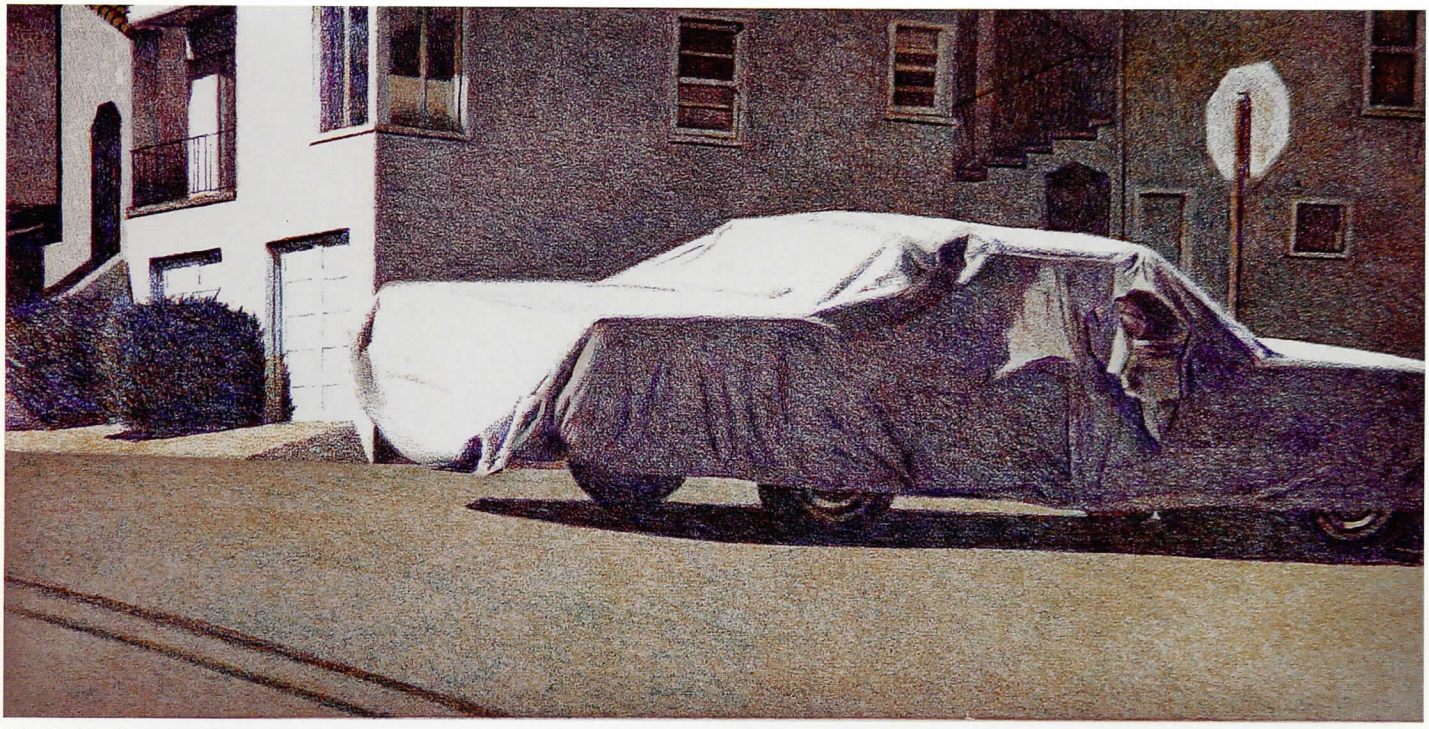
Crown Point Press
Newsletter
Winter 2003

Overview



Robert Bechtle, *Covered Car - Missouri Street,* 2002. Color soft ground etching with aquatint. Paper size: 16 x 23"; image size: 8 x 16 ". Edition 40. Printed by Case Hudson.

Robert Bechtle

Photographs are so much a part of contemporary art, it is hard to believe that thirty or so years ago making a painting by imitating a photograph was radical. As long as photography has existed, artists have considered it a tool (Vermeer used a camera obscura in the seventeenth century). But in the mid-1960s when Robert Bechtle began painting from photographs, many people, even those in the art world, viewed the practice as a crutch. Bechtle flew in the face of that prejudice. Beyond that, he was (and still is) radical because of his subject matter, which is neither timeless nor grand, and his technique, which is painstaking and not very "artistic."

In the early 1960s when Andy Warhol and other Pop artists began using photography, they did it in ways that subverted craft. They directly and imperfectly transferred actual photos to canvases and often added handmade flourishes and non-specific colors. This was radical because it looked easy, but the paintings ended up looking like art.

The deadpan hand-painted imitation of photographs practiced a little later by Robert Bechtle and other photorealists is something else again. It doesn't look easy (in fact, it is not) and it doesn't look like "art" either. Its old-fashioned painterly craftsmanship and its inexpressive, ordinary subject matter obscured its radical nature.

In the 1990s, philosophers often pointed out that everything we see—a landscape, a person, an object—is "mediated," separated from our direct experience, by our knowledge of how a camera lens sees things. Bechtle's scenes look real to us, but because they are from a camera's-eye view, they don't seem to be timeless. We sense that the light will be different in a few moments, the shadows stronger and longer. A car will move. A person will appear. Nowadays some artist-photographers make models, build sets, or employ actors so they can set up their photographs to be unnerving by seeming to be timeless. They go to these elaborate lengths, I think, to subvert the feeling that photographs ordinarily reflect a world in flux even if movement is not actually shown.

Why not just present a photograph, deadpan, if that's the point? Some artists do that. Placing photographs in a context with paintings seems to make us see the photographs in a new way. But for Bechtle, the act of painting has value in itself. This is what a practicing painter does. "The sense of time in a painting is very slow, very static, long term," he has said in a recent interview. "The sense of time in a photograph tends to be immediate."

A critic once spoke of Bechtle's "mysterious doggedness of depicting." Bechtle goes to his studio and may work all day on the hubcap of a car, building it slowly with little marks, each carrying a particular fragment of light. "There's a kind of misty quality, a certain flatness to the light here in San Francisco, especially in summer," he says, and adds that when he first began working

Robert Bechtle, *Portrero Intersection - 20th and Mississippi,* 2002. Color direct gravure with spit bite aquatint. Paper size: 16 x 23"; image size: 8 x 16". Edition 30. Printed by Case Hudson.

Robert Bechtle, *20th and Mississippi - Night,* 2002. Color direct gravure with spit bite aquatint. Paper size: 16 x 23"; image size: 8 x 16". Edition 30. Printed by Case Hudson.

Robert Bechtle, *20th Street Capri*, 1993 - 2002. Color direct gravure with spit bite aquatint and soft ground etching. Paper size: 16-3/4 x 20"; image size: 9 x 12". Edition 40. Printed by Case Hudson.

from photographs he deliberately tried to make the paintings seem flat. He has somewhat modified that position over time.

The steep angles of the roads cresting in the centers of several of these new prints do not lend themselves to flatness, though at least one of them, *Potrero Intersection—Blue Sky*, seems uncannily flat given the deep perspective. This is perhaps because of the lack of obvious drawing marks. But in two other prints that use images of the same Potrero intersection there are some rather surprising squiggles in the foreground. These have a precedent in the watercolors that Bechtle has been making recently, and also in the monoprints he did at Crown Point Press in 1993. Especially in his watercolors and prints, Bechtle has begun to branch out. Lately he has been doing night scenes that he sees as romantic and working with covered cars that he calls "mysterious and funny."

Over the years, Bechtle's work changes, but the changes are subtle. In this series of prints, it's interesting to compare *20th Street Capri* with the others in the group. Bechtle began *20th Street Capri* in 1993, but he wasn't happy with the early proofs and he abandoned it. In 2002 he asked to see the plates again. He dropped out one plate he had drawn in 1993 and made two new ones. Then he decided to release the print. In some indefinable way it differs from the 2002 prints in style.

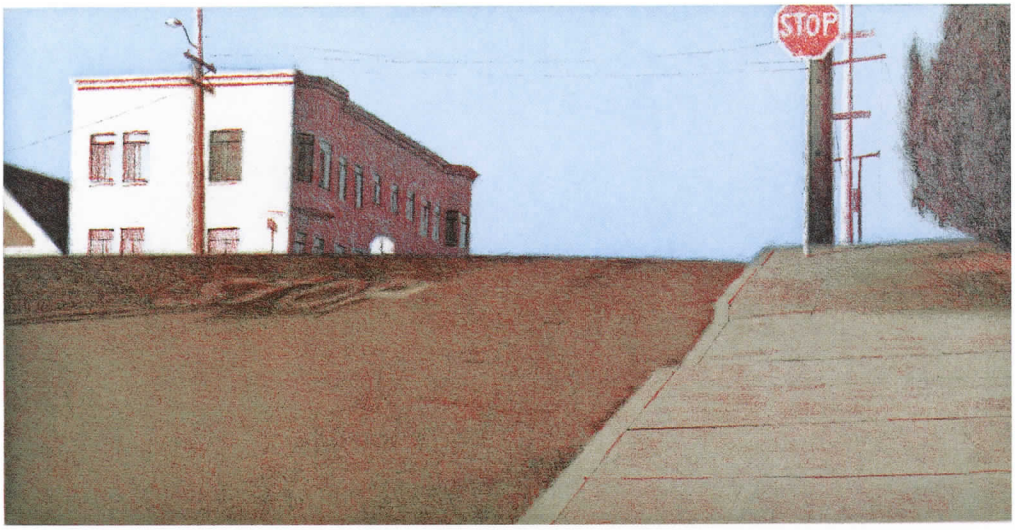
Early in his career (in the '60s and '70s), Bechtle—as he explained in a 1982 interview—was "consciously trying to see how devoid of inherent interest I could make things, how bland they could be and still make some kind of sense." At that time, pop art was on top of the world and it had adopted the methods of commercial art, which works hard to enliven its subjects. Realists, consequently, took a different tack and made their art workmanlike, without embellishment. They shared their workman attitude with the minimal artists who came along slightly earlier, and with the conceptual artists who developed at about the same time. They also shared with minimal and conceptual artists an interest in specificity, though it was expressed differently in the different mindsets. The specificity of realist artists—especially photorealists like Bechtle—was focused on the examination and accumulation of detail. A main reason that Bechtle's work seems not to have changed much over the years is that the detail aspect of it has not changed.

Bechtle looks at each individual part of his subject and does his best to be faithful to it as the camera has seen it. And his subject is very particular to him. "A lot of what I have done has been a kind of accommodation with California influences and California subject matter," he says. "I realize this is what is most familiar to me and this is what I'm most interested in making art out of."

Robert Bechtle was born in 1932 in San Francisco, and has lived all his life in the San Francisco Bay Area. This is a small art community with its own stream of art ideas. Hans Hofmann taught in Berkeley in the early 1940s before he lived in New York, and abstract expressionists Clyfford Still and Mark Rothko were at the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute) in the 1950s. Richard Diebenkorn and other Bay Area figurative painters provided influences toward figuration before those kinds of ideas resurfaced (after abstract expressionism had done away with them) in New York. Funk art, a kind of homegrown humor-filled pop art that developed in reaction to the seriousness of the Bay Area figurative painters, began here in the early 1960s and was dominating the local galleries by the end of that decade when photorealism and conceptual art began to assert themselves.

The photorealists and the conceptual artists here, like the funk artists, were a part of the Bay Area's figurative climate, but they were more international in scope. They were developing their ideas simultaneously with artists elsewhere.

Bechtle was friendly with several New York photorealists who



Robert Bechtle, *Potrero Intersecton - Blue Sky,* 2002. Color soft ground etching with aquatint. Paper size: 13-3/4 x 19"; image size: 6 x 12". Edition 40. Printed by Case Hudson.

provided interaction more than influence. He says his influences include Richard Diebenkorn and the American realist painter Edward Hopper (who was an influence on Diebenkorn). "When the light takes on as strong a presence as it does for both those artists, where the shadows become almost objects themselves, then the figures loose their primacy. They start to recede and that creates a sense of isolation," he says.

The sense of isolation in the work of Diebenkorn and Hopper—especially Hopper—is very different from Bechtle's, however. For the older artists, the picture contains the isolated mood, holds it in. The picture is a world unto itself. Bechtle's world, which is of our time and absolutely ordinary, is at the edges of his paintings. The centers usually are in shadow and without incident. We can rest in isolation in the center, then drift to brighter edges and—without even thinking much about it—move past the painting to the real world.

In the New York Times in 1992, critic Roberta Smith pointed out that Bechtle's painting "records, almost anonymously, the subtlety and variety with which the ordinary world is revealed by light. So doing, it dignifies the commonplace while also illuminating the complex, artificial process of seeing, choosing, and painting that can yield art." That complex, artificial process is essentially formal. Bechtle, talking about some houses that are the subject of a recent painting, says they have a "wonderful visual rhythm as they go up the hill. I'm always struck by it." He speaks about his paintings as "still lifes, really." "If they didn't have houses, they would be very abstract," he says.

As he said long ago in 1982, his paintings "all along" have been about "the quality of light" and "my own, everyday surroundings." He is looking for art, he says, that is "formally interesting and at the same time evokes some kind of poetry." He doesn't talk about being radical. But in a time of overblown photography and of all kinds of posing and posturing, perhaps he is.

—Kathan Brown

Early quotations from the artist are taken from *View*, 1982, an interview by Robin White at Crown Point Press. Later ones are from an interview by Jesse Hamlin in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 3, 2002.

Robert Bechtle in the Crown Point studio, 2002.

In the Crown Point Gallery:
***Friends*: New Etchings by Robert Bechtle and Tom Marioni**
January 9 - March 1, 2003

Please join us in the gallery at a reception for the artists on Friday, January 10 from 6 - 8 pm.

In San Francisco:
Visit Crown Point Press at the San Francisco International Art Exposition 2003, at Fort Mason Center, January 17 - 20.

In New York:
Crown Point's new editions are available for viewing at Pace Prints, 32 East 57th Street.

Design and Production: Sasha Baguskas
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