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Matters of Fact

As one of the original Photo-Realists, Robert Bechtle has been grappling with representation for some four decades.

BY RICHARD KALINA

Robert Bechtle hit upon a photo-based approach to realism in the mid-1960s, clarified his painting methods by the end of that decade and, while deepening the work over the years, has stayed firmly within the Photo-Realist fold ever since. Bechtle remains close to his geographic roots as well. He was born in California's San Francisco Bay Area in 1932 and has lived, studied and worked there his entire life. The great majority of his subjects—cars, house fronts, backyards, streetscapes, people sitting or standing around or going about ordinary domestic business (lighting a barbeque, watering the lawn)—have been drawn from his immediate surroundings. The recent retrospectives of his paintings and works on paper at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and of his prints at the nearby Crown Point Press Gallery examined the work of an artist who enjoys an international reputation, but who is also very much a part of the local scene. Bay Area painting has figured importantly in American postwar art, and Bechtle has continued to play a key role in its development. In fact, if you wished to map Bay Area realism—for me, the region's strongest suit—one point of reference would be the structured expressionism of Richard Diebenkorn, another the juicy Pop of Wayne Thiebaud, and a third the cool, meticulous Photo-Realism of Robert Bechtle.

Photo-Realism, as Bechtle practices it, seems straightforward. It is presentational, emotionally understated and stylistically neutral, with no mysteries, politics or painterly flourishes readily apparent. Bechtle shoots a 35mm slide of a scene from quotidian American life, projects it onto a midsized canvas, draws it accurately and renders it with brushes and oil paint in a clear, meticulous way, so that the final product retains the look and feel of the source photograph. Considering the amount of detail inherent in most photographs, it comes as no surprise that it takes months for Bechtle to make a painting. Photo-Realists have used various techniques to make their work. Malcolm Morley in his early paintings, for example, would grid the canvas, turn it upside down and paint the image in, square by square. (He has recently returned to this style in his paintings of catastrophes and sporting events.) Others combine source photographs to create a working image. Bechtle keeps it simple. He shoots a slide, crops it and uses what he sees, subject to the occasional deletion or minor rearrangement. Bechtle shepherds his painting along in clear, layered stages. He draws the projected image, turns the lights back on and slowly brings the painting up from a monochrome to a colored underpainting. He

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Robert Bechtle: '60 T-Bird, 1967-68, oil on canvas, 72 by 98⅛ inches.ersity of California, Berkeley Art Museum.

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Jetta, *2003, oil on canvas, 37 by 66½ inches. Collection Randy and Arlene Brooks, Honolulu.*

then moves on to precise overpainting, and finally adds the carefully considered small adjustments needed to bring the work to the right degree of finish.

In some ways Photo-Realism is easier than it looks. Although to the general public it appears to be a technical tour de force, most trained artists can pull the feat off, and over the years many have. Some, of course, do it better than others. Many people consider the Photo-Realists a uniform lot, distinguished only by variations in subject matter—one paints diners, another movie theaters, still another pickup trucks—but there is much more to it than that, and artists like Bechtle, Ralph Goings and Richard Estes are able to make surprising things happen in what would appear to be a tightly restricted format. The Photo-Realist enterprise continues in various guises, and (to take a recent example) if you compare Bechtle's work to the recent Damien Hirst paintings of pills, medical procedures and the like, the difference becomes clear. Bechtle and his experienced peers make paintings that are formally rich and nuanced, in command of the resources of both realistic and abstract painting, whereas the Hirst paintings (like Jeff Koons's forays into representational painting), although interesting in the context of his larger project, are essentially information; they are formally inert and, tellingly, look better in reproduction than in real life.

The self-acknowledged Photo-Realists also sort out according to who came to the practice when. Bechtle was a member of the original group. Discovering a new way of making art (and Photo-Realism really did amount to something fresh) rather than taking up an existing style has traditionally added to an artist's luster. In part this is a function of critical and commercial bookkeeping (the First Generation Abstract Expressionists, for example, are distinguished from the Second), but a significant aspect of primacy—and Bechtle has pointed this out on a number of occasions—is a sense of heightened urgency in the work, a feeling on the part of the artist that something needs to be done, and nobody so far has done it. This urgency can last throughout an artist's career, and I believe it has for Bechtle. His newer work is more pressured and baroque than that which preceded it, sometimes teetering on the edge of vertigo. It is full of shadows and light shifts, and replete with painterly incident, albeit subtle. A street, for example, that in an early Bechtle would be an uninflected stretch of gray, will be rendered in a later work as an almost pointillist spread of blue, orange and brown. Step back a bit, and it resolves perfectly into pavement, but the visual charge stays with you.

Bechtle's earliest professional work was painterly in a nondemonstrative way. It was introspective, carefully composed (he often portrayed figures in an interior, set against framing windows or mirrors) and executed in nicely modulated, grayed tonalities. These are fine paintings—*Cookie Jar* (1964), a self-portrait with the figure ambiguously caught somewhere in the mid-ground of opposing bedroom mirrors, is a good example—but they are anchored firmly in traditional territory. It wasn't until Bechtle moved his focus outdoors and began to use the camera as a real working tool that his work began to look like something new.

The quality of light differs from place to place, and, on the sunny middays that Bechtle chose to photograph his subjects, that light—clean, bright and coastal—seems quintessentially Californian. One of his earliest Photo-Realist works, *'60 T-Bird* (1967-68), set the stage for many of the paintings that were to follow. It is a portrait (as are a large number of Bechtle's paintings), but one with a difference. A slim, balding man who looks to be in his mid-30s is shown standing by the open door of a shiny white Ford Thunderbird, one foot inside

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the car, the other on the pavement. He's wearing white chinos, a blue short-sleeved shirt and sunglasses. He's posed, sort of: his body turned three quarters toward us, his head in profile. His left hand is in his pocket; his right rests casually on the top of the car's window frame. He's a good-looking guy with a cool car on a beautiful California day—and he's the artist's brother to boot. But the picture's not really about him; in fact, in terms of square inches, he's not terribly important. It's much more about the feel of the heavy, cream-white car set against the textured facade of a bluer white stucco house. It's about the smooth expanse of pavement, the fat gray tires and the composition of windows, vents, drainpipes, rooflines and bushes. What seems to have most concerned the artist is precise planar division and the interplay of both close and sharply divergent tonal values.

But this is also a painting in which the *look* of a photograph is closely attended to: the monocular flattening, the combination of spatial squeeze and equally weighted detail. We know that visual space and feel comfortable with it. This innate acceptance gives Bechtle plenty of room to maneuver, to turn up the heat without our much noticing. The collapsed pictorial space of a photograph allows objects that are adjacent in the photo but on different planes in the real world to stick together, as it were—to read as both discrete entities and as odd hybrids. For example, a tire seems glued to the young boy's back in *Agua Caliente Nova* (1975); man and Weber barbeque become one in *Miles City Bar-B-Que* (1978); and the artist seated on his living-room couch and the white Volvo station wagon parked in the driveway outside are conjoined head-to-grille in *Potrero Hill* (1996).

It is striking how few of the Photo-Realists ever got involved with photography as an artistic medium in its own right. In the pictures he takes for his paintings Bechtle deliberately cultivates an artless look, the sort of straight-ahead stance of, as he puts it, "a real-estate photograph." He shoots all the photographs for his paintings, and they are taken solely for that purpose. With the exception of an early canvas, *'46 Chevy* (1965), he has never used a preexisting snapshot as a source for his work. Photography functions simply as a tool, a means to an end, not the end itself. The tool, of course, is used subtly. For example, unlike Chuck Close and Gerhard Richter, Bechtle does not use photography's capacity to blur either as a signifier of the painting's photographic source, a formal device or a means of intensifying emotion. All of the elements in a Bechtle painting are in sharp focus, just as they are in human vision. He maintains extreme crispness but avoids a distracting "cutout" look by various tactics, among them the painting of very thin halation lines paralleling a contour, or the breaking of a smooth edge and the insertion of a bordering area's colors and forms. Bechtle knows how to operate in the gap between what the eye registers and the mind constructs, a useful ability when dealing with a source as tricky as photography.

Cars function as surrogates for living creatures in Bechtle's painting, sometimes menacingly, sometimes humorously.

The objectivity of a photograph is a convention, and one decreasingly serviceable in a world of widespread digital manipulation. Since painting, however, has traditionally bent observed reality to its own expressive and interpretive purposes, the use of a photograph as an ostensibly undistorted painting model allows the artist to tap into the aura of veracity that photographs are still sometimes presumed to have. Needless to say, putting a lens (of any focal length) between the artist and the subject to be painted invariably changes the look of that painting. The camera distorts, but it distorts in a different way than drawing or painting from life does. No matter how skilled an artist you are, and how intent you are on transcribing what you see, the act of

Marin Avenue—Late Afternoon, *1998, oil on canvas, 36 by 66 inches. Private collection, Atlanta.*

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Damped down both emotionally and formally, Bechtle's paintings, for all their seeming obviousness, reveal themselves rather slowly.

transferring three-dimensional reality onto a two-dimensional surface is of necessity mediated through sensibility. The head moves, the light changes, scales subtly shift; some aspect of the visual field is always more engaging than another. This, of course, is precisely what we value in working from life. To paint a photograph is another business altogether, since it makes something two-dimensional from something that is *already* two-dimensional.

This process would seem straightforward, but the act of translation from photograph to painting is not a simple shift of scale or change of materials. Because the two aspects of the equation are so self-contained and formally related, the move from photograph to painting functions as an act of displacement as much as it does an act of transformation. The photograph has taken up residence in the painting. It is the "other"—hidden there in plain sight, and creating, as the "other" tends to do, a sense of unease.

A related form of displacement operates in Bechtle's work, a movement of identity between people and things. In *'61 Pontiac* (1968-69), a family, as usual unnamed, but in fact the artist, his wife and two young children, are posed in front of a white Pontiac station wagon. They squint a bit into the sun, the man with his left hand on top of his son's head, the woman holding the younger daughter on her hip. But there is a fifth member of the family, the car. This implicit category drift works both ways: as the car becomes more human, the humans become less so. The title of the painting (and this is echoed throughout the body of Bechtle's work) is no accident.

Cars figure prominently in Bechtle's art—not exactly a surprise in work depicting modern California life, but in a purportedly open culture they possess an oddly hermetic quality. People may be shown in proximity to automobiles, but nobody (with the exception of that early snapshot-derived painting, *'46 Chevy*) is ever seated *in* one, much less shown in the act of driving. There are (again with the exception of *'46 Chevy*) no convertibles either. Automobiles are parked, their engines silent, and in a number of recent works, like *Jetta* (2003) and *Covered Car—Missouri Street II* (2001), they are shrouded by car covers. For the most part Bechtle's cars are big and bulky, low-keyed, but still vaguely menacing presences. They tend to crowd the space of the painting, sometimes physically, but almost always emotionally. The hulking brown-and-tan station wagon in *'71 Buick* is captured from a low angle and at a slight diagonal. It looms in front of a modest white bungalow, which, with its staggered roofline, echoes the shape of the car. It's not much of a contest: the car is powerful, dominant; the house, with its white-and-red scalloped aluminum awnings, rather pathetic. Similarly, the silvery blue sedan in *Marin Avenue—Late Afternoon* (1998) is (due to perspective) longer than the unprepossessing house it is parked in front of, and the huge gray-green Chrysler in *Alameda Chrysler* (1981) makes the older woman who proudly stands by its smooth, concave flank look small and vulnerable, her loud floral blouse, checked pants and chipper air notwithstanding. Perhaps the most ominous of all is the sky-blue Chrysler with the black-wall tires in *'67 Chrysler* (1973). It is parked facing slightly downhill, ready to roll, and carries with it the sullen, matte and disturbingly anonymous look of an unmarked police cruiser.

Cars function as surrogates for living creatures in Bechtle's painting, sometimes menacingly, sometimes humorously. The mismatched trio of white Buick compact, old-fashioned black boatlike Hudson and light-blue VW bug parked nose-to-tail in *Date Palms* (1971) feels like a procession of circus animals, while the bright-yellow sedan with the black vinyl top in *Near Ocean Avenue* (2002), parked in a driveway in a neighborhood of bland cars and blander houses, suggests the presence of an individualist, a life-of-the-(very dull)-party type.

Night Chairs, *1980, charcoal on paper, 12 by 16¼ inches.*

While cars reflect the humans that own them, so does furniture, especially that analogue to the seated human form, the chair. Chairs are pressed into service in a number of Bechtle's paintings. *Watsonville Chairs* (1976) depicts an enclosed back porch, separated from its neighbors by a wooden fence topped with a run of yellow corrugated plastic. A strikingly tanned elderly man is the sole occupant of the picture. He sits in profile at a round white table in the right-hand corner of the foreground. His arm and a portion of his face are in deep shadow, while the rest of him is bril-

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Santa Barbara Chairs, *1983, oil on canvas, 47⅞ by 68⅛ inches. Estate of Richard Brown Baker through Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven.*

liantly lighted. An open bottle of Olympia beer sits on the table next to him. He faces right and looks out of the picture, not connecting in any way with the viewer. Far more congenial are the three mismatched and casually placed chairs occupying the majority of the deck space. Two are tubular-aluminum deck chairs, one yellow and white, the other green and white. The center chair is a dining room or kitchen chair upholstered in a green vinyl floral print, its pointy, tapered legs set uncomfortably in the wide spaces between the deck boards. There's a family here, but a missing one, and the painting, for all its light, strikes me as distressingly dark in spirit—something out of a downbeat John Cheever story (set improbably in the warm country south of San Francisco.)

Santa Barbara Chairs (1983) is another painting with a strong emotional kick. The bearded artist, wearing sunglasses, faces the viewer. He is on a patio in a grassy backyard, seated at one of those round white tables with a hole in the center for an umbrella. There's no umbrella, and while the figure is partially shaded, the table is in full sun. The table and a jumble of mismatched chairs interpose themselves between the figure and the viewer like a kind of barricade. The scene portrayed is, on the face of it, perfectly ordinary, but the sense of psychological isolation is palpable. The figure and the furniture are set off-center to the right. The painting is saved from imbalance by the single green-and-white line of a garden hose that runs across the grass on the left-hand side of the picture. This provides a tenuous compositional and emotional stability, a conduit to and from the figure.

The psychological charge of a Bechtle painting is all the more powerful because of its indirection: he goes to great pains to draw our attention away from obvious emotions and toward an

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almost numbing recitation of visual specifics. Such an approach has characterized the work of a certain sector of the literary and cinematic avant-garde, and the novels of Alain Robbe-Grillet, with their deadpan accretion of descriptive detail, make an interesting counterpart to Bechtle's work. If Bechtle were a photographer, then the psychological might play a more conspicuous role in his work. These, however, are paintings, and detail, while captured immediately and mechanically in the source photograph, is not treated that way in the end product. A photographer, no matter how engaged, stands at a remove from the complexity of the subject photographed: a scene is framed, the best image chosen and the picture is developed and printed. While a photographer pays attention to the elements of the photograph, it is not with the same point-to-point intensity brought to bear by a painter transcribing that photograph. That concentration on specifics and away from the iconic tends to mute emotions, especially when the subject matter is ostensibly neutral. Bechtle's paintings are damped down both emotionally and formally, and, while immediately comprehensible on one level, they tend to reveal themselves slowly, even a bit reluctantly.

Sterling Avenue—Raking the Grass, *1996, watercolor on paper, 10 by 14 inches. Collection Troy Bryan Downing, San Diego.*

Watering on Sterling Avenue, *1994, watercolor on paper, 15¼ by 22¼ inches. Collection Jeanne Newman.*

Bechtle, in the last 15 or so years, has nudged his subject matter away from the overtly mundane to the guardedly lively. While in earlier work, for example, the streets he depicted were resolutely flat, he now takes advantage of San Francisco's hilliness to give his paintings an air of dynamism and instability. The results might be consciously dramatic, as in *Sunset Intersection—40th and Vicente* (1989), with its strange combination of sunlit street and blackening, stormy sky, or they may be quietly unsettling, as they are in *Texas Street Intersection* (2000). That painting places the viewer on the edge of the pavement at an intersection of two wide but nearly empty streets. Yellow walk lines placed perpendicular to the bottom of the canvas and right of center direct us across the street to a steep hill whose sidewalk is deeply shadowed. Another hill falls percipitously away to the left. A stop sign runs from the bottom of the painting to the top, isolating a light-colored car on the far left side of the painting. The car is not parallel parked. Instead, it faces us, its rear wheels up against the curb. The car looks heavy, canted and not entirely steady. This unanchored feeling is exaggerated by the way the picture is cropped. No sky shows; there is nothing bigger or deeper to orient yourself by. It is worthwhile to compare the painting to a print that Bechtle made of the same subject in 2004. *Texas and 20th Intersection* was clearly created from the same image that generated the painting, but the print, a soft ground etching with aquatint, feels quite different from the work on canvas. Bechtle changed format for the print, making the image squarer. More of the scene is thus revealed at the top and bottom, and, by rendering the shadows transparently and adding windows and a section of sky to the composition, he gives the print a lighter, less emotionally compressed air.

Bechtle has also done drawings and prints of night scenes in recent years. The streets he portrays are, as usual, empty. Cars are parked, and the occasional window is lighted. These are particularly affecting works, conveying not the expected emotion of isolation or loneliness, but instead a romantic quietness. *Arkansas Street—Night* (2002) is a small charcoal drawing on blue-gray paper. It depicts a street with a few windows illuminated and two cars parked on either end of it. Moody and elegiac, the drawing has the feeling of the turn-of-the-century pictorial photography of Alfred Stieglitz or Edward Steichen. Similarly lyrical is a gravure-and-aquatint print, *20th and Mississippi—Night* (2002). A hilly street crests in the middle of the composition, forming what is, to all intents and purposes, a horizon line. On one side of the street, a low white building sits; on the other side, a pickup truck. The sky lightens as it approaches the pavement, and you

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Texas Street Intersection, *2000, oil on canvas, 36 by 66 inches. Collection Malcolm Holzman, New York. Photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.*

Texas and 20th Intersection, *2004, color soft ground etching with aquatint, 22 by 30¾ inches. Courtesy Crown Point Press.*

can't help feeling that something extraordinary is happening right over that hill.

While Bechtle might have his theatrical moments, his work never crosses the line into manipulation, much less sentimentality. It is grounded in the factual, in the complex world of appearances. The utter familiarity of his subject matter—both the scene itself and the look of the source photograph—allows Bechtle's paintings to slip in under the radar. (Familiarity does not, of course, imply universality. Bechtle's subject matter is grounded in a specific time, place and social milieu, and will no doubt appear more removed from ordinary life as time goes by.)

Refreshingly, the paintings do not proclaim their importance or flaunt their intelligence. In an odd twist, Bechtle's overt technical virtuosity provides a cover for his pictorial and conceptual depth: if the paintings are so well painted, so "lifelike," how can they be anything but easy, middlebrow stuff? Of course, letting people underestimate you has tactical advantages. Bechtle grapples with serious issues of representation, but he does so in such a laboriously offhand way that it takes a while for a viewer to realize what the artist is up to, and just how good he is. Bechtle has taken on the sorts of problems that artists of all representational stripes are dealing with these days—particularly the transmutation of the photographic image—and he has, over a span of 40-odd years, come up with real answers. He has proven himself to be a first-rate painter, draftsman and printmaker, and as these recent shows make clear, someone to whom we should pay serious attention. □

"Robert Bechtle: A Retrospective," curated by Janet Bishop, appeared at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art [Feb. 12-June 5], traveled to the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth [June 26-Aug. 28] and will be seen next spring at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. [Mar. 4-June 4, 2006]. It is accompanied by a 206-page catalogue that includes essays by Bishop, Michael Auping, Jonathan Weinberg and Charles Ray. "Robert Bechtle Prints: 1965-2004" appeared at Crown Point Press Gallery, San Francisco [Feb. 11-Apr. 29]. Drawings by the artist were also on view at Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco [Feb. 3-Mar. 5].

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