, who had a house up in Maine. I'd never been anywhere on the East Coast. I was stunned and absolutely fell in love with New England – the green, the white houses, the ocean, the whole bit. I always swore that at some point I'd like to have a house in New England. I didn't want to live there full time, but the summers. After Whitney [Chadwick] and I got together, it became a possibility. We were in a situation where it made sense for both of us. It was 1984, because that was the year I had a NEA Grant and we stayed in New York for most of that year. So, we had weekends, once the weather warmed up, and we went to New England to look around.

Whitney's from that part of the country. Western New York, I think?
Yeah, Western New York... Niagara Falls.

So, she had relatives in the area.

Yeah, two sisters. One lives near Newport, which is near where we are, and the other is in Cambridge. Whitney had spent seven years in Cambridge, teaching at MIT, before she came out here to California. It seemed like the logical thing to do. The circumstances at that point were, we were renting a flat in San Francisco, and the idea of buying a country house and then renting your city house made perfect sense, because lots of people in New York do that. Lots of friends had situations like that, where they're renting a loft space in New York and have a country house Upstate.

I should mention that Whitney is one of the premier art historians in the country. I wonder what it's like being married to an art historian of that ilk? I'm sure on one level it's great because you have a common interest, and I'm sure you've found it compatible, because you've obviously stayed together.
It makes for an interesting life. We deal with different facets of essentially the same thing. I learn a lot from her, and maybe she learns a bit from me. I don't know. She's very conscious of the difference between how artists look at things and how art historians look at it, and what the ramifications of that may be. She has a good take on it.

I've seen her comments on your art, in essays written during the occasion of your retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. I think that was 2004. She entered into some conversation with one of the essayists in the catalog. You don't mind her talking on the record about your art?

No. I don't. I mean there's a certain element of potential conflict of interest, but it depends what the forum is and what the circumstances are. She knows it well enough and what the context of it is, because she was teaching it at MIT before she ever came out here.

One other point I wanted to raise before we retire is that there is often a conflict in artists minds that they have to be in New York, and they can't stay in San Francisco. You've mentioned that you and Whitney have spent time in New York, and I know you've enjoyed your time there. Do you think there has been a downside by staying in San Francisco?

Well, it's certainly something one thinks about. There's always a downside to it. There's a downside to every choice. There's always reason to do things and reasons not to do things. I thought about staying in New York back when I was coming back from Europe in 1962, but decided against it, and I think it was the right decision. I'm not sure I would have evolved into doing what I'm doing if I had stayed in New York. Who knows? You do what you do, and it's always going to come out. I think the circumstances for getting work done, particularly since I had my foot in the door of the teaching thing so that I could build a life that enabled me to work long stretches of time, which is the great advantage of teaching. In New York, you get into a forty-hour a week job situation very easily and that can be death. I've seen lots of young aspiring artists who crashed for that reason. They're still setting tile, or being carpenters, or whatever, because they have to earn a living somehow. They don't have the good tradeoff in terms of time and have a very difficult time producing work. My hat's off to those that do manage to establish themselves with gallery sales and actually be able to live as an artist. I think it's much easier to live in San Francisco than it is in New York. I think nostalgically about it sometime, because I love New York and feel quite comfortable there, but I've never had to scramble for a place to work or find a bit of real estate to buy a loft in SoHo. Those things were possible back in 1962. That building that Don Judd bought, it's going to open as a museum. I think he paid something like \$60,000 for it, which in 1962 was a substantial amount of money, but not compared to what it's worth now. So anyway, I don't have any regrets about it. San Francisco is a wonderful place. I grew up knowing that. My family always said San Francisco is a very special place.

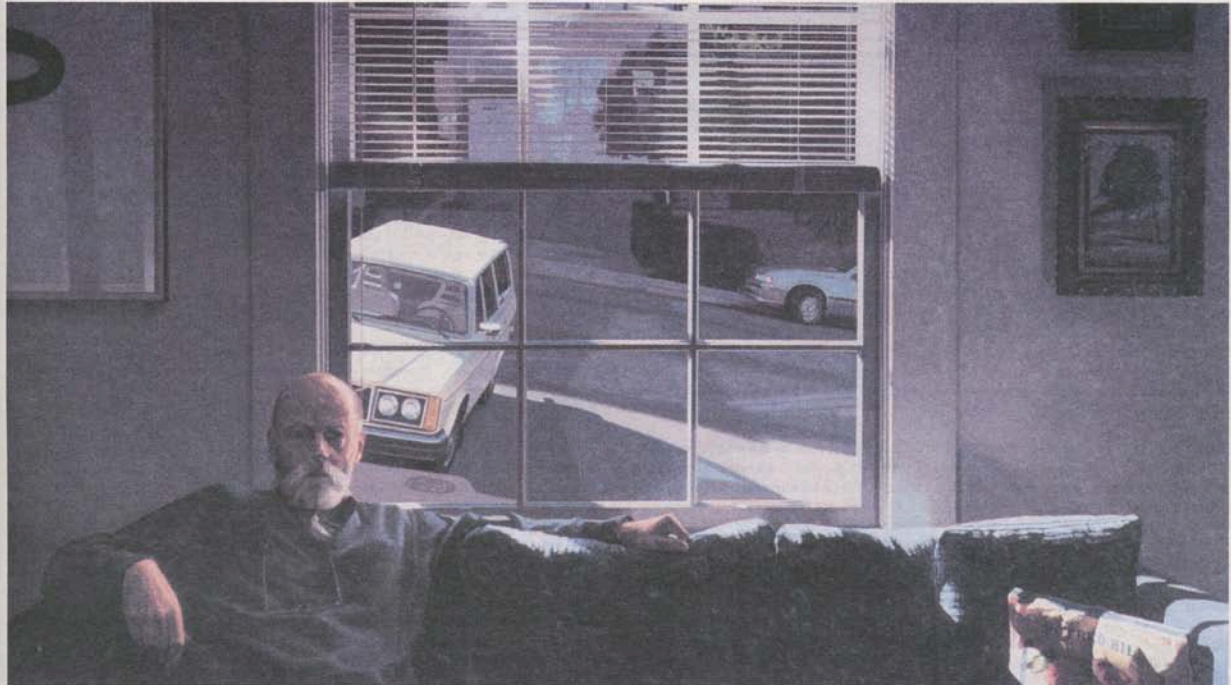
For more information on Bechtle please contact: Gallery Paule Anglim (SF), Gladstone Gallery (NYC)



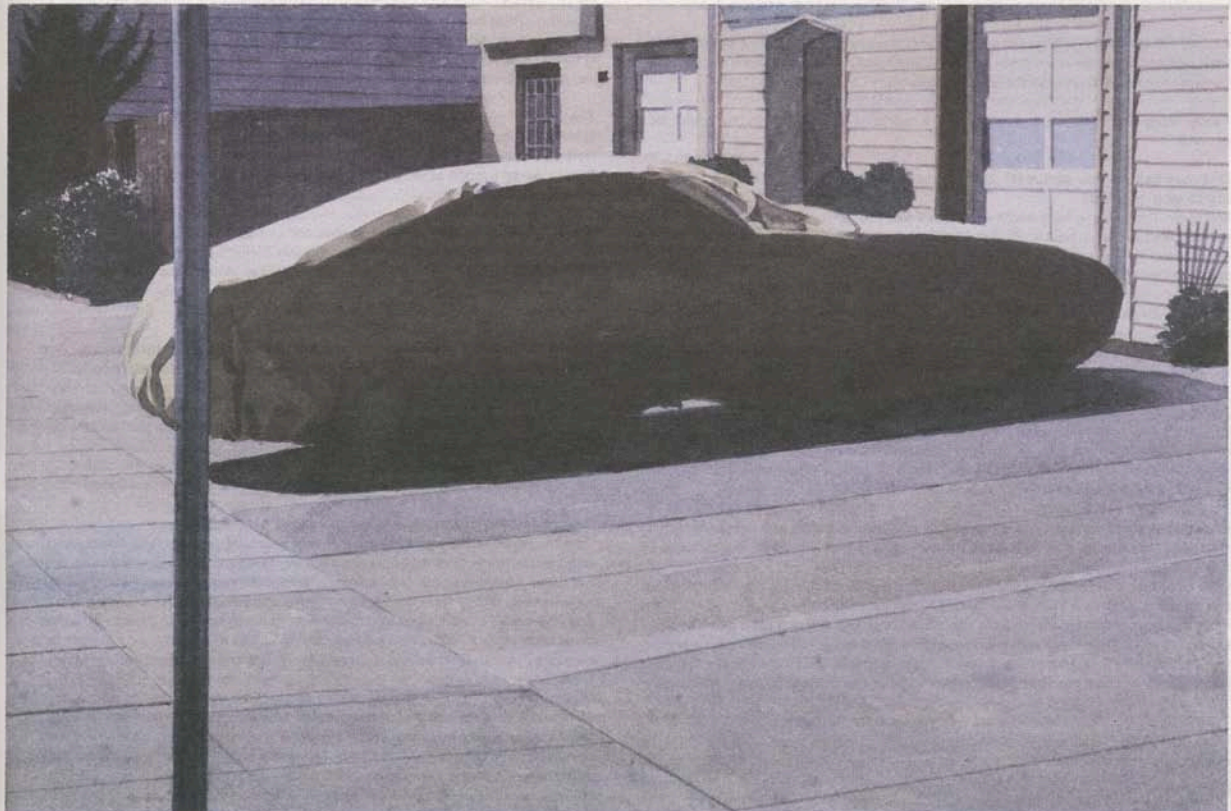
"Alameda Intersection - Clay and Mound Streets" 2004. Oil on canvas. 36 x 66 inches (91.4 x 167.6 cm). © Robert Bechtle. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

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"Potrero Hill" 1996. Oil on canvas; 36 x 66 in. Collection SFMOMA; Ruth Nash Fund purchase; © Robert Bechtle.



"Covered Car - SF (Version II)" 2007. Watercolor on paper. 10" x 14". Courtesy of Gallery Paule Anglim.