



Hold Still: Looking at Photorealism

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From Lens to Eye to Hand: Photorealism 1969 to Today presents nearly fifty years of paintings and watercolors by key Photorealist artists, and provides an opportunity to reexamine the movement's methodology and underlying structure. Although Photorealism can certainly be seen in connection to the history, style, and semiotics of modern representational painting (and to a lesser extent late-twentieth-century art photography), it is worth noting that those ties are scarcely referred to in the work itself. Photorealism is contained, compressed, and seamless, intent on the creation of an ostensibly logical, self-evident reality, a visual text that relates almost entirely to its own premises: the stressed interplay between the depiction of a slice of unremarkable three-dimensional reality and the meticulous hand-painted reproduction of a two-dimensional photograph. Each Photorealist painting is a single, unambiguous, in-focus image. There are no montages, no obvious distortions, and with a few exceptions, these works avoid the blurring used by Gerhard Richter and other painters as a photographic signifier. The images in a Photorealist painting might be unobtrusively cropped, or constructed as subtly conjoined panoramas, but in every case they are presented straightforwardly. They are facts on the ground, seemingly irrefutable. Even though Photorealism appears to be the blatant antithesis of the critic Clement Greenberg's dictum that successful painting must religiously abjure the effects of other disciplines, it in fact sticks more resolutely to its own principles and procedures than nearly any other modern painting movement. The Photorealist might expand his or her range of subject matter, or refine or modify some aspect of technique, but the change is almost invariably incremental or of minor qualitative difference. Given this, some might assume that Photorealism as a whole is static—Alexandrianist as opposed to avant-garde, as Greenberg would put it. It is the furthest thing from it.

What Photorealism conspicuously lacks is pretention. This is in direct opposition to academic art of all kinds (conservative or avant-garde), the hallmarks of which are grandiosity, self-importance, the unvarnished summoning of "deep meaning," tacit agreement with the social and moral norms of the art-validating class, ostentatiously bravura facture, and its practitioners' embedment in the academies and schools. Photorealist paintings are generally (with some notable large-scaled exceptions) easel-sized, apolitical, impersonal, deadpan, and (again with a few exceptions—some of Audrey Flack's work, for example), resolutely non-allegorical. They are cleanly painted, with distinctly delineated forms and a non-impastoed surface that ranges in finish from lightly varnished to semi-matte. While some practitioners have taught, Photorealism has a very low profile in academia—nowhere near that of installation and conceptual art, photography and video, or even abstract painting. As for classic academic art—the embodiment of the Alexandrianist—tired as it might seem to us now, it was interesting and engaging to its contemporary viewers. A Bouguereau or a Gérôme gave Salon visitors and collectors a good deal to talk about and admire—advanced art of the day, on the contrary, was often seen as puzzling, boring, and not to be taken seriously. Photorealism has in some ways suffered the same fate. The elements of Photorealism that have caused knowledgeable people to critically undervalue it—its reliance on what appears to be mere technical virtuosity and its apparent lack of interpretive difficulty—need to be explored.

While a Photorealist painting provides us with a quite credible likeness—it really does look like a photograph—achieving that level of verisimilitude is not all that hard for a trained and patient artist (with the emphasis on *patient*) to accomplish. The drawing is generally

taken care of by projecting and tracing a photograph on the canvas, and the actual painting consists of varying degrees (depending on the artist) of standard under- and overpainting, using the photograph as a color reference. The abundance of detail and incident, while reinforcing the impression of demanding skill, actually makes things easier for the artist. Lots of small things yield interesting textures—details reinforce neighboring details and cancel out technical problems. It is the larger, less inflected areas (like skies) that are more trouble, and where the most skilled practitioners shine.

While the majority of Photorealist paintings look extremely dense and seem similarly constructed from the ground up, that similarity is most evident either at a normal viewing distance, where the image snaps together, or in the reducing glass of photographic reproduction. A Richard Estes or a Robert Bechtle from the '70s or '80s, for instance, which were painted from slides, will on close examination display concentrations of simplified, abstracted marks that resolve themselves a few feet back into coherent, suitably complex forms; while a recent Raphaella Spence or Bertrand Meniel, taken from extraordinarily high-resolution digital images, will carry that tightness of articulation into each square inch of the painting. If anything, differences in photographic materials—essentially art supplies—assert themselves perceptually more strongly than do matters of painterly technique. We can see this in the arena of general chromatic feel. Color print and color slide film, as well as different brands and processes (Ektachrome, Kodachrome, Fujichrome), each have their own look. So does digital photography, which tends to pick up and magnify highly saturated tones and hues: there is a good reason why an Estes urban painting taken from an Ektachrome slide has a bluer cast and a more somber look than a digitally-derived Meniel cityscape.

The real technical difficulties that Photorealist painters face are considerably more subtle than getting something to look like something else. The ultimate model for the Photorealist is the source photograph. A photograph, though most often based on something in the real world, does not have a strict one-to-one relationship with that reality. Reading a photograph is a convention that we as a culture have absorbed over the span of the modern period. Visually processing a photograph, in an important sense, means overlooking its inherent distortions, notably its spatial squeeze and the collapsed arena it encapsulates. We normalize depth of field variations and disregard, for example, the combination of forms that occurs when objects that are next to each other in the photograph exist in different planes in the real world, although the canny painter is able to create evocative (and subliminally read) formal and psychological hybrids—say, car/building or head/road. Paintings with the photograph (especially the snapshot) as a model aim for a certain look—a task that can easily be mishandled. Photographs that are in focus (as is the human eye) feel especially *crisp*. This is particularly the case with the even midday light or the balanced indoor illumination that we see so often in these paintings. But you can be too crisp. That even light serves the Photorealists well. It eliminates overly dramatic chiaroscuro, but increases the possibility of getting a clunky and disjunctive "cut out" appearance, thus breaking the smooth, compressed monocular read of the photograph. These days you can frequently see awkward transitions of this sort in unprofessionally Photoshopped pictures, but the danger has always existed with Photorealist painting. There are ways to deal with it—a slight softening of an edge, the painting of barely registering halation lines paralleling a contour, or the mixing in of the colors of adjacent areas and forms—and with enough care and experience a solid Photorealist painter can negotiate the charged space between what the eye records and what the brain processes. As in any art

form, there is a big jump between the pretty good and the extraordinary. This presents a problem for Photorealism, since the average gallery or museumgoer can be easily wowed by merely adequate technique, and the negatively inclined viewer will all too readily see the ostensible virtuosity, discounting it as empty razzle-dazzle, missing the quieter skill that resides in the best work.

An interesting problem is Photorealism's straightforwardness and apparent ease of interpretation—or even the lack of necessity for interpretation at all. Historically, Pop Art and the varieties of realism that flowed from it (Photorealism being perhaps the earliest) were positioned as antidotes to the subjectivity, autographic uniqueness, and attendant “difficulty” of the gestural abstraction of the preceding artistic generation. The gallerist Ivan Karp, one of the original champions of Photorealism, made that clear in his important 1963 *Artforum* article on Pop Art, “Anti-Sensibility Painting.” Immediately understandable art, combined with boring, commonplace, and non-artistic subject matter, was transgressive in the context of contemporary art world expectations. Photorealism carried the same charge as Pop, but unlike Pop, which in due time added a panoply of artistic flourishes and historical references (their earnestness carefully undercut by irony), Photorealism never abandoned its artless affect, its *look* of utter comprehensibility. To make matters more complicated, accessibility has now become the norm. It is hard to say precisely why art has grown less opaque, but even abstraction, which had previously perplexed the public, is, after a hundred years of ongoing production, more readily stylistically sortable, and thereby understandable in terms of context and historical placement, if not in subjective intent.

If art as a whole presents less of a problem of interpretation these days, then Photorealism's seemingly open doorway hardly counts as a critical disqualifier. And as far as its quotidian subject matter goes, any unease with that should have been dispelled by a half-century of art's immersion in the waters of popular and media culture, and its continuing fascination with the Duchampian appropriation of real-world objects. Of course, ostensible accessibility does not tell the whole story. Art just appears easier to understand. You can get in, but only so far. The best art is still tough going, even if it might not look that way at first glance. Photorealism's apparent ease is tethered to its history; what it is really saying and how it says it is another matter. Its factuality, its ordinariness, is not to be taken lightly. After all, as the photographer Garry Winogrand stated, “There is nothing as mysterious as a fact clearly described.”

Photorealism, slotting itself in with a long line of vernacular American realisms, is an art form primarily of our country, and most of its subject matter reflects the American cultural landscape. In tune with its more immediate Pop origins, Photorealism delights in depicting the humdrum world of cars, trucks, motorcycles, storefronts and signs, diners, displays, toys, vending machines, and a host of unmemorable street scenes and semiurban landscapes. People show up, but they are, for the most part, of no more weight and consequence than the objects they are placed among. Individual artists tend to gravitate to specific subject matters: Robert Bechtle and Richard Estes to Bay Area and New York street views respectively, Ralph Goings to pickup trucks and diners, Robert Cottingham to neon signs, Charles Bell to overscaled gumball machines and marbles, Tom Blackwell to motorcycles and store windows, Ron Kleemann to tricked-up racing cars and semi-trailers, Richard McLean to horse shows, John Baeder to diners, John Salt to car wrecking yards, Audrey Flack to dressing table/boudoir still-life setups, and Bertrand Meniel to jam-packed urban spaces like Times Square. The choice of subject matter feels more an arbitrary matter of convenience, in line with, say, a penchant for glittery, reflective things or

an interest in the automotive, rather than an ongoing compulsion to get below the surface of the subject in order to plumb its meaning. For the Photorealists, surface is all. They are about the painstaking recording of information, the evenly weighted, small-scaled flood of data that makes up the raw material of perception.

Photorealism's emphasis on the prosaic and densely packed has strong parallels with Impressionism. Looking at that work now, we tend to see it as lovely, and for average museumgoers today, it is pretty and easily understood—their favorite art (much more so than Renaissance paintings with all their complicated symbolism and iconography). At the time of its making, however, people were put off not only by Impressionism's lack of artfulness, but by its general unwillingness to engage with what were presumed to be important matters or subjects. The dearth of history or religious paintings aside, Impressionist artists didn't even paint especially compelling scenery or historically significant buildings, although a nice cathedral or château might be handily nearby. A bustling railway station or a crowded dance hall was much more interesting. These artists were after the texture of modern experience, particularly that of the cities and those adjacent country-like areas, such as Argenteuil, where city dwellers went to relax, bringing their city ways with them. The artists were, in short, documenting changing social norms—subjects at work and leisure, just as the Photorealists have continually done. Impressionist paintings are often as crowded and full of pictorial incident as Photorealist ones, and they record the unspectacular and modern with the same degree of fidelity. What is implicit in Impressionism is explicit in Photorealism—for everything to be equally valued, nothing must be especially important.

This emphasis on specificity, process, and repetition sites Photorealism in the larger arena of twentieth-century avant-garde practice in art, literature, film, and music. How different is the Photorealist's unwavering stare from the project of a conceptualist such as Roman Opalka, who painted what was to be an infinite numerical sequence, one number painting followed by another by another, until he died? Or from a novel by Alain Robbe-Grillet, composed of an accretion of the most detailed possible description? Or an unfolding set of subtly varied tones by a minimalist composer like Terry Riley or Philip Glass. Or an early Warhol film like *Empire*, which forces eight hours of continuous slow-motion footage of the Empire State Building on us? With all of these you get the general idea—its overall sign—but the sheer bulk and pressure of similarly weighted detail works to defamiliarize the art, to make it slow, mysterious, and strange. As the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky pointed out in his 1917 essay “Art as Technique,” in normal life we see things not in their entirety, but recognize them by a kind of perceptual shorthand, habitually noting only their main characteristics. This is efficient but aesthetically barren. Art exists, says Shklovsky, “that one may recover the sensation of life. . . . The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.”

We see and quickly comprehend the overall subject matter of a Photorealist work while at the same time realizing that it is a hand-done painting, painstakingly realized, inch by inch, with each portion equally valued. We also know and cannot *unknow* the fact that the laboriously fabricated painting is the end product of a nearly instantaneous mechanical process—a sixtieth of a second stretched out over months and months. This discontinuity works against the smooth comprehension that we quite rightly apply to normal life

and leaves us with the sense that something else is afoot. We are used to the artless look of the artful—the casual drawing and rough painting, the carefully calibrated clumsiness. Beautifully painted banality is a more challenging problem. It is not a coincidence that, with the exception of Chuck Close, none of the painters in this show have worked in the professional arena of photography. The source photographs of the Photorealists are for the most part taken by the artists themselves, and while as a rule they are properly framed and decently composed (and thus removed from self-consciously “bad” photography with its potential for artiness), they are predictable and pedestrian—with the same anonymous look of, as Robert Bechtle put it, “a real estate photograph.” They are nowhere near the same quality as a seemingly offhand photograph by Lee Friedlander or Garry Winogrand (photographers whose work was criticized for being too much like a snapshot). And yet to scrupulously *paint* one of those photographers’ images would yield a work that would appear stilted and grating. The perfect photographic moment is not the perfect Photorealist moment, because there are no such things as perfect moments in Photorealism, just slightly better ones. The democracy of the point-to-point read, the devaluing of the focus of interest, is echoed in the democracy of the source material. Essentially the photography aspect of Photorealism is balanced on a fine point—it can’t be too bad, but perhaps more subtly, it can’t be too good.

We might ask ourselves how the Photorealists fit in with that wide swath of painters who have used photography as source material for their work. Photography has long provided a convenient way to bring a variety of subject matters into the studio. After all, there are only four basic (and combinable) approaches to incorporating the outside world into a painting or drawing: using photographs, direct observation, working from the imagination, or importing material directly into the artwork, as in collage. Not only has photography provided abundant visual information for painters, but the photographic approach—its way of looking and framing—has informed painting and drawing since Degas and Caillebotte, if not before. A host of important postwar artists have relied on photographs for their paintings: Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, James Rosenquist, Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke, Robert Longo, Jack Goldstein, David Salle, Eric Fischl, Jeff Koons, and Damien Hirst, to name but a few.

Many painters have used photography, yet it is clear that the Photorealists do something quite different and more specific with it. It is what they do, but significantly, what they *don’t* do. They of course painstakingly replicate the two-dimensional photograph itself, but they also stay away from the drama inherent in photography’s capacity to stop action. Time and movement are hardly issues at all in Photorealism (except for technical matters like nailing down the constantly changing reflections in glass and chrome). Instead its practitioners focus almost exclusively on another property of photography: its granular capability to gather up a seeming infinity of detail. Absent too from Photorealism is photography’s ease of scalar manipulation, its ability to scour a vast range of cultural information, as well as its affinity for collage- or montage-like juxtaposition. In a montage or collage, there is no limit on what might be pushed together, and often the more unrelated the images, the more evocative are the metaphors generated. The Photorealists, for better or worse, don’t go down that road. Photography is key to their enterprise, but its various potentials and properties are rarely explored. Photorealists make use of its essential spatial uncertainties, but not of its ambiguities of signification, at least not overtly. While Photorealism might seem expansive, that expansiveness echoes the multitudinous nature of the world around us, the struc-

ture of complexities within complexities that are revealed to the focused gaze of the camera lens. Photorealism, while presenting an ostensibly cluttered and messy world, a maze of reflection, is in itself methodologically pure. Basically, it does one thing and it does it very well indeed—a telling example of Isaiah Berlin’s idea of the hedgehog and the fox (taken from an aphorism of the Greek poet Archilochus): “The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog one important thing.”

Why has Photorealism as an art movement stayed intact and vital for so long? With some small technical differences, primarily the growing use of digital photography, the disappearance from the market of certain films, and a much-diminished use of the airbrush (largely for health reasons), Photorealism has remained remarkably consistent in style, method, and personnel for nearly fifty years. This is much more atypical than we might think. Modern art movements have a reasonably quick turnover rate. They fall away for a variety of reasons: a broadening and dissipation of practice (Cubism, Surrealism), overspecificity (Orphism, Synchronism, Purism), a move by key artists toward other practices (Fauvism), or a pejorative critical demarcation (first- and second-generation Abstract Expressionism). These explanations apply to earlier movements: we can easily come up with a similar list for art from the ’60s and after. On another note, and for reasons too complex to go into here, new named movements in the traditional sense of the term have almost entirely ceased to come into existence for the last twenty or so years. If anything, movements have evolved into genres. For example, while much art today embodies Pop Art ideas, sources, and practices, that work is never labeled as such, any more than a contemporary landscape would be called neo-Barbizon, post-Divisionist, or second-generation Hudson River School. Making art out of the signs and materials of popular culture is now as unremarkable, undifferentiated, and generalized a practice as painting a portrait or a still life.

So what is different about Photorealism, and what might account for its extraordinary cohesion? The key element, I believe, is its highly focused range of practice, its unwillingness to expand (and dilute) its field, especially to move, as so much art has in recent years, toward the interdisciplinary. It is purely a painting movement with ancillary drawings and watercolors, and the lack of blur in Photorealist paintings is emblematic of its programmatic clarity. As Frank Stella said of his early minimal paintings, “I tried to keep the paint as good as it was in the can.” We might say that the Photorealists tried to keep the image as good as it was in the camera.

Photorealism is an obvious stylistic movement, but it wasn’t really a socially based movement, a collection of friends and friendly antagonists—as were the Abstract Expressionists and the Pop artists. The Photorealists came from and have lived and worked in different parts of the country. While some knew one another, they weren’t part of a tightly knit circle, particularly in their formative years. The closer artists are to one another, and the closer they are to art centers, the more powerful are the forces for dispersion. Proximity amplifies the power of new ideas and the allure of change, just as it compounds the inevitable personal rivalries and the dissatisfactions engendered by a competitive art world. Photorealism has, to its ultimate advantage, maintained a relatively low profile, comfortable with flying under the radar and thereby avoiding forces that seek to undermine and delegitimize it.

It is telling that as the older Photorealists leave us, a similar number of younger ones take their place. It feels like a naturally balanced and regulated artistic ecosystem, albeit one still confined mostly to the United States. There has been some European participation

of late, but despite the ready fit of Photorealism and glittering cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Seoul, and Tokyo, there have been no significant Asian manifestations of the movement to date. Photorealism is basically a self-selecting style, rather than a culturally or educationally encouraged one: many artists are drawn to freewheeling gestural painting of one sort or another, but there are far fewer who take deep satisfaction in spending months and months of diligent small-scaled work on a painting whose final appearance is almost completely known in advance.

Photorealism has survived because it has remained undiluted and conceptually coherent, but also because it has managed to stay consistently compelling. While a viewer can approach it on an immediate level—for its technique, finesse, and appealing subject matter—that viewer can also go deeper and enjoy the complexity and contradictions, the multiple means of entrance that Photorealism affords. We are fortunate to live in an artistically pluralistic age, where still-vital art is not cut off prematurely. There may come a time when Photorealism will feel dated, most likely when the readily recognizable artifacts of the postwar age that populate its canvases become strange, or worse, quaint. But for now we should take pleasure in an art that is fully thought-out, true to itself, and in its low-keyed and insistent way, provocative and puzzling.