Sebastian Smee, "Seeing 'Photorealism' in a new light," *The Boston Globe*, January 4, 2013.

Seeing 'Photorealism' in a new light

By Sebastian Smee | GLOBE STAFF JANUARY 04, 2014
ROBERT BECHTLE/GLADSTONE GALLERY, NEW YORK

" '64 Valiant" by Robert Bechtle.

NEW HAVEN — Ostensibly preoccupied with how things looked, Photorealism was actually, and often obscurely, concerned with ideas. As such, it epitomized self-consciously progressive art of the 1970s, along with early video and performance art.

Like visiting teenage nephews who leave whiskers in the kitchen sink and refuse to say when they'll leave, those other species of 1970s art are still very much with us, and we've almost become sentimentally fond of them. Photorealism was different. Its stay was brief. Embarrassed by its inability to get a girlfriend or a job, it politely made its bed and went home long ago.

Or so we thought. But, on the evidence of a thought-provoking show at Yale University Art Gallery called "Still Life: 1970s Photorealism," we were wrong. It turns out that all Photorealism did was go out on a long bender. After hanging out

Sebastian Smee, "Seeing 'Photorealism' in a new light," *The Boston Globe*, January 4, 2013.

downtown with the likes of Chuck Close, Ed Ruscha, Richard Prince, Jeff Koons, and Gerhard Richter, Photorealism now returns to our doorstep with a disarming smile. "Remember me?"
"I thought we were finished with you."
"You misunderstood."

And perhaps we did. After all, what was Photorealism really about? The easy answer — "Many things" — doesn't satisfy. In motivation, ambition, and execution, the works in the Yale show, all taken from the gallery's collection, may be surprisingly various. But there's one big and obvious thing that holds them together: photography.
The central, generative tension in Photorealist painting is the tension between the there-and- then of photography and the here-and-now of painting. Whistling insouciantly in the background is a related tension — it's really a low-level irony — between the banal ubiquity of 1970s color photography (and its generally humdrum subjects) and the special singularity of museum-scale painting.

Why did this tension cease to hold our interest, quickly turning Photorealism into the most dated of movements, the pictorial equivalent of disco balls and bouffant hair? Mostly because, throughout the 1980s and '90s, these interesting tensions were usurped and out-muscled by similar tensions coming from the opposite direction. Photographers such as Cindy Sherman, Louise Lawler, Andreas Gursky, Rineke Dijkstra, and, let's be frank, a zillion others, began to bring the singularity, the here-and-nowness of painting to photography, with museum-ready results. Kapow! Take that, painting! Why go to all the trouble of making paint resemble photographs when you could get effects more charged and challenging by making photographs resemble paintings?

Humiliated by its finicky obsession with pinpricks of light, its super-fine sable brushes, and all its other encumbrances, Photorealism folded its hand. But as I hinted earlier, several major artists, though not exactly Photorealists, continued to be interested in what happened when paint was used to contrive photographic effects. Artists such as Close and especially Richter were especially taken by the idea of focus — or in Richter's case, lack of focus.

For purely mechanical reasons, the question of focus is at the heart of photography. It did not necessarily pertain to painting, where everything can be in focus if the painter so desires. Richter, as if recoiling against the clarity and specificity — the mental focus — of painting, contrived to make of photographic blur a kind of spiritual bass note, a drone, against which the whole history of image-making was now to be measured.

Sebastian Smee, "Seeing 'Photorealism' in a new light," *The Boston Globe*, January 4, 2013.

He is represented here with a 1972 painting called "Portrait of Holger Friedrich." The work was commissioned on behalf of Friedrich's partner after the subject's untimel death. Friedrich is shown head-on, sitting in the front seat of a car, suggesting the presence of a camera on the dashboard, or perhaps in the subject's own hands — a "selfie."

The blur, and the arrestingly intimate vantage point, give the portrait the unnerving quality of a death mask, putting the work in the tradition of Andy Warhol's more explicitly violent but equally affectless silk screen paintings of car crashes. Those same qualities also point forward, of course, to Richter's own celebrated series of blurry paintings based on news photos of the dead members of the Baader Meinhof gang. (That series is called "October 19, 1977" — note the curiously sharp focus of the title.)

Richter's portrait is atypical of 1970s Photorealism, which tended to be interested not in blur (which suggests speed and transience) but in the kind of heightened clarity that suggests stasis (hence the term "still life" in the show's title). A fine example is Idelle Weber's 1974 painting, "Gutter 1," a virtuosic transposition into paint of a close-up photo of trash in a street gutter.

Weber, who switched to Photorealism in the 1970s after a decade exploring Pop, attends to light and color here with a clarity that almost evokes the sacred. Half the trash she depicts is made of reflective materials like crumpled aluminum. For good measure, she throws in a white plastic straw with a thin blue stripe and an iron grate once splashed with surplus yellow paint that is now cracking and peeling.
The conceit of using paint to reproduce a photograph of tired and flaking paint sets up a kind of aesthetic brinksmanship that dovetails with the elevation of trash to museum-worthy subject matter. But, although the painting itself beguiles and ravishes the eye, these paradoxes are without real bite. They feel thinly optical, needlessly arch.

The same goes for many other works in the show: The more dazzling, transient, and unlikely the light effects, the more they present themselves as a suitable subject for these painters, after the camera's mediation. But the amount of wheezing effort involved undermines their purpose. Great art pounces, like a solitary predator; these works lay siege. They exhaust the eye, and leave you unsurprised that Photorealism failed to emerge from the 1970s as a viable style.

Why then (to return to the beginning) this recent renewed interest in the movement? Is it simply a function of the current pervasive nostalgia for all things '70s that finds expression in untended facial hair, flares, floral prints, and fondue parties?
Highly likely. But I think a more interesting explanation might be something related

but subtly different. It might have to do with what I see as a revival of more poetic modes of art-making, modes that do not avoid nostalgia (poetry in many ways is nostalgia), but are nonetheless fresher and more authentic.

To see what I'm talking about, it's best to focus on two artists included in this show. One is Duane Hanson, the sculptor whose utterly lifelike human figures — disenfranchised, drunk, drug-addicted, dated, and otherwise put upon — scorch sentimentality, and give actual weight to the quality so much Photorealist painting aspired to but failed to pull off: literalism. Hanson is poetic, and even nostalgic ("these people were once real," he says in a deadpan voice) but blisteringly so.

The other is Robert Bechtle, a classic Photorealist — and for me, the best. Bechtle is represented here by " '64 Valiant," a 1971 painting of a car parked in front of a store selling fried chicken.

In one sense, Bechtle's whole mode is nostalgic, tuned to the minor key of a fading Polaroid. But he is a real painter, not a copyist, with a natural feel for composition, color, and subject matter. His works may be based on photographs; but rather than engaging in a kind of aesthetic and conceptual brinksmanship with the rival medium, he commandeers it for his own purposes.

If you have read "The Virgin Suicides" by Jeffrey Eugenides, or fallen under the spell of Robert Adams's photographs in "Summer Nights, Walking," you have had in your mind something like a painting by Robert Bechtle. The time of day is not the point. It's the emotional tenor.

Bechtle finds a perfect equipoise between photography's poignantly blurred "there-and-then" and painting's concentrated focus. He keeps his colors muted and in harmony. And he often finds a way to set the physical beauty and spiritual promise of cars (a perennial subject) against the more matter-of-fact actualities of the glamour- free parking lot, the tired suburban façade, the oil stain on the bitumen. Oh, and there's also his light. Bechtle's light is creamy, tinted with gray, and it lingers over greens, pale blues, and soft browns — colors that suggest a washed-up decade not so long ago; it doesn't really matter which one.