

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Peter Schjeldahl, "Parked Cars," *The New Yorker*, May 9, 2005.

THE ART WORLD

PARKED CARS

American Photo-Realism at its best.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

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I first encountered the underrated Bay Area artist Robert Bechtle's great painting "'61 Pontiac" (1968-69), which is in his present retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, in a 1969 group show in New York. It was among the early examples of Photo-Realism, a populist, generally lightweight movement that flourished beyond the pale of that time's strivingly serious art world, where recondite postminimalism ruled. The painting was as good as American Photo-Realism would get: a vision of and about life in these United States as telling as little else since Edward Hopper, and a philosophically rich interplay of painting and photography that brings to mind Gerhard Richter. Seven feet wide, on three abutted panels, "'61 Pontiac" shows the artist and his family standing beside a creamy-white station wagon on a suburban street in the midday sunlight. The source is obviously a photograph—Bechtle had begun to work with slides projected onto canvas. Neatly bearded, subdued Dad, in a short-sleeved business shirt and baggy corduroy trousers, rests a hand on the head of his restive young son, in short pants and sneakers. Sturdy, long-haired Mom, her eyes in deep shadow, holds their uninterested little girl and smiles. She may be speaking. Details are slightly blurry, testifying to the snapshot's loss of definition when blown up to such a size. Of course, it isn't possible to describe a painting—a tissue of decisions—as "blurred." So the artist's faithfulness to the vagaries of photography is part of the picture's form and significance.



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I remember being rattled by the middle-class ordinariness of the scene. For one thing, it was the last sort of image that one expected from the vicinity of San Francisco in that epoch of hippie revolutionizing. But the work did not feel conservative. Untouched by either sentiment or irony, it seemed, as it still does, entirely unconcerned with its own approximation of an American demographic ideal. Gradually, you register that it is beautiful. Translated into oil paint, the Kodachrome colors of flesh, grass, and Mom's striped skirt take on sumptuous, dreaming intensity. Though derived from the click of a camera, the image has none of what Roland Barthes termed a photograph's "punctum," its quotient of inaccessible pastness. In "'61 Pontiac," time balloons forward, backward, and sky-high. I sense the droning, sheer duration of days in suburban neighborhoods in mild climates, an immensity laced with a familiar terror: boredom, our foretaste of being dead. Nothing can happen there. Or something can—a family of four pauses beside a station wagon, whose predictability makes matters worse. In this and many subsequent works, Bechtle is a fascinated diver in the ocean of interminable American afternoons.

The Whitney Museum bought the painting in 1970, but Bechtle's career—managed in New York by the insouciantly commercial O.K. Harris gallery—attracted almost no further critical attention. The local avant-garde was in one of its "painting is dead" phases and was automatically dismissive of things Californian anyway. Meanwhile, the work's equable take on bourgeois America suggested a different country from the infernal regions ritually evoked by counterculturalists. Today, when most art of 1969 is snugly historical, "'61 Pontiac" stays fresh. That's because the spiritual realities that it channelled have not changed. The problem of how to live in this land, as it actually is, has outfaced all attempts to escape or transcend it. And the numbing domination of our visual culture by cameras, of one kind or another, is as urgent a challenge to painting now as it was when Andy Warhol wedded mechanical imagery to high art four decades ago. Bechtle exploits the strangeness in humdrum photographs of the obvious, and he does so with the sort of reticent, stubborn grace that marks most of the Bay Area's finest painters—David Park, Richard Diebenkorn, Wayne Thiebaud.

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Now seventy-two years old, Bechtle was born and grew up in the Bay Area, the son of a teacher mother and an electrician father who, during the Depression, resorted to selling door to door. ("Hoover Man" (1966) shows a rangy, cowboy-hatted dude with a vacuum cleaner, backlit outside the partly opened front door of a house; his posture trumpets a wish to be anywhere else in the world.) Bechtle won early recognition as a budding artist. He was excited by art in Berlin, when he was stationed there as an Army private in the mid-fifties. He attended the California College of Arts and Crafts, in Oakland, where he purposely avoided studying with Diebenkorn, fearing infection by the master's then epidemic influence. A long tour of Europe in 1961-62—coincidentally, near the time of a similar and also decisive sojourn there by his Southern Californian contemporary Ed Ruscha—nurtured Bechtle's independence of mind. On the return trip, in 1962, he saw a groundbreaking show of Pop art at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York. He wanted something of that newness, he has said; but, typically for him, it could not resemble what others had done. Back home, paintings of gloomy interiors—expressing a melancholy streak that, suppressed thereafter, exerts a subliminal gravity in all his work—soon gave way to plein-air depictions of cars parked on nondescript streets. An exasperating struggle to manage the foreshortening of a black Cadillac in 1966 occasioned Bechtle's first use of slides, as an aid that became a content of his art.

Bechtle's paintings do not yield first impressions. I immediately feel that I know them thoroughly, as if from a prior life. This may be an effect of their congruence with the sorts of things that the brain, in self-defense, refuses to remember. Designed to seek import in what meets our eyes, we are equipped with ways of recognizing the unimportant in a flash, and blocking it from consciousness. Bechtle zeroes in on the always seen and never noticed—without giving it importance. (He differs in this from other Photo-Realists, who tend to congratulate a subject for having been chosen by them.) "Alameda Gran Torino" (1974), a masterpiece, is a nova of banality. The station wagon can't help but be only and exactly what Detroit fashioned. Hot sunlight can't help but glint from a bumper and produce a faint reflection of the windshield on a garage door. A closeness between the green of the car and that of a background shadow is unusual, but so perfectly meaningless that your mind may panic at the waste of its energy in beholding the fact. Then something peculiar can happen: your reflexive sense of the picture as a photograph breaks down, and the object's identity as a painting, done entirely on purpose, gains ground. Look closely. A congeries of tiny freehand strokes delivers an inconspicuous patch of foliage. The whole work is a feat of resourceful painterly artifice. At last, it's as if the original photograph were a ghost that died and came back as a body.

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Bechtle's later work has grown in ease and virtuosity, with occasional loss of tension. Recent lovely charcoal drawings and aquatint etchings relax into exquisiteness. And he returns now and then to dim interiors, usually featuring himself gazing outward, which are more oppressive the better they are painted. (To Californians, might being indoors feel tragic in and of itself?) It can't be comfortable to accept that, by the nature of one's talent, somebody else's parked car amounts to a more compelling self-portrait than anything done with a mirror. That's Bechtle's lot. His street paintings vibrate with everything that his personality—like common photography, and perhaps like suburban society—bottles up. As in "'61 Pontiac," charged indirection skirts fatalistic comedy when family and friends appear. "Alameda Chrysler" (1981) portrays the artist's formidable, white-haired mother, snazzy in a bold flowered shirt and checked slacks, beaming beside her brawny coupe, against a near background of dark-green, sun-dappled shadows on trees, topiary, and a white house. It's a gorgeous day. Grandma's in clover. Life is incredibly complicated, and the proof is that when you confront any simple, stopped part of it you are stupefied. ♦