

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Kenneth Baker, "Bechtle's painting captures what the camera can't," *San Francisco Gate*,
March 9, 2005.

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Kenneth Baker, Chronicle Art Critic
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Robert Bechtle

BECHTLE09 "Santa Barbara Chairs" (1983) Oil on canvas by Robert Bechtle Courtesy of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Yale University Art Gallery

Reproduction seldom does art any good, but it nearly destroys the work of painter **Robert Bechtle**.

Commentators have mischaracterized Bechtle's work as "photo-realism" since it first got noticed in the 1960s. Although Bechtle has long used photographs as source material, the term "photo-realism" falsely implies that he takes photographic information or the camera's way of seeing as his subject.

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As visitors to Bechtle's retrospective at the [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art](#) discover, whatever camera and projector do for Bechtle -- as tools for mapping appearances -- the camera undoes when his finished work passes through it. It represents his paintings as depictions of photographs, rather than as hand-crafted images informed by photography as a technology and a force of culture.

SFMOMA has on view several of Bechtle's source photographs. They show both how he alters their givens and how unlike the paintings they look at every level except the flatly factual: a window here, a light source there, a chair turned so, a pair of glasses on a face.

The camera simply cannot see the remarkably high, sustained level of craft in Bechtle's paintings. It misreports his quiet feats of technique and decision-making as matters of its own fidelity.

For proof, go straight to the painting titled "Roses" (1973). It describes three women outdoors, drinks in hand, admiring a thicket of rose bushes in bloom at the corner of a driveway. Hot sunlight slams down onto the scene from the upper left.

Projecting a photograph on canvas surely helped Bechtle to work out the picture's ungainly spatial structure, to plot shadows and such. On a narrative level, the painting retains the nothing-much-happening quality of a snapshot. But no photograph could tell him how to handle inch by inch the touches of color that define the sun-shot rose bushes.

In this wide, dazzling passage, Bechtle gets the dapple of sunlight on the shrub leaves and every nuance of color in the pale, back-lighted roses. Or more accurately, he gets the eye to accept that he has recreated these appearances as truthfully as anyone could expect of painting.

Yet, again contrary to secondhand acquaintance, Bechtle's art does not settle for any simpleminded idea of reality. The medium of painting shines as vividly as descriptive content does in "Date Palms" (1971), a view of three parked cars beneath giant palms that stand before a monstrosity of nearly featureless architecture. The painting's considerable size -- 5 by 7 feet -- permits a rhyming of fine brushwork and the palm fronds it describes that can have no parallel in photography.

So how best to describe Bechtle's works?

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As inventories of things we could notice, but probably do not: the light within shadows and the shapes they make on surfaces; the chromatic richness of what we take for simple hues; how differently the eye discriminates something on the far side of a window pane and something reflected in it; how light articulates the disparate textures of stuff, from flesh to metal, plastic, wood, stucco, foliage and pavement.

Nowhere do the discriminations in Bechtle's art shine more impressively than in the watercolors. Anyone who knows firsthand this incorrigible medium can only stand in awe at the economy in description of light, shadow and surfaces in Bechtle sheets such as "Oakland Ghia" (1974) and "Sterling Avenue -- Raking the Grass" (1996).

Add psychological ambiguity to the list of qualities that reproduction drains from Bechtle's art.

Could we see the snapshot that lies behind the self-portrait "Santa Barbara Chairs" (1983), we might make nothing much of the hose that runs from the image's left edge and disappears behind the artist, who sits behind a circular table in a lawn chair.

The scale and intensity of the painting, its sharp division of bright green lawn and deeply shadowed background, lead us to see Bechtle as adrift in the ostensibly homey setting, the hose tethering him like an astronaut's lifeline.

The foreground empty chairs, despite the attention he has lavished on the sunlight delineating them, intensify the self-portrait's air of isolation.

Cars, houses and chairs frequently stand in for their owners in Bechtle's art, as they do in American life.

The cross-sections of American daily life cut by Bechtle's pictures can seem so banal at first that we may suspect irony. But the SFMOMA retrospective corrects this impression also.

Most obviously in pictures that simmer with family tension, such as "Xmas in Gilroy" (1971) and "Foster's Freeze, Escalon" (1975), but throughout Bechtle's art we find him staging an almost subliminal drama.

Even pictures empty of people evoke a sensibility mutely fleeing from the social or overt aspects of a situation into fascination with usually unnoticed qualities of the visible.

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Bechtle's art may render an unflattering psychological self-portrait. But it offers a redeeming account of painting as the art that teaches its audience to find unnoticed richness in the appearances of which reality is made.

Crown Point Press, which has published several of Bechtle's prints, presents a concise retrospective of his graphics. It provides another angle of vision on the research into how things look that underlies everything he makes.