

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Peter Plagens, "Driving Realism, Wistful Scenes," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 1, 2014, p. 20.

FINE ART | By Peter Plagens

Driving Realism, Wistful Scenes

Robert Bechtle

◆ **Gladstone**

515 W. 24th St., (212) 206-9300
Through Feb. 15

I used to call them "mayonnaise days"—those quiet, sunny California afternoons of peopleless streets and no pressing deadlines, in which everything seemed to have the bland flavor of a cheese sandwich on white bread. A real poet might make of these ingredients subtly pointed social commentary having to do with painless ennui in comfy contemporary America. The realist Bay Area painter Robert Bechtle (b. 1932) is a poet—a visual poet—and that's exactly what he does in this contemplative exhibition of oil paintings, watercolors and drawings.

Mr. Bechtle's favorite, well-nigh-exclusive subject matter is parked cars, exactly placed (or found—he works from photographs he takes) in deceptively off-handed compositions involving choice details (sometimes a car is covered with a tarp), adroitly blanketing shadows and a slightly bleached-out, mildly alienated color palette. He's not a finicky photorealist. A few years back, he told the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, "My theory is that a painting should never be finished any further than it needs to be to get the idea across, and that anything more than that is fussing."

That Mr. Bechtle's pictures are more evocative of the novels of Evan S. Connell than they are of his fellow photorealists is testimony to his subliminal depiction of the human predicament. His cars are surrogate persons, scattered, almost alone, waiting for something to happen. In short, he's much, much more than just another obsessive hyperrealist showing off.



Robert Bechtle's 'Clay Street, Alameda' (2013) at the Gladstone Gallery.

Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels