

PAINING PHOTOGRAPHY: ROBERT BECHTLE AND THE CRITICAL LEGACY
OF 1960s PHOTOREALISM

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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In the early 1970s, New York gallerist Louis K. Meisel devised a formal set of criteria to identify a group of artists he referred to as Photorealists. Despite the serious limitations of Meisel's initial formulation, his criteria for assessing what constitutes Photorealism continue to dominate the critical discourse surrounding this artistic approach. This thesis revisits the critical legacy of 1960s Photorealism through a case study of artist Robert Bechtle and, in contrast to Meisel, identifies Bechtle's work as deeply informed by other contemporary artists engaged with photographic imagery. By better appreciating Bechtle's craft-based approach to the painting tradition and positioning his work in the broader history of the ongoing "dialogue" between painting and photography, this thesis ultimately provides a more expansive and robust understanding of Photorealist practices in the 1960s as well as their critical legacy.

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CHAPTER I

THE CRITICAL LEGACY OF 1960s PHOTOREALISM

One of the reasons there has been no outstanding critic championing Photo-Realism is that there is really very little to interpret or explain; the paintings speak for themselves. [...] All the artists have been interviewed; many have written about their work. What they say is what there is; there are no mysteries or secrets. Grounded in paint rather than theory, Photo-Realism does not need the intellectualizing, speculating, and interpreting required by Minimal, Conceptual, Environmental, and Performance art. This does not make Photo-Realism any better or worse, any more or less important than any other type of art.

– Louis K. Meisel, *Photo-Realism*, 1980¹

The above quote is excerpted from the Introduction to Louis K. Meisel’s *Photo-Realism*, a book published by the New York gallerist in 1980, and the first in his series on the American Photorealist painters. The continued legacy of these artists is greatly indebted to Meisel, who coined the term “Photorealism” in 1968.² Meisel has meticulously documented the works of these artists in *catalog raisonné*-style books and updated their content periodically. As of today, he has published four volumes: *Photo-Realism*, *Photorealism Since 1980*, *Photorealism at the Millennium*, and most recently, *Photorealism in the Digital Age*. Appointed with the task of amassing a collection of Photorealist works for Stuart M. Speiser in 1972—a collection “which was eventually to travel to more than twenty museums”—Meisel devised a set of criteria to distinguish the unique formal approach of the Photorealist painters.³ His “five-point definition” also appears in the Introduction of his first work and consists of the following requirements:

¹ Louis K. Meisel, *Photo-Realism* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1980), 20.

² *Ibid.*, 9.

³ *Ibid.*

1. The Photo-Realist uses the camera and photograph to gather information.
2. The Photo-Realist uses a mechanical or semimechanical [*sic*] means to transfer the information to the canvas.
3. The Photo-Realist must have the technical ability to make the finished work appear photographic.
4. The artist must have exhibited work as a Photo-Realist by 1972 to be considered one of the central Photo-Realists.
5. The artist must have devoted at least five years to the development and exhibition of Photo-Realist work.⁴

The reader may be surprised to learn of Meisel’s level of commitment to the Photorealist artists, given the diminishing tone of his words in the quote cited at the beginning of this chapter. To say that “Photo-Realism does not need the [same] intellectualizing, speculating, and interpreting”⁵ as other contemporary styles overlooks the unique contributions of the Photorealist painters and minimizes the significance of their work. Meisel is not the only individual who has critiqued Photorealism in this manner (though it seems strange that he would do so)—in fact, I cite this quote specifically because it reflects the prevailing sentiment towards Photorealism in much of the critical literature. In her Introduction to *Supperrealist Painting and Sculpture*, Christine Lindey observes, “The cool realism of the style has [...] earned it the distinction of being vitriolically attacked by many critics. It has been dismissed for being cold and inhuman, retrogressive, or merely naïve,” and thus overlooked in terms of its potential for critical content.⁶

⁴ Ibid., 12-14.

⁵ Ibid., 20.

⁶ Christine Lindey, *Supperrealist Painting and Sculpture* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1980), 7.

What Meisel's sentiments indicate, then, is that the overall approach to Photorealism—and his foundational definition of the style—is in need of re-evaluation. One must be cognizant of Meisel's aims and motivations as a gallerist, while also acknowledging his efforts to unite an otherwise disparate group of artists.⁷ Meisel's continued dedication to these artists positions him as the premier expert on Photorealism, and it does so justly. His five-point definition from the 1970s is problematic, however, because it remains *the* authoritative criteria for approaching Photorealism in contemporary writing. Given the interpretive limitations suggested in Meisel's quote, I propose a closer examination of his definition.

What is particularly unusual about Meisel's definition is the contrast between the first three criteria and the latter two; the first three points refer to technical features of the Photorealist approach to painting, whereas the fourth and fifth points limit these artists by time period—yet they do so arbitrarily. Meisel's fourth point, “The artist must have exhibited work as a Photo-Realist by 1972 to be considered one of the central Photo-Realists,” is based on his logic that, “By 1972, Photo-Realism was a well-founded and developed style [and] considering the time-consuming nature of this type of painting, an artist must have been working in this direction prior to 1970 to have exhibited developed work by 1972.”⁸ Meisel's speculation is based on his own knowledge from working with these artists, and the reader will note that the year 1972 conveniently aligns with his development of the formal guidelines for Photorealism.⁹ Similarly, with regards to his

⁷ According to Meisel, the first generation of Photorealist artists developed their practices independently. Meisel, *Photo-Realism*, 18-20.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

fifth point—that “the artist must have devoted at least five years to the development and exhibition of Photo-Realist work”—Meisel admits that “it is always convenient [...] for historical and academic ends, as well as commercial purposes, to establish and define groups or movements,” offering no explanation for the five-year requirement other than an effort to exclude any “band wagoners,” or artists who were not interested in continuing to produce work in the Photorealist style.¹⁰ With the advantage of a broader historical perspective, we now see that Meisel’s definition of Photorealism, coupled with the quote cited earlier, is limiting and imprecise. Again, this is not to underrate Meisel’s role in the careers of these artists, but to highlight the fundamental limitations in the critical literature on Photorealism.

Here I wish to build upon this review of the existing literature and expand the approach to this type of art. Chapter II will introduce California Photorealist Robert Bechtle, who serves as a fitting case study as one of the earliest artists to work in this mode. According to Meisel, Bechtle was the *first* artist to create a true Photorealistic work.¹¹ I will discuss the influence of Meisel’s five-point definition in the approach to Bechtle’s work, as well as the influence in subsequent writings on the artist.

Meisel has pointed out that the Photorealist artists are not united by a common ideology since “there is no doctrine, no set of rules, or manifesto set forth by any of these artists.”¹² This lack of a common goal reinforces the importance of Meisel’s definition in the initial development of Photorealism, and explains, in part, the imprecise nature of his five-point definition. As such, Chapter III will approach the emergence of Photorealism

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Louis K. Meisel and Linda Chase, *Photorealism at the Millennium* (New York: Abrams, 2002) 18.

¹² Meisel, *Photo-Realism*, 20.

as a unique *moment* in the 1960s, rather than a discrete *movement* in the history of art. I will compare Bechtle's work to that of contemporary artists—the silkscreened images of Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg, for instance—with particular attention to the use of photographic imagery. This discussion will effectively situate Bechtle's Photorealistic compositions in the context of the unparalleled artistic climate of the 1960s.

Developing from this broader context, we will see that Bechtle's work operates in a larger historical “dialogue” between painting and photography. Chapter IV will consider the implications of Photorealism and its unusual return to the painting tradition in the midst of the late sixties. Finally, Chapter V will synthesize these interests with the cultural context examined in Chapter II to further explore the possible repercussions of Bechtle's work that surface in this reassessment of Photorealism.

CHAPTER II

A CASE STUDY OF ROBERT BECHTLE

In 2005, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) held a major retrospective of Robert Bechtle's work. Curator Janet Bishop cites Meisel's five-point definition of Photorealism in her essay for the exhibition catalog, *Robert Bechtle: Painting as We Are*. She stipulates, "From this point forward, it is easy enough to position Bechtle within this history: He was a founding Photorealist (Meisel credits him as being the first); he was one of the originators of the style in California; and his work neatly fit all of the aforementioned criteria."¹³ I cite this example to reiterate the pervasiveness of Meisel's original list of criteria from the 1970s—to illustrate its influence in recent literature and in the continuing careers of these artists. Bechtle makes a particularly good case study for this re-evaluation of Photorealism due to his long-standing artistic career; as noted earlier and as alluded to in the excerpt from Bishop's essay, Meisel designates Bechtle as the first true Photorealist. The painting Meisel refers to specifically is '56 *Chrysler* from 1965 [Fig. 1]—a work easily overlooked for its mundane subject matter yet significant for its direct reference to the photographic medium. Here we must turn to a brief history of the artist before we can fully appreciate his use of the photographic image.

A Brief History of the Artist

Robert Alan Bechtle was born in San Francisco in 1932. His parents, Otto and Thelma Bechtle, spent the majority of their lives in the California Bay Area, and their son followed suit. Bechtle exhibited an interest in art at an early age, and in 1950, he enrolled

¹³ Janet Bishop, "Robert Bechtle: Painting as We Are" in *Robert Bechtle: A Retrospective* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2005), 22.



Figure 1. Robert Bechtle, *'56 Chrysler*, 1965 (oil on canvas, 36 x 40 inches)¹⁴

at the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland to begin studying graphic design. After a brief stint in the Army, he returned for his MFA in painting, gaining exposure to the flourishing Bay Area Figurative movement.¹⁵

¹⁴ Robert Bechtle, "'56 Chrysler,'" painting, 1965, *SFMOMA.org*, http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/multimedia/interactive_features/24?autoplay=true# (accessed June 7, 2015).

¹⁵ Bishop, et. al., *Robert Bechtle: A Retrospective*, 13.

Bechtle cites the leading artists of the Bay Area Figurative movement as his primary influences—artists like David Park, Elmer Bischoff, and in particular, Richard Diebenkorn.¹⁶ These artists were interested in reintroducing the figure to painting as a turn away from Abstract Expressionism, though their gestural handling of thick layers of paint meant that their works often bore formal similarities to those of their predecessors.¹⁷

Although he initially resisted the influence of Diebenkorn's work, Bechtle found that he could not avoid the growing momentum of the Bay Area Figurative movement.¹⁸ Bishop highlights the formal similarities between the works of these artists in her lecture "Painters Looking at Paintings: Henri Matisse, Richard Diebenkorn, Wayne Thiebaud, and Robert Bechtle" at the de Young Museum in 2013, noting Bechtle's references to the picture planes of Diebenkorn's *Ocean Park* series [**Fig. 2**].¹⁹ She acknowledges that the connection is not immediately obvious, particularly as Bechtle had made every effort to distinguish his work from that of the Bay Area Figurative artists—in fact, Bishop suggests that Bechtle's use of the photograph in his work was partially motivated by the desire to pursue a different style.²⁰

¹⁶ See, for instance, Bechtle's discussion of Diebenkorn's work in "75 Reasons to Live: Robert Bechtle on Richard Diebenkorn's Coffee," San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, released January 2010, <http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/multimedia/videos/670>.

¹⁷ Refer to Susan Landauer's critical work *The San Francisco School of Abstract Expressionism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1996) and Thomas Albright's *Art in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945-1980: An Illustrated History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

¹⁸ In his interview with Paul Karlstrom, Bechtle admits that he avoided taking classes with Diebenkorn, who was a faculty member at the CCAC during his graduate school years. "Oral history interview with Robert Alan Bechtle, 1978 September 13-1980 February 1," *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*, accessed March 16, 2015, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-robert-alan-bechtle-12008>.

¹⁹ Janet Bishop, "Painters Looking at Paintings: Henri Matisse, Richard Diebenkorn, Wayne Thiebaud, and Robert Bechtle," (lecture, de Young Museum, San Francisco, CA, September 7, 2013). Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, published September 17, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xNYO3QSy0HE>.

²⁰ Ibid.



Figure 2. Richard Diebenkorn, *Cityscape I* (formerly *Landscape I*), 1963 (oil on canvas, 60 ¼ x 50 ½ inches)²¹

²¹ Richard Diebenkorn, “Cityscape I (formerly *Landscape I*),” painting, 1963, *Artstor Digital Library*, <http://library.artstor.org/library/secure/ViewImages?id=8CNVfzckJjw9NEA7eD95QX4tWHwo&userId=hTxOdzAk&zoomparams> (accessed June 7, 2015).

In 1964, Bechtle began using photographs as a visual reference tool for painting, and ultimately transitioned to working purely from the photograph.²² Soon after, in 1969, Bechtle began working with gallerist Ivan Karp at OK Harris Works of Art in New York, cementing his place alongside other first-generation Photorealists who include Ralph Goings and Richard McLean,²³ as well as Chuck Close and Richard Estes.²⁴ Although the realistic portrayal of a subject has deep roots in Western artistic tradition, the works of the Photorealists differ in one crucial aspect: these artists aim to recreate the *photographic* image of the subject, rather than the likeness of the original subject itself.

The regional styles unique to the San Francisco Bay Area artists guided Bechtle's development of an individual style, but the larger context of movements in the late sixties also had significant influence on his early artistic career. While regional influence is important to Bechtle's practice, a broader consideration of art historical context is essential to understanding the rise of Photorealism more generally. This is especially important because the Photorealist artists were not unified by a central ideology like the Pop, Conceptual, or Minimalist artists.²⁵

²² In the course of his discussion with Bechtle, Karlstrom indicates that the artist works "almost exclusively 35mm slides," though in his early works, he sometimes used "black and white photographs" as his primary source. *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*, "Oral history interview with Robert Alan Bechtle, 1978 September 13-1980 February 1."

²³ Meisel refers to Bechtle, Goings, and McLean as the "West Coast Photo-Realist Triumvirate," as they were all students at the California College of Arts and Crafts though they were "not close friends at the time." Meisel, *Photo-Realism*, 25.

²⁴ Meisel chronicles these first-generation artists (according to his definition of Photorealism) in *Photo-Realism*.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

Photorealism is typically understood as a branch of the Pop art movement.²⁶ In contrast to the slick, commercial images affiliated with the work of Pop artists, Bechtle has gained recognition for his unemotional compositions which depict scenes of postwar middle-class life in the San Francisco Bay Area through his personal snapshots [Fig. 3]. The frequent appearance of cars in Bechtle's work is explained, in part, by the artist's approach to the subject itself. His deadpan aesthetic embraces dry, unidealized reality. Bechtle is interested in exploring banal, everyday imagery, and he cites neo-Dada artist Jasper Johns as an influence in his fascination with "the invisibility of subject matter [and] painting things that we don't pay any attention to."²⁷ Bechtle has often referred to the "dumbness" and ordinary quality of the subjects he chooses to paint, as all of the cars depicted in his works are standard models (at least in the context of their time).²⁸

Additionally, the car tends to be part of the "natural" background for the artist focusing specifically on the scenery of everyday suburban America; thus the presence of cars in nearly all of Bechtle's works is both deliberate and incidental. *Vicente Avenue Intersection* [Fig. 4] provides an example of one of Bechtle's later works, in which the car is no longer at the center of the composition (a stylistic development) yet remains a key feature of the suburban environment.²⁹

²⁶ See Meisel's discussion at the beginning of his Introduction to *Photo-Realism*. Ibid., 12.

²⁷ Brooke Kellaway, "Interview with Robert Bechtle," Walker Art Center, published May 25, 2012, <http://blogs.walkerart.org/visualarts/2012/05/25/interview-with-robert-bechtle/>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Further discussion of Bechtle's ubiquitous car imagery can be found in the ArtsDC.com video. "Artist Robert Bechtle Talks about Cars in his Work," ArtsDC.com, accessed March 16, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mzULO24hgsA>.



Figure 3. Robert Bechtle, *Alameda Chrysler*, 1981 (oil on canvas, 49 x 70 inches)³⁰



Figure 4. Robert Bechtle, *Vicente Avenue Intersection*, 1989 (oil on canvas, 48 x 69 inches)³¹

³⁰ Robert Bechtle, “Alameda Chrysler,” painting, 1981, *Louis K. Meisel Gallery*, <http://www.meisलगallery.com/lkmg/artist/works/detail.php?wid=14&aid=1> (accessed June 7, 2015).

³¹ Robert Bechtle, “Vicente Avenue Intersection,” painting, 1989, *SFMOMA.org*, http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/multimedia/interactive_features/24?autoplay=true# (accessed June 7, 2015). *NB*: Also referred to as *Sunset Intersection–40th* and *Vicente*.

The following chapter will explore Bechtle's work in conjunction with others engaged with photographic imagery to contextualize his work and illuminate its engagement with the sensibility of the late sixties—essential to understanding the contributions of Photorealism, yet overlooked in Meisel's definition. As we will see, Bechtle's work was influenced by Pop art, but also by Conceptual photography and Minimalist painting.

CHAPTER III

PHOTOREALISM AS A “60s MOMENT”

The latter half of the 1960s offered a burgeoning development of diverse and unconventional approaches; this was the era in which artists experimented with new forms and mediums at an unprecedented level. This decade encompasses works ranging from environments and Happenings, to performance and Land art. Bechtle’s Photorealist works are intertwined with similar concerns and approaches to the photograph as those of Pop artists, yet his work also resonates with other concurrent movements in the late sixties, including Conceptual art—due to the emphasis on photography among these artists—as well as the material concerns of Minimalist painters.

Minimalist Painting

While this chapter will focus predominantly on contemporary uses of the photograph (which appear in Conceptual and Pop art), the similarities between Bechtle’s work and Minimalist painting are worth mentioning to provide additional context. Bechtle’s process of transferring the banal, unemotional snapshot images to the canvas is both precise and scientific, as each composition is derived directly from the original photograph. Bechtle notes, “The photograph, in addition to being a reference source, also serves as a kind of structure or system for the painting which limits the choices of color and placement,”³² and as such, Photorealism has been criticized for a lack of authorial expression—ultimately, one of the goals of the Minimalist painters in their deliberate rejection of authorship and personal expression. The primary subjects of Bechtle’s paintings are the photographs themselves rather than the individuals and objects

³² Robert Bechtle, *Robert Bechtle: A Retrospective Exhibit* (Sacramento, CA: Joint Board of Trustees, E.B. Crocker Art Gallery, 1973).

portrayed.³³ Bechtle's work thus can be understood as non-illusionistic, even if his hyperrealistic rendering of the images may initially suggest otherwise. Bechtle does not attempt to mimic three-dimensional reality, but instead directly transfers the abstracted forms of a two-dimensional photograph to the surface of a two-dimensional canvas. Indeed, Bechtle notes that his painting process centers around "shapes and color relationships and flat patches," rather than the content of the composition.³⁴ This approach gives Bechtle's work its "flatness"—a primary quality of the works by Color Field and Post-Painterly Abstraction artists like Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis. Bechtle's work thus coincides with the object-based and non-illusionistic qualities of Minimalist paintings, which begins to help us understand how his work engages with contemporary artistic interests.

Foundations in Pop Art

Pop art is largely recognized as an American phenomenon, yet Bechtle first encountered the work of artists using American pop culture as their primary subject matter during his travels overseas in Europe in the early 1960s. These were the works of the proto-Pop artists known as the Independent Group at the London Institute of Contemporary Art. This early iteration of Pop art embraces American commercial imagery, yet differs in terms of its critical and often satirical tone. Richard Hamilton's work *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?* [Fig. 5] illustrates this approach, seemingly lampooning the indulgent and idealized American

³³ This idea will be discussed further in Chapter IV.

³⁴ "Time lapse video of Robert Bechtle at work" from "Robert Bechtle: A Retrospective," San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, released December 2004, <http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/multimedia/videos/229#>.

lifestyle through a plethora of commercial references. The canned ham, television set, and vacuum cleaner all point to technologies and mass-produced products readily accessible to American consumers, yet unattainable in the scarcity of resources in Europe's postwar economic recovery. Hamilton would have been one of the artists whose work Bechtle saw in his travels overseas.³⁵



Figure 5. Richard Hamilton, *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Home So Different, So Appealing?*, 1956 (mixed media, 10 ½ x 9 ¾ inches)³⁶

³⁵ Bishop notes, "While traveling, Bechtle reveled in exhibitions of work by Richard Hamilton and other British Pop artists in London and a show by the American Larry Rivers in Paris, all of which made him more attuned to the potential of commercial content in art." Bishop, et. al., *Robert Bechtle: A Retrospective*, 17.

³⁶ Richard Hamilton, "*Just What Is It That Makes Today's Home So Different, So Appealing?*," mixed media, 1956, *UO Libraries Art & Architecture Image Collection*, <http://oregondigital.org/u/?artimages.20114> (accessed June 7, 2015).

When Bechtle returned from his travels in Europe, he encountered the first major exhibit of American Pop art at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York.³⁷ This exhibit of “New Realists,” as they were sometimes called, included central figures of what would become known as the Pop art movement: Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Tom Wesselmann, and Claes Oldenburg. Although Bechtle’s work incorporates banal, everyday imagery—as opposed to the glossy, commercial advertisements characteristic of Pop art—he exhibits a similar interest in mass reproduction and mechanization shared by Lichtenstein and Warhol through his use of the snapshot photograph. Bechtle engages with similar issues to those of the Pop artists but diverges in his approach to these issues and in his engagement with the photographic medium.

Like Lichtenstein, Bechtle’s work combines painting (a tradition associated with “high” culture) with “lowbrow” subject matter. Lichtenstein references the comic book, while Bechtle employs the family photograph or informal snapshot. Lichtenstein’s iconic Ben Day Dots are inspired by the color-dot system of the commercial printing press, which he magnifies to produce images like *Drowning Girl* [Fig. 6]. In a similar vein, Bechtle’s paintings highlight the mechanical production of photographic images. At this point in history, the camera was readily available to American consumers, so snapshot photographs would have been a familiar and popular item. Just as the television became a staple of every standard American middle-class household, other technologies, like the

³⁷ Peter Schjeldahl, “Parked Cars: American Photo-Realism at Its Best,” *The New Yorker*, May 9, 2005. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/05/09/parked-cars>.

Polaroid camera and automobile (which frequently appear in Bechtle's compositions) were easily accessible to this growing consumer market.³⁸



Figure 6. Roy Lichtenstein, *Drowning Girl*, 1963 (oil on canvas, 68 x 68 inches)³⁹

Lichtenstein's *Little Big Painting* [Fig. 7] particularly resonates with this discussion of the intersection of painting and mass-produced imagery. The stylized brushstroke appropriates elements of illustration methods and commercial techniques in its thick, black outlines and graphic shapes. The solid colors and lack of shading

³⁸ Lynn Spiegel, "TV Snapshots, An Archive of Everyday Life" (lecture, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR, February 2, 2015).

³⁹ Roy Lichtenstein, "Drowning Girl," painting, 1963, *Artstor Digital Library*, <http://library.artstor.org/library/secure/ViewImages?id=%2FTRKfyk31Sk0PSI9aIN7R3srWXkudFF5&userId=hTxOdzAk&zoomparams> (accessed June 7, 2015).

emphasize the flattened, superficial appearance of the composition. Although the piece looks as though it has been mechanically produced, it is important to note that Lichtenstein meticulously hand-painted the individual Ben Day Dots—akin to the pointillist technique, although in this case, the exactness creates a mechanized appearance rather than an expressive, impressionistic surface. As such, both Lichtenstein and Bechtle purposefully embraced a traditional mode of work, even in an era when painting was no longer in vogue. Both artists applied the painting tradition to contemporary interests in terms of the subject matter they portrayed, as well as the manner in which they portrayed it; both artists engage with the tension between hand-crafted and machine-made imagery.⁴⁰ For Lichtenstein, it was the comic book and Ben Day Dots, and for Bechtle, it was the informal snapshot and hyperrealistic rendering of the photographic image.

Pop artist Andy Warhol's conception of his studio as a "Factory" reveals his interest in mass reproduction, which is further reinforced through his use of silkscreen prints. Silkscreen technology blurs the boundary between the photograph and the painting: a paradox inherent to the mode of production itself. Works like *Marilyn Monroe Diptych* [Fig. 8] refute the originality of painting (as heralded by Clement Greenberg in relation to the works of the Abstract Expressionists in the preceding decade) because the image is easily reproduced. At the same time, however, these works cannot be classified simply as photographs, given the formal reduction of the image and Warhol's use of the silkscreen medium; works like *Marilyn Monroe Diptych* approximate painting more than photography by presenting the silkscreened image on canvas.

⁴⁰ The return to the painting tradition will be discussed at length in the next chapter.



Figure 7. Roy Lichtenstein, *Little Big Painting*, 1965 (oil on canvas, 68 x 80 inches)⁴¹



Figure 8. Andy Warhol, *Marilyn Monroe Diptych*, 1962 (silkscreen on canvas, 82 x 57 inches)⁴²

⁴¹ Roy Lichtenstein, “Little Big Painting,” painting, 1965, *Artstor Digital Library*, <http://library.artstor.org/library/secure/ViewImages?id=%2FTRKfyk3ISk0PSI9aIN7R3MmXHovfVY%3D&userId=hTxOdzAk&zoomparams> (accessed June 7, 2015).

⁴² Andy Warhol, “Marilyn Monroe Diptych,” painting, 1962, *Artstor Digital Library*, <http://library.artstor.org/library/secure/ViewImages?id=8CJGczI9NzldLS1WEDhzTnkrX3gseF17cCg%3D&userId=hTxOdzAk&zoomparams> (accessed June 7, 2015).

Both Pop art and Photorealism have come under criticism for their seemingly superficial content.⁴³ The majority of Warhol's works feature celebrity faces and commercial products, such as his famed series of Campbell's soup cans and Brillo box sculptures. These works were immediately embraced by a wide audience because of the familiarity of their content, and furthermore, because the products themselves were designed to be attractive to the consumer's eye. Warhol refuted Greenberg's promotion of the "genius" Abstract Expressionist artists through the appropriation of everyday products. Similarly, Bechtle's work challenges Fine Art photography by making large-scale paintings of informal snapshots. He elevates the importance of everyday imagery through the oversized dimensions of his works.

Yet Warhol also incorporated politically-charged photographic imagery into a much darker series of works. *Red Race Riot* [**Fig. 9**], for instance, is a far cry from the static, deadpan compositions of Bechtle's photographs like *Alameda Chrysler* and *Vicente Avenue Intersection* [refer back to **Figs. 3-4** in Chapter II]. Even the motionless *Electric Chair* [**Fig. 10**], which Warhol approaches in a similar manner to Bechtle's family snapshots, creates far more emotional tension because of its controversial subject matter. This later series of works engage with the less attractive but realistic socio-political issues circulating at the time, resisting the notion that Warhol's silkscreen paintings were entirely devoid of critical content. By comparison, Bechtle's images take a seemingly neutral stance to everyday reality in the "snapshot" approach to banal subject matter.

⁴³ See Michael Archer's discussion in *Art Since 1960*, in which he notes, "The ensuing discussion [...] concentrated on whether Pop had contributed something new in terms of either form or content." Michael Archer, *Art Since 1960*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2014), 15.

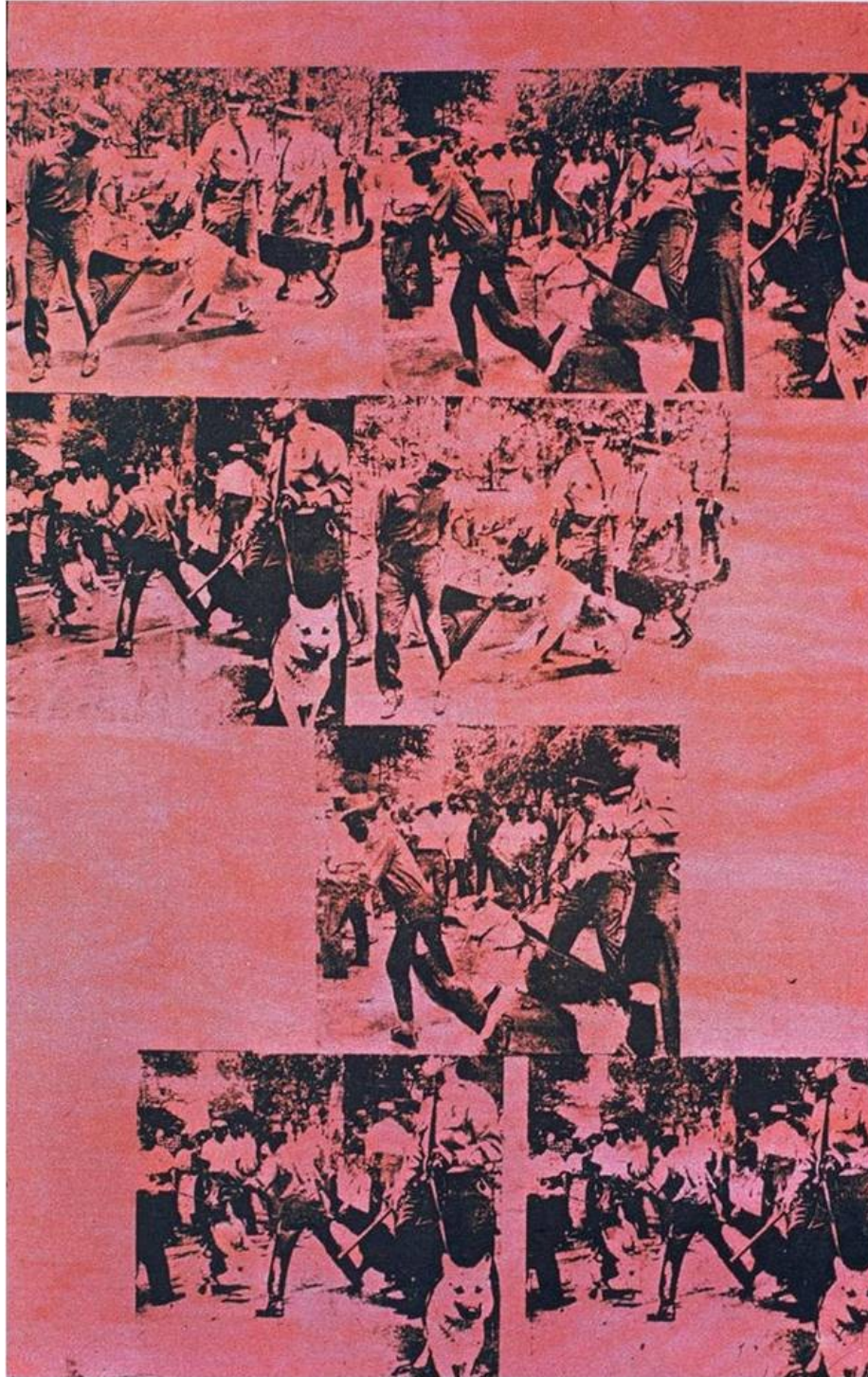


Figure 9. Andy Warhol, *Red Race Riot*, 1963 (silkscreen on canvas, 11 feet 5 inches x 6 feet 10 ½ inches)⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Andy Warhol, “Red Race Riot,” painting, 1963, *Artstor Digital Library*, <http://library.artstor.org/library/secure/ViewImages?id=8CJGczI9NzldLS1WEDhzTnkrX3gseFI%2Feyk%3D&userId=hTxOdzAk&zoomparams> (accessed June 7, 2015).

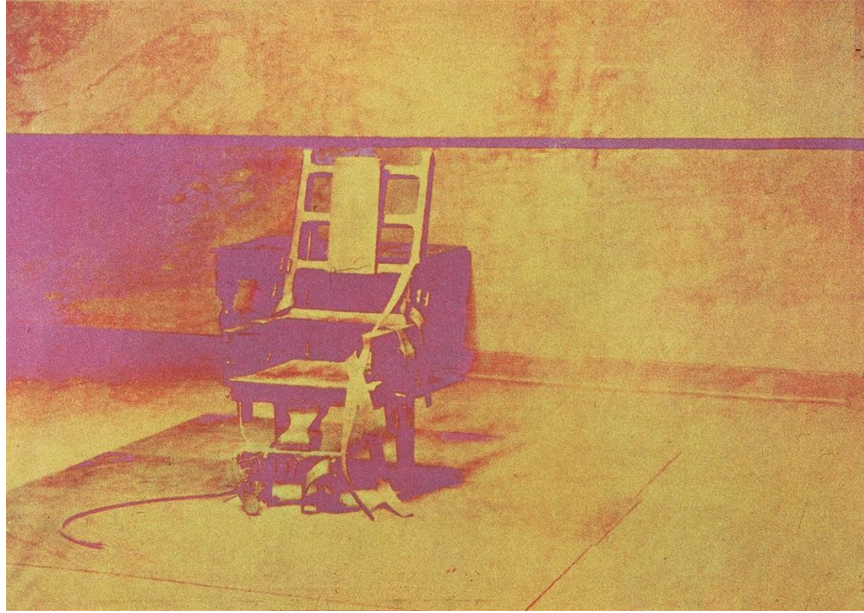


Figure 10. Andy Warhol, *Electric Chair*, 1967 (silkscreen on canvas, 54 x 73 inches)⁴⁵

Yet a crucial similarity in the formal approaches of these artists surfaces when we remember that Bechtle's work operates on two different levels and depends on the viewer's perception of form and content. The viewer's eye tends to focus on the content of the image and notices the people and subject matter depicted in the photographic composition; formally, however, these works represent abstracted reality in Bechtle's two-dimensional paintings of two-dimensional photographs. In other words, the *photograph* is the primary subject of his compositions, rather than the subjects depicted in the photographs.⁴⁶ Bechtle's images do not appear nearly as provocative as those of Warhol's *Red Race Riot* or *Electric Chair*, yet they are equally controversial on a formal level. As Meisel notes, "Even in the extremely liberal atmosphere of the sixties, it was still regarded as cheating or 'against the rules' to paint from or use the photograph,"

⁴⁵ Andy Warhol, "Electric Chair," painting, 1967, *Artstor Digital Library*, <http://library.artstor.org/library/secure/ViewImages?id=8CJGczI9NzldLS1WEDhzTnkrX3gseFZ9ciU%3D&userId=hTxOdzAk&zoomparams> (accessed June 7, 2015).

⁴⁶ Refer to Chapter IV for further discussion of this idea.

especially one that fell under the informal “snapshot” genre, as opposed to fine art photography.⁴⁷ Thus Bechtle’s work engages with the photographic image in similar manner to Warhol, despite the distinct appearance of their respective compositions.

Bechtle’s work also has affinities to the work of Robert Rauschenberg. Although Rauschenberg is associated with the neo-Dada movement which predates Pop art, Rauschenberg is an important reference as he also began creating silkscreened photographs in the mid-sixties. Works like *Retroactive I* [Fig. 11] resemble the aforementioned examples of Warhol’s work, and allude to current socio-political icons, such as President John F. Kennedy and the international interest in space exploration programs. Bechtle’s Photorealist works approach the photograph in a manner that resonates with Rauschenberg’s “combine” paintings, which merged painting and sculpture into assemblage works. In *The Painter and the Photograph* Van Deren Coke writes, “For many artists the photograph is reality. Rauschenberg is willing to raid this real world to introduce fragments of it and the illusion of stereometric depth to his paintings and prints—not for their own sake—but for comparison. The tension between the real and the illusion of the real is played upon.”⁴⁸ Rauschenberg created this tension through a combination of two-dimensional painting (including silkscreened photographs) and three-dimensional sculpture.⁴⁹ Bechtle’s work produces a similar tension, though he does so through a combination of two-dimensional photography and two-dimensional

⁴⁷ Meisel, *Photo-Realism*, 21.

⁴⁸ Van Deren Coke, *The Painter and the Photograph; From Delacroix to Warhol* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1972), 243.

⁴⁹ Also refer to Mary Warner Marien’s *Photography, A Cultural History*, in which she writes, “More than Warhol, Rauschenberg wanted to puncture the pretensions of ‘high art’ in traditional media [...] by making art that was not conceived as a mirror of life, but contained bits of life itself” Mary Warner Marien, *Photography: A Cultural History* (New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc. (publishing as Prentice Hall), 2011), 376.

painting. Bechtle produces the illusion of three-dimensional reality through his hyperrealistic rendering of the content of the photograph. When considered in relation to Coke's commentary on Rauschenberg's work, Bechtle's work can also be thought of as playing with assumption that photographic images portray reality. Again, Bechtle's work functions on two levels, and while they appear to reproduce reality (the everyday snapshot), his paintings are ultimately abstracted images; they reproduce scenes through the two-dimensional photograph—not from real or three-dimensional objects.



Figure 11. Robert Rauschenberg, *Retroactive I*, 1964 (silkscreen on canvas, 84 x 60 inches)⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Robert Rauschenberg, "Retroactive I," painting, 1964, *Artstor Digital Library*, <http://library.artstor.org/library/secure/ViewImages?id=8CJGczI9NzldLS1WEDhzTnkrX3gse1h7fyE%3D&userId=hTxOdzAk&zoomparams> (accessed June 7, 2015).

Conceptual Photography

While Photorealism is most closely associated with the Pop art movement, it emerged at nearly the same time as Conceptual art, with which it has distinct affinities. As noted earlier, Meisel cites Bechtle's '56 *Chrysler* from 1965 as the first true Photorealistic work, and according to Tony Godfrey, Conceptual art "reached both its apogee and its crisis in the years 1966-72."⁵¹

Conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth explains why artists turned to alternative media in this period, noting that "a painting could never question the nature of art, because the medium had an in-built assumption about what art was."⁵² Conceptual art expanded the possibilities for artistic media through experimentation with non-traditional forms, challenging the viewer's established perception of "art" and customary engagement with the work. In Kosuth's iconic Conceptual artwork *One and Three Chairs* from 1965 [Fig. 12], for example, the artist juxtaposed a chair, a photograph of a chair, and a textual definition of the word "chair." In doing so, he demonstrated that the work itself lies in the *concept* or idea of a chair, as each of the three physical manifestations convey the same concept to the viewer⁵³; moreover, the forms are dissimilar but equally successful in accomplishing this task. Works like *One and Three Chairs* provoke the question *What is art?*⁵⁴ but also encourage the viewer to ask *Where is the art?* Unlike a painting or sculpture, which is automatically identified as "art" and approached as such, this

⁵¹ Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art* (London: Phaidon, 1998), 6.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 135.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

installation suggests that mundane, everyday objects are equally suited to transmit ideas as traditional forms of art.



Figure 12. Joseph Kosuth, *One and Three Chairs* (installation view), 1965 (mixed media, variable dimensions)⁵⁵

Conceptual art included non-traditional forms like performances and Happenings, but it also interrogated traditional mediums and aesthetics. In his essay for *The Last Picture Show*, an exhibit of Conceptual photography held at the Walker Art Center from 2003-2004, Douglas Fogle notes that the concept of the *tableau*—the “independently beautiful depiction and composition that derives from the institutionalization of perspective and dramatic figuration and the origins of modern Western art [...] was

⁵⁵ Joseph Kosuth, “One and Three Chairs,” installation, 1965, *UO Libraries Art & Architecture Image Collection*, http://oregondigital.org/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/artimages&CISOPTR=30076&CISOBX=1&REC=1 (accessed June 7, 2015).

adopted by art photography in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries under the rubric of Pictorialism.”⁵⁶ Photography began cementing its foundations in the artistic tradition through the “heroic” works of Art Photography—works like those of Ansel Adams and Henri Cartier-Bresson, for instance, which were thought to be “taken by great geniuses.”⁵⁷ Cartier-Bresson’s *Derriere la Gare Saint-Lazare* [Fig. 13] demonstrated that photography could capture a “decisive moment”—the unparalleled achievement of the camera as a device that could arrest or “freeze” a moment in time.



Figure 13. Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Derriere la Gare Saint-Lazare* (*Behind the Gare Saint-Lazare, Paris*), 1932 (photograph)⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Douglas Fogle, *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography, 1960-1982* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2003), 11.

⁵⁷ Godfrey, 310.

⁵⁸ Henri Cartier-Bresson, “Derriere la Gare Saint-Lazare (Behind the Gare Saint-Lazare, Paris),” photograph, 1932, *Artstor Digital Library*, <http://library.artstor.org/library/secure/ViewImages?id=8D1Mcjw9MjA9NEA7eD96QHogW3wv&userId=hTxOdzAk&zoomparams> (accessed June 7, 2015).

Although photography was not as firmly rooted in artistic tradition as painting and sculpture, it was not immune to the destabilizing investigations of Conceptual art. Artist Douglas Huebler's use of the camera "as a 'dumb' recording instrument"⁵⁹—a mechanical device which simply collected information—aimed to demystify the "heroic" quality of Art Photography and reduce the medium back to its original documentary function. This use of the camera does not imply that Conceptual artists accepted photography as an accurate form of documentation; on the contrary, they recognized that "photography is never innocent, but framed by ways of representing that are always ideologically loaded."⁶⁰ French artist Yves Klein anticipated this return to skepticism of the photograph in the early example *Dimanche* [Fig. 14], in which his apparent "leap into the void" was made possible through post-production manipulation of the image. This kind of work challenged the traditional perception of art and its accepted forms, destabilizing the Modernist notion of "truth" as understood to be evident in photography.

While this discussion of Conceptual art may seem to conflict with Bechtle's work insofar as he favored the traditional medium of painting, it provides a more complete picture of the significance of the subject of interest: the photograph.⁶¹ In the Introduction to *Photorealism Since 1980*, Meisel reflects on the legacy of the Photorealist artists and contends that their success "legitimized the camera, the photograph, and the realist image

⁵⁹ Godfrey, 303.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 301.

⁶¹ Although it will not be discussed here, it is worth mentioning that John Szarkowski, head of the Department of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art orchestrated *The Photographer's Eye* in 1964—the same year Bechtle began creating his first Photorealist work. This exhibit, according to Carol Squiers, was a "landmark exhibition [...] in which he laid out the basic rules of photographic seeing and making." Carol Squiers, "What is a Photograph?" in *What is a Photograph?* (New York, International Center of Photography and DelMonico Books (an imprint of Prestel), 2013), 11. Also see Marien, 383-388.

for all artists afterward.”⁶² Meisel’s statement alludes to the idiosyncratic return to realistic imagery through a traditional mode of production in this period. Photorealist painting and Conceptual art ultimately took very different directions in terms of methodologies and objectives, yet both styles depended heavily on photography. Marien explains, “For Conceptual artists [...] photography became important because its record-keeping function favored their focus on making and communicating ideas or concepts.”⁶³ Conceptual art—or concept-based art—places emphasis on the ideas motivating the work, rather than the material work itself.⁶⁴ On a formal level, this approach was expressed through an attempt to “dematerialize the art object”⁶⁵; the immaterial concept was not “collectable or saleable,”⁶⁶ and even in the case of the printed photograph, the materials were inexpensive and the works were easy to reproduce.⁶⁷ Furthermore, Conceptual photographers were interested in the concept presented through the photograph, rather than the physical object itself.⁶⁸

As Meisel suggests in the quote cited at the beginning of Chapter I, “there is really very little to interpret or explain” in terms of the subject in Photorealist work

⁶² Louis K. Meisel, *Photorealism Since 1980* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993), 8.

⁶³ Marien, 376.

⁶⁴ Godfrey explains, “Conceptual art is not about forms or materials, but about ideas and meanings.” Godfrey, 4.

⁶⁵ Marien, 380.

⁶⁶ Godfrey, 4.

⁶⁷ Marien, 380.

⁶⁸ Godfrey writes, “Of course, Conceptual art cannot change the photograph, but it has changed how we think about the photograph. It has made the viewer more aware of their own act of looking.” Godfrey, 339.

because of the degree of literal visual translation of the photographic image.⁶⁹ Yet consideration of Photorealism in relation to the Conceptual movement and the preoccupation with photography provokes a greater level of inquiry than the typical surface reading of Photorealistic paintings, as this discussion brings an additional question to the foreground: Why was the snapshot photograph of particular interest to Bechtle?



Figure 14. Yves Klein, *Dimanche (Leap into the Void)*, 1960 (photograph)⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Meisel, *Photo-Realism*, 20.

⁷⁰ Yves Klein, “Dimanche (Leap into the Void),” photograph, 1960, *UO Libraries Art & Architecture Image Collection*, http://oregondigital.org/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/artimages&CISOPTR=18310&CISOBX=1&REC=1 (accessed June 7, 2015).

Bechtle offers an explanation for his choice of subject matter in the following excerpt from his 1973 Artist's Statement:

Photographs allow me to paint with enough accuracy that the reference to the 'real thing' is direct and not distracted by the inevitable distortions of drawing from the actual object. I am not particularly interested in those subtle differences between the way we perceive a three-dimensional object and the way we might translate it into two-dimensional marks, but rather in having those marks make up as convincing a reminder of that object as possible. (Even if the finished painting reminds us of the photograph, that is close enough, since we tend to believe in the veracity of the camera.) [...] I want him to relate to it as much as he would to the real thing.⁷¹

According to the artist, the use of a photograph allows him to render the closest approximation to "reality" in his works. Again, if we approach the *photograph* as the primary subject of the work, we can see how Bechtle's interest in the snapshot aligns with contemporary uses of this medium. Pop art emphasized the mechanized and mass-produced elements of the photograph, while Conceptual artists embraced its ordinary, anti-heroic qualities. In *New Art in the 60s and 70s: Redefining Reality*, Anne Rorimer explains that ready access to the portable camera in the 1960s meant that photography became "a commonplace medium available to the amateur as well as the professional."⁷² Bechtle's use of the informal snapshot coincides with Edward Ruscha's *Twentysix [sic] Gasoline Stations* [Fig. 15], for instance, which presents the banal, everyday image as Art. Bechtle's paintings of personal snapshots obscure the same boundary between life and art, but furthermore, they obscure the boundary between illusion and reality. This chapter has provided contemporary examples to contextualize Bechtle's use of the

⁷¹ Meisel, *Photo-Realism*, 27.

⁷² Anne Rorimer, *New Art in the 60s and 70s: Redefining Reality* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2001), 113.

photograph; the next two chapters will expand upon this context to discuss the manner in which Bechtle's approach to the photograph blurs the aforementioned distinctions.



Figure 15. Edward Ruscha, *Standard Station, Amarillo, Texas* (from *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*), 1963 (photograph)⁷³

⁷³ Edward Ruscha, "Standard Station, Amarillo, Texas (from Twentysix Gasoline Stations)," photograph, 1963, *UO Libraries Art & Architecture Image Collection*, http://oregondigital.org/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/artimages&CISOPTR=18376&CISOBX=1&REC=1 (accessed June 7, 2015).

CHAPTER IV
PAINTING PHOTOGRAPHY

Painting (Isn't) Dead

Looking at Bechtle's work in conjunction with other contemporary uses of photography opens new avenues of inquiry regarding his return to the painting tradition. If we refer back to Meisel's definition of Photorealism, in which the first three points underscore the central role of technical craft in Photorealism, we see that his criteria fail to engage more expansive questions surrounding the role of the painter after the invention of photography, and the seeming absurdity of hand-recreating a photographic image. In 1859—almost exactly a century before Bechtle completed his first Photorealist work—French writer Charles Baudelaire speculated, “If photography is allowed to supplement art in some of its functions, it will soon have supplanted or corrupted it altogether.”⁷⁴ This statement coincides with the widespread notion that with the advent of photography, painting had become obsolete.⁷⁵ The ease and accessibility of photographic technology, as well as the prevalence of the snapshot in the late sixties thus invokes questions like, *Why was the snapshot inadequate for Bechtle?* and *What does his painting of the photograph contribute that photography fails to accomplish alone?*

The answer, as we have seen, lies partially in an understanding of Photorealism as a “60s moment”—a distinct intersection of painting and photography in the history of art. Bechtle created tension between the “old” tradition of painting and the “new” technology of snapshot photography by fusing these elements into a single composition, and in doing

⁷⁴ Cited in Jonathan Weinberg, “Photographic Guilt: The Painter and the Camera” in *Robert Bechtle: A Retrospective* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2005), 47.

⁷⁵ In *American Art of the 1960s*, Irving Sandler writes, “A recurring topic for argument in the late sixties was: Is Painting Dead?” Irving Sandler, *American Art of the 1960s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 55.

so, he was participating in the dialogue of contemporary concerns. Although the thematic relation to Pop art and other movements of the same era is clear, Photorealism remains idiosyncratic in its appearance due to its hyperrealistic rendering of the photograph. Bechtle's banal imagery seems stagnant as it harks back on the Realist tradition of genre painting through the content of the snapshots depicted—particularly as it is situated within the experimental climate of the late sixties. These seeming idiosyncrasies are best understood by appreciating Photorealism as an exploration of the relationship between photography and painting within the work.⁷⁶

In his 1978 interview with Paul Karlstrom for the Smithsonian Institute's *Archives of American Art*, Bechtle reveals, "The problem that one had to grapple with at that point was that a realistic style in art had been seen as being old fashioned and not having anything to do with modern art," and notes that he sought to explore the possibility that "one could make use of the realistic style to function with modern context."⁷⁷ Works like *'60 T-Bird* (1967-68) [Fig. 16] indicate the artist's embrace of modern, everyday subject matter—both in terms of the mundane street scene, as well as the reference to informal snapshot photography. Re-creating these works at such a large scale meant that Photorealist paintings *surpassed* the technical abilities of color photography at the time.⁷⁸ The Photorealist method of creating works from photographs may thus be viewed as a means of reinvigorating the painting tradition in effort to prevent

⁷⁶ Further discussion of historical intersections between these two mediums appears in the subsequent chapter.

⁷⁷ *Archives of American Art*, Smithsonian Institution, "Oral history interview with Robert Alan Bechtle, 1978 September 13-1980 February 1."

⁷⁸ In *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, Michael Fried notes that large-scale color photographs did not appear until the late 1970s. Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), 2. See also Charlotte Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*, 3rd ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2014), 13.

Realist painting from becoming obsolete. While the inclusion of the artist's own pair of sunglasses in *Fosters Freeze, Escalon* [Fig. 17] appears incidental, Bechtle jokes that they evoke his presence in the image, as though reminding the viewer that the painter—not the camera—is responsible for the artwork on display.⁷⁹



Figure 16. Robert Bechtle, '60 T-Bird, 1968-69, (oil on canvas, 72 x 98 7/8 inches)⁸⁰

The Appreciation of Craft

In his critical essay “Photographic Guilt: The Painter and the Camera,” which accompanies Bishop’s aforementioned contribution to the exhibit catalog for Bechtle’s

⁷⁹ “Picturing Americas – American Photorealism in the 70s,” Deutsche Bank Group, accessed March 16, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nf2DsaSEP_w.

⁸⁰ Robert Bechtle, “‘60 T-Bird,” painting, 1968-69, *SFMOMA.org*, http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/multimedia/interactive_features/24?autoplay=true# (accessed June 7, 2015).



Figure 17. Robert Bechtle, *Fosters Freeze, Escalon*, 1975 (oil on canvas, 40 x 58 inches)⁸¹

2005 SFMOMA Retrospective, Jonathan Weinberg notes, “A photograph may be flat, but we don’t necessarily see it that way. We oscillate between a sense of two-dimensionality and depth. Looking intensely at a photograph (or a painting for that matter) is not a static process, even when the picture itself is static.”⁸² Weinberg references the idea that Bechtle’s work can be seen as a representation of a two-dimensional object (the photograph), but also as a three-dimensional scene because of the familiar *content* of the photograph. Indeed, this hypothesis aligns with the artist’s aims as outlined in his 1973

⁸¹ Robert Bechtle, “Fosters Freeze, Escalon,” painting, 1975, *Deutsche Bank Art Works*, <http://db-artmag.com/en/54/feature/a-journey-back-to-the-heyday-of-photorealism/> (accessed June 7, 2015).

⁸² Weinberg, 51.

statement.⁸³ Bechtle's work might thus be thought of as an attempt to renew the viewer's perception of the mass-produced image, as well as the ignored and overlooked banal, everyday scenery in the content of the image. Yet Weinberg also asserts that his essay aims to "examine why tracing a photograph to make a painting might seem like a crime to many artists and critics."⁸⁴ Weinberg acknowledges that Bechtle's approach defies the traditional convention of painting from life (hence, his photographic "guilt" and dependence on the photograph; we might also consider Warhol's screenprint works in this regard) but the author also brings attention to painterly elements of the artist's work—examples of ways in which they are decidedly painterly and *not* photographic.

In one of Bechtle's most well-recognized works *'61 Pontiac* [Fig. 18], for instance, the artist presents the viewer with one of his personal family snapshots, scaled to approximate life-like dimensions. At this scale, the viewer cannot avoid confronting minute details that may otherwise be overlooked: the distorted scenery in the reflection of the car window, the squinting eyes and shadows on the faces of the figures in the bright sunlight, and most importantly, the grain of the photograph itself. Bechtle positions the figures at the center of the composition, yet the split panels of this triptych remind the viewer that he or she is looking at a two-dimensional surface—in terms of the painting, as well as the photograph portrayed in the painting. Again, the primary subject of the painting is the *photograph* of the figures, rather than the central figures themselves. Yet the viewer should also note that the photographic image "only exists as an illusion"⁸⁵

⁸³ Refer to the excerpt in Chapter III.

⁸⁴ Weinberg, 46-61.

⁸⁵ I am indebted to Professor Dan Powell for this observation, which surfaced in the course of my thesis defense.

created through the artist's hyperrealistic rendering. The emphasis ultimately remains on the overall work as a *painting* of a photograph.



Figure 18. Robert Bechtle, *'61 Pontiac*, 1969 (oil on canvas, 60 x 84 inches)⁸⁶

Notably, the artist accomplishes this task through the careful, painstaking reproduction of an instantaneously-produced snapshot.⁸⁷ In his essay for the *Snapshot* catalog, Clément Chéroux suggests that both nineteenth century painters and Photorealists (including Bechtle) “undoubtedly shared [the] idea that, in comparison to

⁸⁶ Robert Bechtle, “'61 Pontiac,” painting, 1969, *Whitney Museum of American Art*, http://whitney.org/image_columns/0067/8696/70.16_bechtle_resized.jpg (accessed June 7, 2015).

⁸⁷ In “A Place in the Sun,” Michael Auping notes, “Over his four-decade career, Bechtle has completed on average four to five paintings per year.” Michael Auping, “A Place in the Sun” in *Robert Bechtle: A Retrospective* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2005), 38.

photography, painting always ‘had the advantage of being hand-made.’”⁸⁸ Rather than embrace the speed of technology and reproductive quality of the photograph (as seen in the example of Warhol’s mass-produced silkscreens, for instance), Bechtle counters the pace and production of modern innovations by reviving the painting tradition. His work promotes an appreciation of craft—in terms of his creation of the work, as well as the viewer’s experience of the piece.

Certainly, the most impressive effect of Photorealism is the visual illusion. The viewer must carefully observe the work in effort to reconcile the photographic appearance of the painting with his or her knowledge that the work was created by hand—not machine. Weinberg comments, “An uncanny illusion is one that is disturbing: We struggle to figure out how and why it came to be made. If it fools the eye, it does so momentarily; its uncanniness is tied to its very artificiality—we sense that it is a copy of something else, a false double, yet we wonder at its incredible verisimilitude.”⁸⁹ As such, Bechtle’s hand-painted images subvert the presumed authority of the photograph through the uncanny, hyperrealistic reproduction of the photographic image. Warhol critiqued mass media consumption through the use of controversial subject matter in his candy-colored silkscreens; he detracted from the gravity of a single, powerful image through repetition and seriality, printing Marilyn Monroe’s face over and over to reinforce her status as a pop culture icon, rather a real human being. Here we see that Bechtle’s production of an inimitable painting is equally unsettling. His work produces the illusion

⁸⁸ Clément Chéroux, et. al., *Snapshot: Painters and Photography, Bonnard to Vuillard*, ed. by Elizabeth W. Easton (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), 45.

⁸⁹ Weinberg, 57.

of reality, and the viewer must be reminded that his hyperrealistic rendering represents *photographic* reality—an abstracted image of real life.

In her essay *What is a Photograph?*, Carol Squiers refers to the “tension between the ‘two realities’ of painting and photography.”⁹⁰ But are these necessarily two separate realities? As seen in the example of *'61 Pontiac*, the viewer’s eye “oscillates”⁹¹ between levels of engagement with the forms of visual representation. Nonetheless, these realities are unified in a single composition and are inseparable in Bechtle’s work. To further illustrate the significance of this point, I refer to Meisel’s notion that “the camera sees with one eye, not two.”⁹² Meisel contends, “We are so steeped in the new “reality” of the media—newspapers, books, television, movies—that we now perceive through the one eye of the lens all things which we have not experienced firsthand, thus enhancing our perception of reality in photo-derived paintings.”⁹³ As suggested earlier, Bechtle’s Photorealist works offer a means of resisting the notion that “painting is dead” after the invention (and continued technical evolution) of photography. Yet as Meisel’s observation implies, Bechtle’s work also brings attention to the visual experience and reception of photographic images. His hyperrealistic renderings synthesize painting and photography to produce work in which the viewer cannot distinguish between hand-made and machine-made imagery. Photography has changed what we see in an image, but Bechtle’s work also indicates that this technology has changed *how* we see the image and thus *how* we perceive reality.

⁹⁰ Squiers, 19.

⁹¹ Weinberg, 51.

⁹² Meisel, *Photo-Realism*, 21.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER V
PHOTOGRAPHIC REALITY

In his conclusion to *The Painter and the Photograph*, Van Deren Coke quotes the French poet Louis Aragon who stated, “The painter of tomorrow will use the photographer’s eye.”⁹⁴ Bechtle’s use of the photograph reveals the unique social and cultural perception of photography in the United States during the late sixties and forms part of a continually evolving relationship between painting and photography since the inception of the latter medium. The booming economic market and increased commercial production in the United States following WWII promoted the widespread presence of photographic images in media and advertising—in magazines, billboards, and television—at a volume never before experienced.

Bechtle’s Photorealistic works engage with similar themes as contemporary practices, but more importantly, he challenges the cultural perception of the photograph. Building on this renewed and more robust understanding of Bechtle’s work, we can now draw connections between Photorealism and other photo-based practices—an approach Meisel ignores in his view that Photorealism is “grounded in paint rather than theory.”⁹⁵

A survey of the use of the photograph reveals, for instance, that Bechtle was not necessarily the first artist to employ a Photorealistic *approach* to painting—even if, according to Meisel, he was the first *Photorealist*. Since its inception in the early nineteenth century, photography has borrowed stylistic elements from painting, and painting, in turn, has borrowed from photography. Aaron Scharf notes in his introduction to *Art and Photography*—a comprehensive text examining the history of the relationship

⁹⁴ Coke, 301.

⁹⁵ Meisel, *Photo-Realism*, 20.

between the two mediums—that “almost every definable characteristic of photographic form had been anticipated by some artist before the invention of the photographic camera.”⁹⁶ The British High Art photographers of the mid-1800s modeled their work on the compositional approaches and subject matter of traditional paintings, for instance, in effort to give credence to photography as an artistic, rather than documentary, form.⁹⁷ Yet photography has made its own contributions to visual culture, too. Scharf observes, “Often artists found, in those very irregularities which photographers themselves spurned, the means to create a new language of form [as] details which escaped the eye were captured by the lens.”⁹⁸ These “irregularities” refer to features like the blur of an object in motion, which commonly registers as a ghostly imprint in the photograph—a spectacle divorced from our natural perception of movement, and introduced to visual and artistic “vocabulary” through photography.

In a review of the prevailing literature that investigates the history of the relationship between photography and painting, the reader will note that Scharf’s aforementioned *Art and Photography* serves as the seminal text which covers these interactions up to the book’s publication in 1968—just three years after Bechtle completed his first Photorealist work. Scharf’s text concludes with images of works by

⁹⁶ Scharf cites examples like, “the cutting-off of figures by the frames frequently seen in snapshots [which] can be found in Donatello’s reliefs in Mantegna, in Mannerist painting and in Japanese prints,” for instance. Aaron Scharf, *Art and Photography* (London: The Penguin Press, 1968), xi.

⁹⁷ Marien 84-90. Also see Stephen Bann’s related note that “throughout the 1850s and 1860s, photography was in a state of continuous technical development, not least in respect of its capacity to meet the challenge of reproducing works of visual art.” In other words, photography also aimed to encapsulate existing modes of visual art (such as painting) and present them through its own mode of representation. Stephen Bann, *Art and the Early Photographic Album* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2011), 15.

⁹⁸ Scharf, xii.

Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, and Richard Hamilton.⁹⁹ Van Deren Coke’s similar publication, *The Painter and the Photograph*—the revised edition of which was published in 1972—begins to approach the works of Pop artists and even goes to the extent of mentioning Chuck Close’s Photorealist portraits, yet he fails to address the greater repercussions of these types of paintings.¹⁰⁰ This is likely because the term “Photorealism” had not yet officially been established, nor had these artists gained recognition as a cohesive group. Both texts thus provide important historical information, but also function as important historical documents themselves; they appear just as the Photorealist paintings of Bechtle emerge to extend the chronology of their accounts. There has been a long-standing history of artists using the photograph, and as this case study reveals, we can now position Photorealism in this continuum.

In doing so, further connections are revealed—connections which Meisel’s approach also fails to instigate, and which influence the continued critical legacy of Photorealism. In his curatorial statement for the 1977 *Pictures* photography exhibit at Artists Space in New York, Douglas Crimp writes, “To an ever greater extent our experience is governed by pictures, pictures in newspapers and magazines, on television and in the cinema. Next to these pictures firsthand experience begins to retreat, to seem more and more trivial. While it once seemed that pictures had the function of interpreting reality, it now seems that they have usurped it.”¹⁰¹ Bechtle’s Artist’s Statement (cited at the end of Chapter III) suggests that photographs assist the artist in accurately depicting reality—*photographic* reality, that is—and here, Crimp suggests that the photographers in

⁹⁸ Refer back to my discussion of Pop art and the use of photographic images in the 1960s in Chapter II.

¹⁰⁰ Coke, 73-75.

¹⁰¹ Fogle, 16. *NB*: The full text of Crimp’s essay is available at: <http://artistspace.org/exhibitions/pictures>.

the *Pictures* exhibit are preoccupied with a similar theme. In this expanded approach to Bechtle's work, we can associate the concerns of the Photorealist painters with those of photographers in subsequent years. These connections thus suggest that 1960s Photorealism reaches beyond the bounds of Meisel's discrete five-point definition, and that it has been more influential than previous critical approaches have allowed.

Conclusion

The camera's "eye" is fundamentally different from the human eye.¹⁰² As discussed in the previous chapter, Photorealism disrupts the viewer's typical engagement with the photograph to bring attention to the cultural perception of photography. Photorealistic engagement with the photograph was not possible (as conceived of in Bechtle's work) in previous decades, as the level of commercial production of photographic images in the 1960s meant that these images became intertwined with everyday reality at an unprecedented rate. As Weinberg indicates, "One might argue that Bechtle uses photography merely as a means of heightened precision, but in resorting to the camera's ability to conjure up 'the real,' he also takes up its baggage as in instrument of surveillance through which we attempt to understand and regulate the world."¹⁰³ Bechtle's paintings take a disengaged stance through the one-step removal from everyday life and substitution for realistic imagery with snapshot photographs. In this process, Bechtle employs the "photographer's eye" to create his work, but more importantly, to reveal the viewer's own engagement with the world through this lens.

¹⁰² Meisel observes, "The camera sees with one eye, not two." Meisel, *Photo-Realism*, 21.

¹⁰³ Weinberg, 51.

APPENDIX

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