Crown Point Press
Newsletter
Winter 2005

Overview

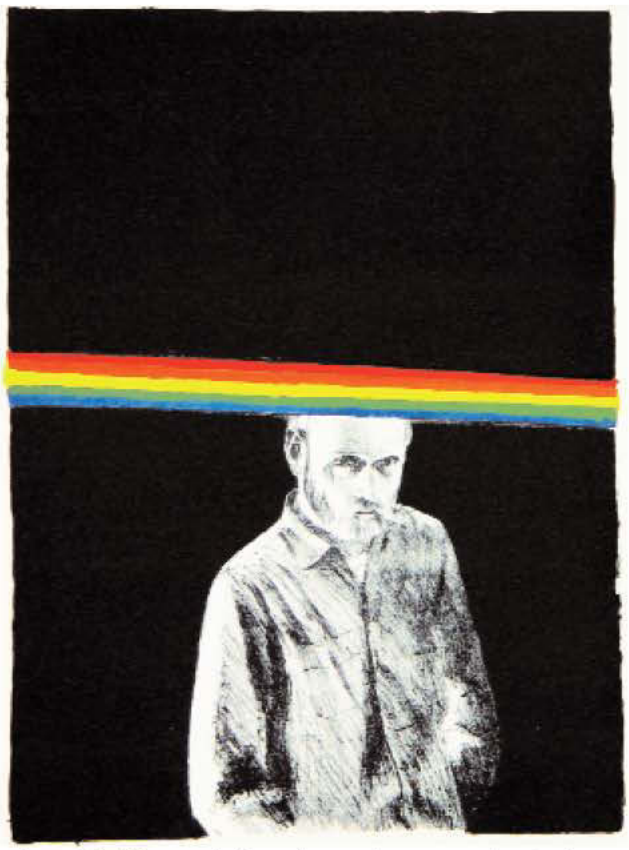
Robert Bechtle, *Texas and 20th Intersection*, 2004. Color soft ground etching with aquatint. Paper size: 31 x 39"; image size: 22 x 30-3/4". Edition 30. Printed by Catherine Brooks.

ROBERT BECHTLE PRINTS 1965-2004

As this newsletter appears in February 2005, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art is opening a retrospective exhibition of the paintings of Robert Bechtle. At the same time, our Crown Point Press gallery (around the corner from the museum) looks back at another aspect of Bechtle's work: his prints.

I met Bechtle in the early 1960s at meetings of the California Society of Printmakers, a group formed by the merging of the California Society of Etchers, of which I was a member, and the Bay Printmakers, a group of lithographers that included him. In 1962, the year I started Crown Point Press, Bechtle had just returned to the San Francisco Bay Area from a year of traveling in Europe, "getting Europe out of my system," he says in hindsight. He spent five months in Spain, thinking about Velasquez, and went to Holland to track down every Vermeer painting he could find. He reveled in Europe's quaintness, and when he returned, America seemed new and exciting. He saw California as "just as exotic" as the fortress towns and fishing villages he had left.

Artists were trying to find ways to go beyond abstract expressionism. Pop art was the dominant art movement.

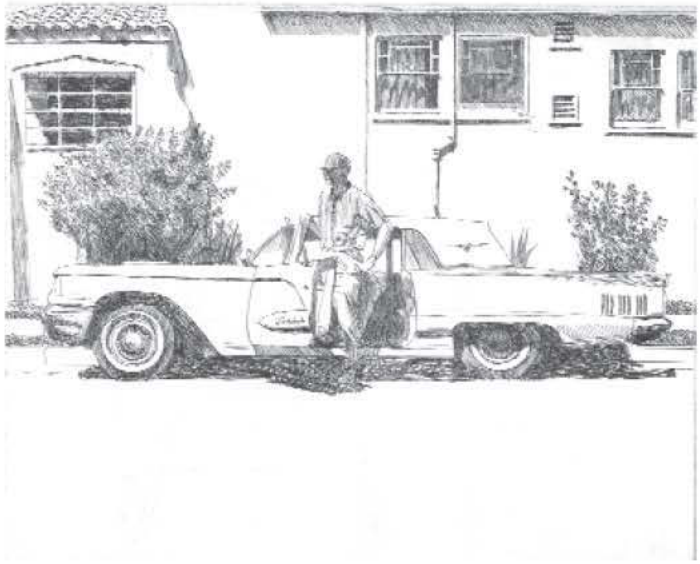


Robert Bechtle, *Flash*, 1965. Color lithograph. Paper and image size: 20-3/4 x 15". Edition 20. Printed and published by the artist.

Richard Diebenkorn, whom Bechtle admired, had switched from abstraction to a figuration colored by abstraction. Bechtle began to work through questions about what figuration is. He had groundwork in drawing, having graduated from the California College of Arts and Crafts (now the California College of the Arts) and worked professionally as a designer, but he felt defeated in attempts to "paint something the way it really looks." In the early '60s, he painted in order to teach himself how to depict real life, and at the same time he used the litho press he had in his garage to infuse his real-life subjects with graphic ideas: light-dark contrasts, symbols and signs (rainbows, for example), images in panels, images fading in and out. He was trying to see if pop art was useful to him. Moving away from expressionism, as many artists at the time were doing, he also thought about ordinariness, flatness, color as a given (as it is in a rainbow). Gradually his prints became less graphic, more like the paintings that he had at first considered exercises. The paintings, on the other hand, over years of development, became more graphic, especially in the use of light and shadow. Printmaking, Bechtle says, is "a way of thinking about what you are doing in a different way." His printmaking thinking and his painting thinking affect one another.

Robert Bechtle was born in 1932 in San Francisco, and has lived all his life in the San Francisco Bay Area, functioning during his adult life within a small art community that has long fostered original 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. And funk art, a kind of homegrown humor-filled, surrealist-influenced pop art began in the San Francisco Bay Area in the early 1960s. In the 1970s, conceptual art and photorealist art were two streams of new art ideas flourishing here, both mixing local traditions of figuration with influences from the minimal art being developed in New York and Europe. The photorealist artists and conceptual artists working in San Francisco in the 1970s were different in obvious ways, but (in varying degrees) they had in common a desire to make their art workmanlike, without embellishment. Early in his career, Bechtle has said, he "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."

In developing a deadpan, straight-ahead, camera-informed realism, Bechtle was part of a small group of realist artists in San Francisco who were in touch with the international art world and were building their ideas simultaneously with artists elsewhere. After about 1970, he was friendly with several New York photorealists who provided interaction more than influence, but his involvement with photorealist ideas had begun in the previous decade. His influences, he says, include Richard Diebenkorn and the American realist painter Edward Hopper



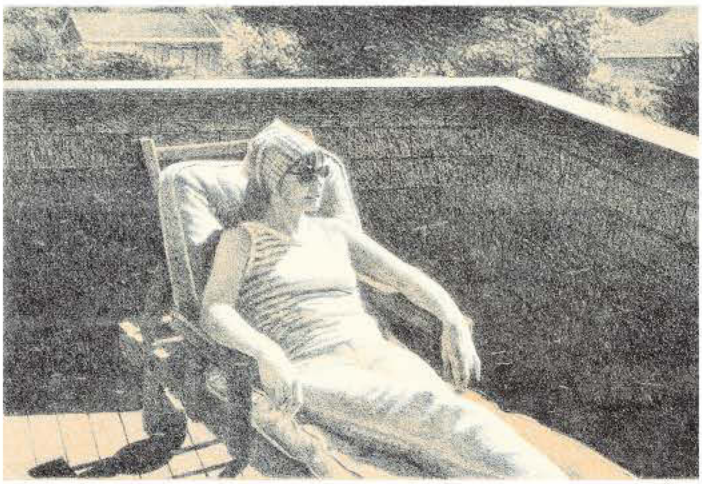
Robert Bechtle, *Thunderbird*, 1967. Hard ground etching. Paper size: 10-3/4 x 14"; image size: 7-1/4 x 9". Unpublished, printed by Kathan Brown.

(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." 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, is at the edges of his paintings. Especially in his mature, most recent work, the center is often in shadow or without much incident. We can rest in isolation there, then drift to bright, active edges and move past the painting to the real world. In Bechtle's vision—the special knowledge about the world that, beyond style, makes a Bechtle painting or print recognizably a Bechtle—the center, our normal point of focus, is less interesting than the edges. He emphasizes the part of life just beyond what we see when we first look.

The style of Bechtle's work, which is crucial to it, comes from photography. Back in the mid-1960s, he began taking photos in order to copy them and turn them into paintings so that "the painting could play out in unforeseen ways." The constraints of the camera gave him a way to keep his paintings from being expressionist. As long as photography has existed, artists have used it as a tool (Vermeer worked with a camera obscura in the seventeenth century), and for Bechtle, for sure, it is a tool not a crutch. "What you see in making the painting is a lot more than you see when taking the photo," he says. "For instance, maybe there is a tree casting a shadow over stairs. In the photo, it registers as just an area of shadow. But when you start to paint it, there is a lot going on there, and you have to find a way to deal with it that will feel right to people."

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. The paintings ended up looking like art. When Bechtle began making his hand-painted imitations of photographs, to many people they didn't look like art. His inexpressive painterly craftsmanship obscured the radical nature of his method.

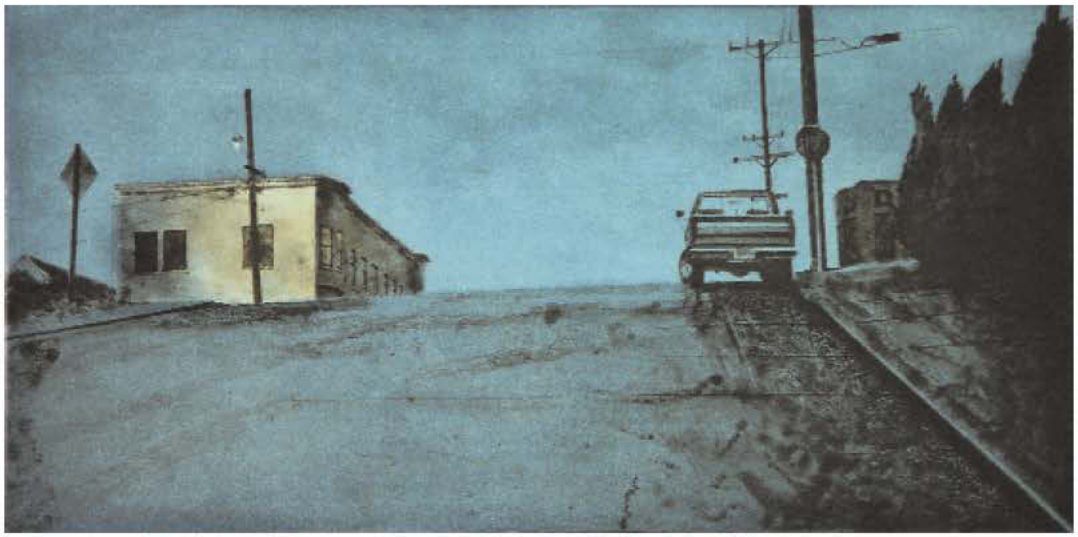


Robert Bechtle, *Woman on Deck*, 1979-81. Color lithograph. Paper size: 10-1/4 x 13": image size: 4-3/4 x 7". Edition 25. Printed and published by the artist.

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. Part of the magic of Bechtle's vision is the sense of impending movement in a quiet picture. His scenes don't seem to be timeless. In them, we recognize a camera-eye view, and consequently feel 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 to subvert the feeling that photographs ordinarily reflect a world in flux. "The sense of time in a painting is very slow, very static, long term," Bechtle has said in a recent interview. "The sense of time in a photograph tends to be immediate." Somehow, his work melds both those senses of time.

Bechtle made his first prints at Crown Point Press in 1967. I had published (in 1965) Richard Diebenkorn's *41 Etchings Drypoints* and Wayne Thiebaud's *Delights* (both are portfolio/books), and I invited Bechtle to do a series of etchings that he tentatively named *The Alameda Book*, after the town across the bay from San Francisco where he grew up. He made only three images, however, and abandoned the project. Hard ground etching, which he was using, was too "ye olde" he said. When I recently reminded him of this (I never forgot, but he did), he laughed and said he had looked at a lot of Rembrandt etchings and thought his fell short, and besides, back then, "we wanted everything to be brand new and terrific." I remember that I suggested he try soft ground, and he said he could make that kind of mark perfectly well with litho. We didn't release the prints, but he and I both kept proofs, and if we still had the plates, we would print them now.

Fourteen years later, in 1982, I tried the soft ground idea out on him again and he made two ambitious prints, *Sunset Street* and *Sunset Intersection*. They involved months of work on his part and *Sunset Intersection* is still considered by many in the print world to be one of the great examples of the use of the soft ground medium. That same year, 1982, he also made his most recent lithograph, published by the Archives of American Art as a fundraiser and printed by Don Farnsworth at



Robert Bechtle, *20th and Mississippi—Night*, 2002. Color direct gravure with spit bite aquatint. Paper size: 16 x 23": image size: 6 x 16". Edition 30. Printed by Case Hudson.

Robert Bechtle, *Potrero Houses-Pennsylvania Avenue*, 1989. Color woodcut printed on silk mounted on rag paper. Paper size: 27 x 26-1/4": image size: 11 x 16". Edition 38. Printed in Beijing at the Rong Bao Zhai studio.

Robert Bechtle, *Sunset Intersection*, 1983. Color soft ground etching in three panels on one sheet of paper. Paper size: 32-1/4 x 59-3/4": image size: 22 x 49-1/2". Edition 35. Printed by Lilah Toland.

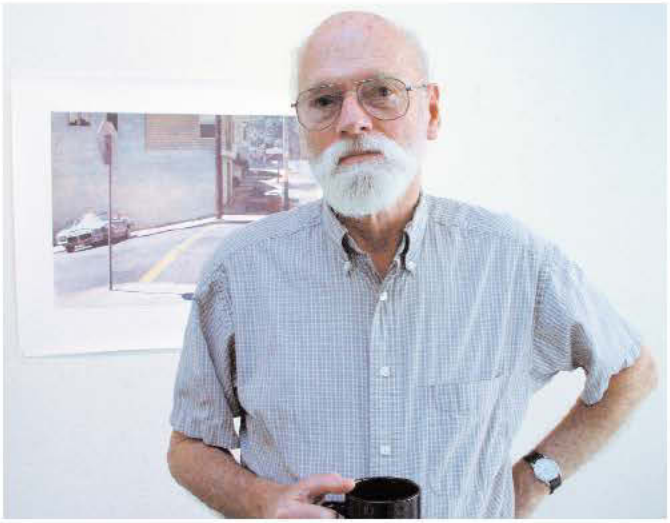
Magnolia Press, Oakland. He still has his press set up in his studio, but the last lithograph he printed himself, *Woman on Deck*, was started in 1979, finished in 1981.

In 1989 and 1990 Bechtle made two woodcuts as part of our Crown Point Press woodcut project in China, and in 1993 he worked in our San Francisco studio on a series of monotypes that were (unusually for him) done from sketches rather than photographs.

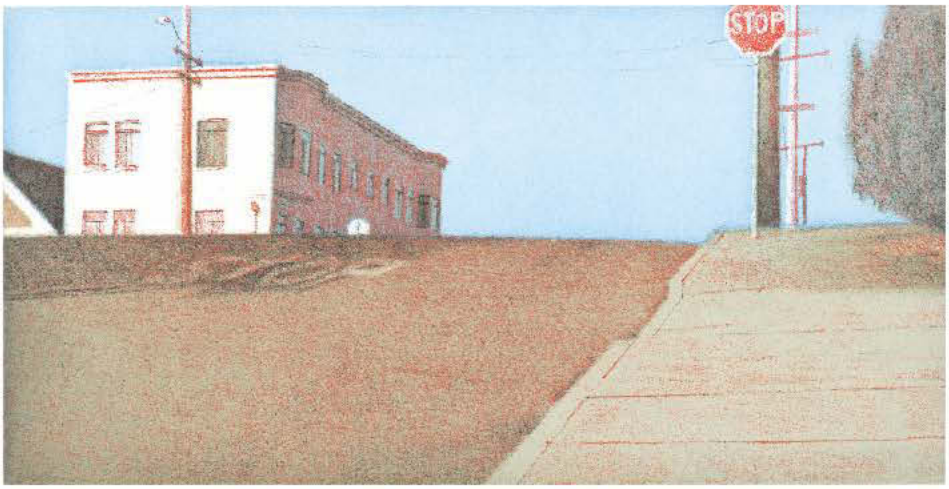
Our largest etching project with Bechtle was in 2002, when we released five prints, two color soft grounds, and three prints made by direct gravure. The first of the direct gravure prints was started in 1993, at my suggestion, when Bechtle was working in the studio on the monotypes. In the direct gravure process, rather than drawing directly on the copper plate as he was used to doing, he drew on a piece of Mylar and we transferred the image to the plate directly (without photography) using a light-sensitive ground. The image, with complex color, presented a registration problem, and was abandoned at the time.

When Bechtle returned in 2002, he was eager to try direct gravure again. He wanted to continue working in soft ground, as he had developed a comfortable way of doing that, but he also wanted to think about the gravure process. It was something different and challenging. "It's interesting to use photo-technology as part of a process not aimed toward reproducing something," he said. He dropped one plate that he had made for the 1993 image, *20th Street Capri*, and added two new ones to make a print that pleased him. Then he drew a new image on Mylar, *Potrero Intersection—20th and Mississippi*, and added an aquatint plate to complete the image. An additional aquatint plate turned the image into a second print, a night scene titled *20th and Mississippi—Night*.

I have saved the best for last: Robert Bechtle's most recent print, the focus of this exhibition, *Texas and 20th Intersection*, 2004. This is a large print for Bechtle, whose work is labor intensive, his largest except for the famous *Sunset Intersection* of 1983. He spent three weeks in October, 2004, working every day on it, drawing five 22 x 30 inch copper plates in soft ground and adding a sixth for aquatint. In soft ground etching, the artist draws on paper laid over a plate coated with a soft wax. The pressure of the pencil picks up the wax, and the texture of the paper is etched into the plate. That texture provides



Robert Bechtle in the Crown Point studio, 2004.



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.

the tooth that holds ink and gives a soft ground line its quality. Bechtle and his printer, Catherine Brooks, spent some time in advance testing papers and choosing a handmade Japanese paper to use in making the plates. Being handmade, it has an irregular grain. "I was pleasantly surprised," Bechtle said. "The paper was coarser than what I had used before, and when the image came together the texture gave it an almost pointillist feel." I would say the print shimmers. The overall texture creates the shimmer, as does the image of sunlight glancing off a car windshield at one of the picture's edges. The sunlight also creates dramatic sidewalk shapes, and glistens on tree leaves behind the street sign: Texas. But this image is not in Texas. We can tell by the misty character of the light. It's a San Francisco scene.

—Kathan Brown

In the Crown Point Gallery:

Robert Bechtle Prints 1965-2004

February 11 - April 2, 2005

Please join us in the gallery at a reception for the artist on Friday, February 11 from 6 - 8 pm.

In San Francisco:

Robert Bechtle: A Retrospective

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, February 12 - June 5, 2005. The show travels to the Modern Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas, June 26 - August 28.

Layout and Production: Sasha Baguskas

20 Hawthorne Street
San Francisco, CA 94105
415. 974.6273
FAX 415.495.4220
www.crownpoint.com

Crown Point Press