

Overview



Robert Bechtle in the
Crown Point studio, 2013.

ROBERT BECHTLE

New Monotypes

In Robert Bechtle's long career as a painter he has focused on the world as we see it in photographs—when you look at a photograph of a Bechtle painting, you could think it is not a painting but a photograph of an actual scene. Nowadays, some artist-photographers make models, build sets, or employ actors so they can set up their photographs to imitate paintings, striving for a timeless quality. Robert Bechtle does the opposite; he makes paintings that imitate photographs. His works, though often unpeopled and usually calm, are moments captured, sensed fully and poised for change. To accomplish this, he builds his paintings up one tiny mark at a time, working so slowly and precisely that he generally completes only two or three in a year. His control of his medium is at the forefront. Peter Schjeldahl, writing in the *Village Voice* in 1991, spoke of his “mysterious doggedness of depicting.”

The scenes in Bechtle's new monotypes from Crown Point Press, however, are not doggedly depicted. He created them with something else in mind. Bechtle has used the medium of monotype to explore how far control can move toward out-of-control and remain satisfactory to him and recognizable as his art.

Although a monotype has passed through a printing press, it is closer to a drawing or a painting than it is to a print. It is

unique. Because the artist did not create a matrix to hold the ink, the image cannot be repeated—the plate is a flat surface like a piece of paper. To begin each of the two series shown here, Bechtle made a drawing on a plate using watercolors and water-soluble colored pencils. Each of his two initial drawings represented a couple of days' work for him; he approached them as he does his drawings on paper by slowly accumulating detail using layers of colors and marks. If he had been making a print, he would have separated the colors onto different plates, but in the monotypes, each entire image, with all its tones and colors, was on a single plate. Also, as is common in the making of monotypes, after the image went through the press the artist—if he wished to—worked on it further, drawing directly on the paper.

Why have a plate at all, then? Why not just draw on paper? The answer, for Bechtle in this body of work, has to do with ghosts. In making a monotype, after the drawing is transferred by the printing press, the image on the plate remains visible but delicate. If another print is pulled without further work it is called a ghost. For each of the two series, Bechtle printed one ghost, then painted over it on the paper. After that, a ghost image was still visible on the plate, and he worked back into that, time and again, to create related images. In doing this he tested varying amounts of control.

Arkansas Street, a series of six, came first. Bechtle lives in the Potrero Hill neighborhood of San Francisco, where many of the streets are named for states. On a long walk he takes each morning he occasionally finds a photograph he can use. It isn't as easy as it might seem. Sometimes he sees something interesting, he told an interviewer recently, but “when I start looking through the camera I find there's absolutely no place I can shoot that will make a photograph suitable for making into a painting.”

Shown here are six versions of a view of Arkansas Street that Bechtle found suitable for shooting. The versions he has drawn of that photograph are different in their colors, light, and defining marks, but whatever it was that interested him is retained in all of them. An expanse of empty street is the most obvious shared element (it is also an element of many Bechtle paintings, particularly recent ones). The street is carefully built of small marks in (1), composed of big brushy marks in (2), and almost dissolving in (3). In (4) and (5) Bechtle begins to bring back control, and then in (6) loosens up again. Number six has an accidental shape in the street that functions structurally because of the windows directly



Arkansas Street (1), 2013. Watercolor monotype. 8¾-x-11¾-inch image on 17½-x-20-inch sheet.
All monotypes printed by Ianne Kjørliie.



Arkansas Street (2)



Arkansas Street (3)



Arkansas Street (4)



Arkansas Street (5)



Arkansas Street (6)



19th and Pennsylvania (1), 2013. Watercolor monotype. 7¾-x-11¾-inch image on 16½-x-19¾-inch sheet.



19th and Pennsylvania (2)



19th and Pennsylvania (3)



19th and Pennsylvania (4)

above it that are washed out in bright light. The shape could be a shimmer in the windshield or in your glasses or in the street itself and it weights the lower corner of the scene, balancing the dark blue above. The artist kept for himself one of these works. Which one do you think he chose? I'll tell you after we talk about *19th and Pennsylvania*.

The second series Bechtle created in this medium at this time is different from the first. There is an expanse of street, and also an expanse of sky. Rather than a wedge of buildings moving uphill, *19th and Pennsylvania* shows a single building at a hill's crest, with some foliage and two parked cars (they don't disturb the street's emptiness).

As in the earlier series, the second print of *19th and Pennsylvania* was a ghost of the first image printed. In *Arkansas Street*, Bechtle had repainted the ghost of (1) almost entirely on the paper and radically changed the colors. By contrast, in *19th and Pennsylvania* he painted the ghost sparingly, mostly smoothing out the crayon texture. This is the only one of the four images in *19th and Pennsylvania* with any painting done after printing.

In *Arkansas Street*, there is painting after printing on all the images except (3). He didn't touch that one after it came off the press. "There's something about it I especially like," he said to me in a tone of surprise when the printer pinned it to the wall. Ultimately, that was the one he selected to keep for himself. In the entire group, it is the least precisely formed. Now that you know this, can you guess which one he kept from the second series, *19th and Pennsylvania*? It is also (3). The works in the center seem to be the ones that Bechtle pushed out-of-control so much that he surprised himself. In moving toward and away from them, he accomplished ten beautiful mono-types, each one, in itself, something to see.

—Kathan Brown

Crown Point Press

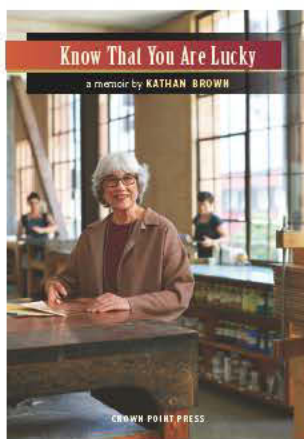
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