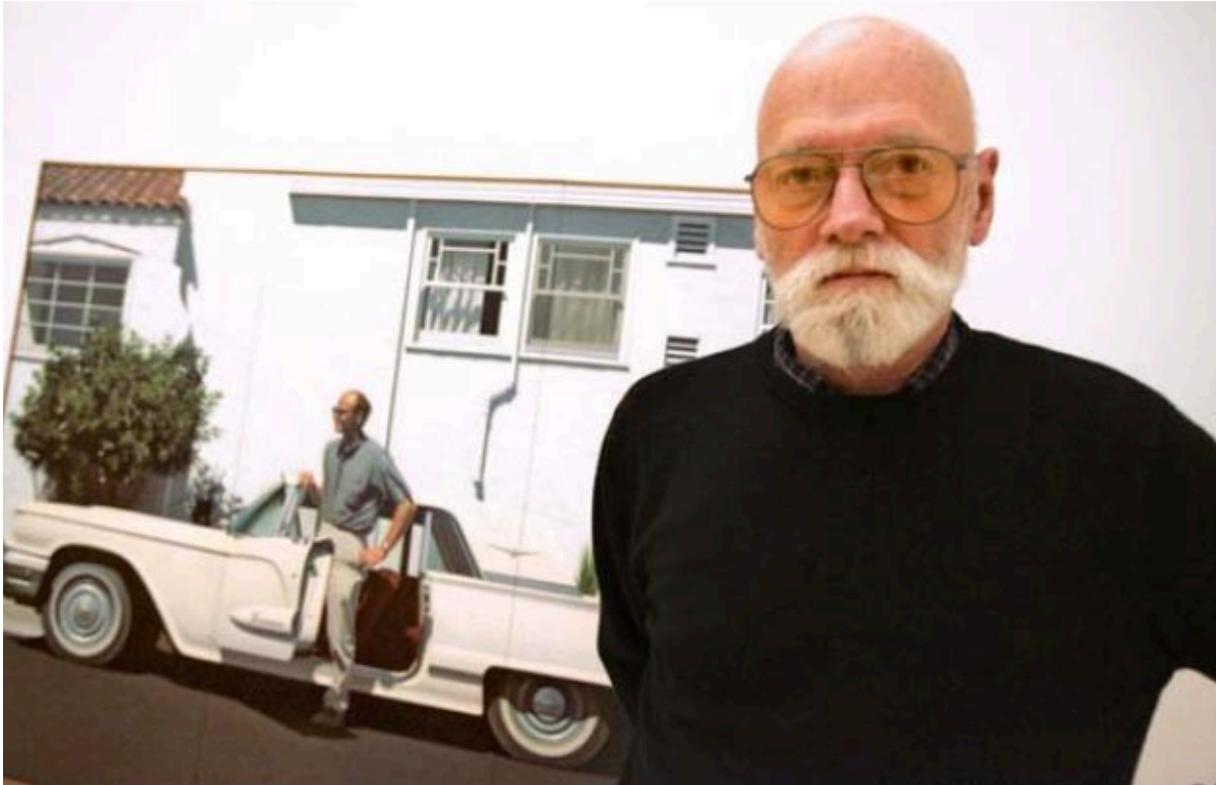


GLADSTONE GALLERY

Jesse Hamlin, "Power lines, cars and patterned pants – 40 years of painting the everyday,"
San Francisco Gate, February 10, 2005.

Power lines, cars and patterned pants -- 40 years of painting the everyday

Jesse Hamlin, Chronicle Staff Writer
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Chronicle / Christina Koci Hernandez

Bechtle with "'60 T-Bird." San Francisco painter Robert Bechtle is a famed photorealist who's having a big retrospective at SFMOMA. We want to shoot him among his pictures.

Robert Bechtle found his metier on the freeway outside Bakersfield about 40 years ago. The young painter had just returned from Europe, where he absorbed the work of British pop artists and old masters like Vermeer, and was driving cross-country back home to the Bay Area. Heading north on Highway 99, he saw something that seemed oddly exotic: a cloverleaf overpass with palm trees shooting up in each corner, diffused in bright, hazy winter light.

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"All of a sudden, this stuff that I'd grown up with in California, but hadn't paid much attention to as having anything to do with art, came into focus," Bechtle says.

"Everybody thinks of the Bay Area as beautiful, and it is. But growing up in a middle-class suburb in Alameda, it didn't seem terribly beautiful to me, it seemed terribly mundane and drab. From that point on, it didn't. There's a kind of resonance to it, a hum. I began to really see it."

Four decades later, the art-crazy kid from Alameda is still tuned in to the hum of ordinary things, drawing poetry from the commonplace. His precisely rendered pictures of cars, houses and shadow-laden sidewalks are at once familiar and mysterious. The more you look, the more they yield. Called a photorealist when he came to prominence in the '60s -- his work is based on photographs -- Bechtle has always pursued a personal path to painting the objects of his affection, pondering the way light affects the Spanish-style bungalows, bushes and T-birds he uses to create the formal drama at the heart of his pictures.

"I think of it as a challenge to find poetry in the stuff we just don't pay attention to," says Bechtle, 72, whose art is being celebrated in three concurrent exhibitions: a 90-piece retrospective at the [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art](#) opening Saturday, a show of his prints at [Crown Point Press](#) starting Friday and a show of drawings at [Gallery Paule Anglim](#) now on view.

The other day, the artist was eyeing some of his early pictures at SFMOMA. He took pleasure in pieces he hadn't seen in years. "But there's also a certain trepidation," says Bechtle, a slim guy with a white beard and a friendly, no-B.S. manner. "You wonder if they're going to still hold up, if they look OK."

He stopped in front of his " '62 Chevy," which depicts a root beer- colored Impala parked diagonally in front of the peachy facade of a Wells Fargo branch office. The white lines on the pavement, the shadow of the entrance overhang, and the drawn Venetian blinds are given equal weight, the shapes locked in like pieces of an abstract design. "It's brighter, more orange than I remember it," says Bechtle, who says he saw the picture a few days earlier and thought, "Gee, that's really not bad." He laughs. "It's unusual for me to do a painting with such warm color in it. ... I'm very fond of Venetian blinds. Not necessarily in reality, but in painting, because of the rhythm."

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Robert Bechtle

Agua Caliente Nova, 1975 Collection of the High Museum of Art, Atlanta; Museum purchase with funds from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Ray M. and Mary Elizabeth Lee Foundation

Not far away hangs "[Alameda Chrysler](#)." It's a great 1981 painting showing the artist's mother, a schoolteacher who raised Bechtle and his younger brother Kenneth after their father died when Bechtle was 12, standing in front of her enormous American car dressed in a busy-print blouse and grayish-blue checked slacks.

"Look at the pants!" he says. "I'm proud of those. When I was painting this, I thought I would make them a uniform color, then I thought, no, that would be a cop-out." Getting it right, showing the object as it is -- "wonderfully specific yet wonderfully ordinary" -- matters to Bechtle, who was riffing on the family snapshot in this and other pictures.

"When you back away from it, it partakes of that whole snapshot quality, a person posing by a car," he says. "I love the way she's dressed, but I look at all this stuff, too," he adds, pointing to deep-shaded foliage, the little fleck of sunlight gleaming off the rear bumper, the dramatic shadows of shrubs on the garage door. "That's where the painting lives."

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Bechtle, who is married to art historian Whitney Chadwick and has two grown children from his first marriage, developed his realistic mode as a way out from under the influence of expressionist painters such as Elmer Bischoff and Richard Diebenkorn. He

came up in the '50s during the heyday of Bay Area figurative expressionism, studying design and illustration at Oakland's College of Arts and Crafts, where he also got his master's degree.

He wanted "to paint in a way that had no style, to try and paint things the way they looked, sort of non-art," says Bechtle, whose early realist paintings still relied on Diebenkorn for their structure. It wasn't until he began working from photographs that Bechtle developed his signature style.



Robert Bechtle

Watsonville Olympia, 1977 Collection of the artist, courtesy of Gallery Paule Anglim and Barbara Gladstone Gallery

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An excellent draftsman, he'd used photographs for reference but mostly painted from direct observation. In 1966, he hit on the method that opened the door to a new way of working. He was drawing the forms for a painting of a little yellow Berkeley house, but couldn't get the foreshortening right on the '56 black Caddy parked in the driveway. So he projected the slide he'd taken as a color reference onto the canvas and traced the line of the car to get it exactly right.

"Another little lightbulb went on," says Bechtle, who has used the method ever since (he still paints everything freehand, of course). "Artists have always used whatever technology was available to them. I'd never done this before. And yeah, I felt guilty about it. I kept saying, 'I can draw OK, maybe I had trouble with this one, but I could do it without the slide.'

"Then I began to understand that it really didn't have anything to do with those interpretive changes that happen when you're painting or drawing from life. That was kind of a side issue. If the issue was to try and make these things as representative of the subject matter as they could be -- so there was a kind of emotional transparency to them, so you weren't sidetracked by how it was done but simply had to deal with 'What are these dumb houses or this old Ford doing here?' " Projecting slides seemed like a really valuable way to achieve that kind of accuracy and rightness."

Bechtle had begun depicting cars a few years earlier. They were everywhere, these machines with beastlike faces, but nobody was really portraying them in paintings. "It just seemed like a still-life object that was fresh," he says. He painted quite a few of them, in the context of the place where they lived, including his brother's '60 T-bird, pictured in the classic work in Berkeley Art Museum's collection, and his '61 Pontiac, shown in the painting of that name owned by the Whitney Museum.

It shows Bechtle, his young kids and then-wife posed on a strip of grass in front of the beige station wagon. In typical snapshot fashion, part of the car has been cropped out. The image toys with tension between photographic time and the time that goes into a painting. "There's this sort of nondescript garden across the way, a bit of lawn, a couple of avocado trees, pink sidewalk. It's very California. I'm always struck how painterly it is. I always forget that."

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The painterliness disappeared for several years as the pictures got tighter and more precise, but returned in recent years as Bechtle's work became looser and brushier, with a dab of pointillism. The artist decided in the late '70s to focus less on the cars and widen the view to show more of the neighborhood, in effect moving from still life to landscape.

"I was beginning to feel I was overidentified with that -- 'Oh, he's the car guy, there's the horse guy,'" says Bechtle, referring to his friend Richard McLean, known for his photorealist paintings of horses.

Bechtle haunts neighborhoods he feels connected to, like the Outer Sunset, with its rows of tidy homes, and Potrero Hill, where he lives and works. (He retired from a teaching at San Francisco State a few years ago.) The hum around 40th and Vicente streets had something to do with the rhythm of the chimneys and rooftops marching up the hill.

The area around 20th and Arkansas streets has inspired numerous drawings and paintings, from various vantage points at different times of day. Bechtle walks around there most every day. Sometimes nothing grabs him. "But I'm paying attention," he says. "I've got my eyes open."



Robert Bechtle

Frisco Nova, 1979 Collection of the City and County of San Francisco; Purchased by the San Francisco Arts Commission for the San Francisco International Airport