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PHOTOREALISM: MORE THAN EYE CANDY

PICTURE THIS



It might look like a photograph, but Raphaelle Spence's depiction of China's Forbidden City is a meticulously painted oil on canvas.

A photorealist painting is always more than it appears to be. From the period mid-century cars of Robert Bechtle to the shimmering coats on the horses of Richard McLean, the cityscapes of Richard Estes, the multilayered shop windows of Tom Blackwell, the glistening glassware and cellophane of Roberto Bernardi and the sprawling landscapes of Raphaella Spence, these works invite wonder both for their high standard of craftsmanship and the individual visions of the artists.



RICHARD ESTES / MARLBOROUGH GALLERY; BERNARDOCCI MEISEL GALLERY

With their intense realism and their meticulously painted, seemingly brushstroke-free surfaces, these works look very much like photographs—and they should, for they are based on photographs taken by the artists. Far from hiding their mechanical origins, these paintings showcase them, reveling in details that the unaided eye cannot see. The latest series from Arizona-based artist John Schieffer, for example, depicts splashes of liquid that can only be captured by high-speed film. But enjoying these artworks might be the least complicated thing about them.

Let's start with what photorealist paintings are not: They are not works of *trompe l'oeil*, because while they are impressively realistic, they are not rendered to scale. And despite what their detractors claim, they are not mere copies of photographs. "I think people often have misconceptions about photorealism—'Why bother painting the scene when you just have a photograph of it?'" But that's not what you get with photorealism at all," says Frank Bernarducci, partner and director of the Bernarducci Meisel gallery in New York. "You're getting the hand of the artist, his technique, his soul. All of his life experience comes to a head in the painting he's working on in that moment. All of that influences the painting." Maggie Bollaert, director of the Plus One Gallery in London, says, "The photos are not just happy snaps that they use to paint. They use it as another tool to create a painting. It's still their own imagination, and still their own creation."

The first wave of photorealists arrived in the late 1960s and early '70s, on the heels of the Pop art movement. Louis Meisel, a New York dealer who is credited with coining the word "photorealism" and has authored three books on the subject, says that Bechtle's '56 *Chrysler*, a painting from 1964, is among the earliest photorealist works. The initial group of artists, by Meisel's reckoning, included Bechtle, Blackwell, Estes, McLean, Don Eddy, Ralph Goings, Ron Kleemann, John Salt and Ben Schonzeit, all of whom continue to paint in the style. As time passed Meisel recognized later-arriving artists such as Davis Cone, who is perhaps best known for his movie theater exteriors, and Bertrand Meniel, a Frenchman who painted the Art Deco streetscapes



From left, two photorealistic visions of New York: Richard Estes' 2009 *Columbus Circle Looking North* and Ron Kleemann's 1987 take on a Macy's Thanksgiving parade balloon, titled *Peckerheads*.

of Miami Beach. "I've spent the last 40 years sticking to the artists I care about," says Meisel. "Each decade, if I'm fortunate, I add five more."

Meisel's term for the style is not universally embraced in the art world. Ivan Karp of the OK Harris gallery in New York, which has handled this form of art since the dawn of the movement, prefers "precision realism" as well as "hyperrealism,"

because they deflect attention from the role of the photograph in the creative process. "The photo is really a technical aid," says Karp, and the artworks "are not necessarily respectful of the photo. Many artists feel the photo is one of the sources for the idea of the painting. Having used the photo, they recompose it as they make the painting." Indeed, these paintings often are not the product of a single image, and even when



EXHIBITION

Summer Sweet (new works by Roberto Bernardi, Tom Blackwell and others)
Bernarducci Meisel, New York / May 6–29



they are, the artists tend to edit and color-correct at will. Blackwell, who is still an active photorealist, says, "I'd rather work from a single image if I can, but I'm willing to do what I have to do to make a compelling and believable image."

Bollaert describes Plus One, which was founded in 2001, as a "hyperrealist" gallery and says she employs the word because it is more prevalently used in Europe. "The impression in Europe is that photorealism is a very American term and a very specific term to the late '60s, '70s and '80s," she says. "Hyperrealism is a broader term for what's going on today."

American artists Rod Penner and Denis Peterson prefer to call themselves hyperrealists rather than photorealists. Peterson, a Long Island, N.Y.-based artist who painted as a photorealist from the late 1960s to the 1980s and adopted the term "hyperrealist" around 2002, uses it to emphasize how his choice of subject matter differs from that of photorealists, who are more likely to revel in the challenge of painting the intricacies of reflective surfaces, be they shop windows, silverware, highly polished vehicles, marbles, the innards of pinball machines or water. Peterson's images have featured beggars, refugees, genocide survivors and heaps of trash piled on urban streets. "Hyperrealism offers a different dynamic," he says. "A slightly different reality can be created. I can offer something more spiritual than photorealism." More recently, Peterson has painted urban scenes of New York and resisted innumerable opportunities to indulge in rendering reflections, allowing them only as subdued accents here and there. Penner specializes in haunting Central Texas scenes of abandoned gas stations and small town streets devoid of human life. The artist, who has expressed disinterest in what he calls "eye candy," says, "Hyperrealism, I think, defines my technique a little better. I would say it's more intense. You get more detail than one photo of a specific place."

Penner's careful delineation hints at a larger issue with photorealism: Not all artists who work with photos, or whose art appears photographic, regard themselves as photorealists, and some actively resist the label. Chuck Close was a member of



Reflections preoccupy photorealists, from the cellophane wrappers and glass in Roberto Bernardi's *Caramelle de Cristallo* and *La Tavolozza* (at left, from top), both from 2010 to the shop window in Tom Blackwell's *Morning in Monaco*, 2009.

the first generation of photorealists but is no longer counted among them. "Today his works are photo-derived, not photorealist," says Meisel. "He has passed through it and is now one of the most important artists of our time." Malcolm Morley, a British-born artist whose work can look photorealistic, is considered a link between Pop art and photorealism, according to Meisel. Mel Ramos' strongly realistic images pairing soft porn and product placement also belong to Pop art.

Clive Head's paintings of London city scenes might seem photorealistic, but they rely very little on photographs. Armin Bienger, a London-based director of Marlborough, the gallery that has represented Head since 2005, says the British

painter deems himself a realist who typically starts by drawing a suitable location and shooting it later, and he "then uses photographic details as references only." Head employed this approach for *Coffee at the Cottage Delight*, a 2009–10 oil on canvas that Marlborough sold for around €140,000 (\$186,000) at The European Fine Art Fair in Maastricht in March. The painting's main figures are based on models who posed for him in his studio. Moreover, Head's approach contradicts and even negates the photorealist tendency to incorporate photographic qualities into a canvas. "It's impossible, even for a wide-angle lens, to capture what's in a Clive Head painting," says Bienger. "You literally have to turn 180 degrees, from left to right."

"I'd rather work from a single image if I can, but I'm willing to do what I have to do to make a compelling and believable image."

—Tom Blackwell, Photorealist

Margaret Morrison, an artist in Watkinsville, Ga., had referenced photographs when painting figures during her career and recently turned to the visual tool for a series of still lifes of pieces of candy, which were displayed at the Woodward Gallery in New York last year. She does not consider herself a photorealist. “The photos were mainly to aid me in seeing more information,” she says. “Most of the finished product was a combination of looking at the photo and having the candy in front of me, to respond to the physicality of the candy.”

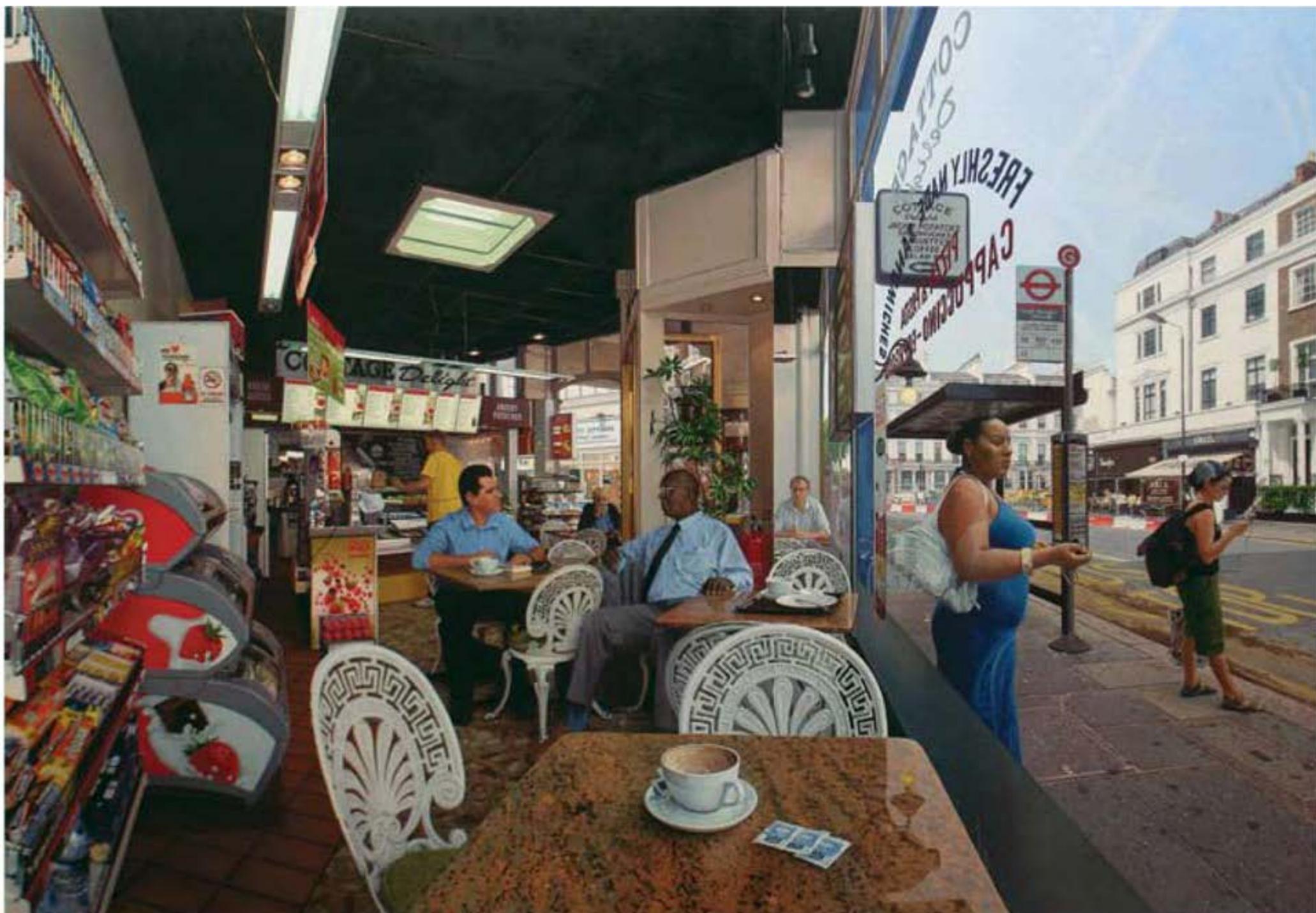
Photorealism has endured critical indifference over the years, as well as the occasional barb or backhanded compliment. In *Photorealism Since 1980*, his second book on the subject, Meisel quotes John Russell saying, “Looking at photorealist paintings

is like eating horsef.esh. If you can stand it, the case against it seems like dated prejudice. If you can't stand it, nothing on earth will change your mind.” Still, Meisel feels that being generally ignored by critics has done photorealism more harm than any verbal brickbats that have been flung at it. “I've held 300 shows in 40 years,” he says, “and only three of the artists have been reviewed in *The New York Times*.” Karp says that the style has suffered somewhat for attracting two distinctly different audiences: “We have the uninformed, who respond to the technique of it—‘My kid couldn't do that, therefore that must be art’—and we have those who are wise enough and able to detect the vitality of the work.” Blackwell, who is now 72, says his wife initially doubted him when he began making highly

realistic renderings of motorcycles. “She thought I had gone off my head,” he says. “It seemed like such a tangent, that no one would take it seriously. But I had an intuition that it would be a very fertile area, and it turned out to be prescient. Within a year I was known all over the world for those paintings.”

Not surprisingly, it takes a certain stubbornness and a will to persevere to gain success as a photorealist artist, particularly when the demands of the technique are so arduous that one's annual output can be as low as three canvases. Many of the painters who gravitate to it are self-taught, and those who have had some art schooling largely concur that the classroom isn't where they learned the skills they depend on most heavily. With the exception of Bech-

Clive Head's *Coffee at the Cottage Delight*, 2009-10, might seem photorealistic, but it relies very little on photographs.





PRUDENCE CUMMING ASSOCIATES / CLIVE HEAD / MARLBOROUGH FINE ART LTD; LOUIS K MEISEL GALLERY; ROD PENNER

From top: Robert Bechtle, painter of '73 *Mustang*, 1974, was among the first generation of photorealists and remains an active practitioner of the style; Rod Penner, a younger artist who describes himself as a hyperrealist, creates haunting photo-based works such as his 2007 *Ghost Station/Stephenville, TX*.



tle, Goings and McLean, who met at the California College of Arts and Crafts, the first generation of painters found their way to what would be called photorealism on their own, unaware of what others across America were doing.

Funnily enough, this tendency to operate in isolation held true for some leaders among the newest generation of artists. British-born Spence, a self-taught 31-year-old painter, says she only learned about her forebears after becoming a full-fledged professional. "I actually started exhibiting

with Meisel and Bernarducci Meisel before I really knew anything about them," she says. Roberto Bernardi, Spence's 36-year-old colleague and boyfriend, says he studied some art history at school in his native Italy, but his textbooks stopped at Pop art. "I remember very little photorealism," he says. Penner, the 45-year-old hyperrealist, studied at what is now Kwantlen Polytechnic University in British Columbia, Canada, and at Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Okla., and says, "I was aware of photorealism before, but only through magazine

Davis Cone, *Cameo*, 1988, acrylic on canvas.



articles. What struck me when I first saw my first photorealist work in person was it seemed more detailed in the magazine. I had assumed it was more detailed than it really was. Not that it made it less of a great work of art—I just found it interesting.”

When Penner saw a photorealist work, he thought, “I can do that,” and went on to prove that he could. Of course, each artist’s motivation for pursuing the form is individual. Blackwell saw connections between motorcycles and the abstracts that he had made previously. “I had no interest in motorcycles per se. They were just striking visual things that caught my eye,” he says. “I became intrigued with the shapes of chrome. In a way, you could look at it divorced from its function. An engine could almost be an abstract painting.” Ron Kleemann, another first-generation artist who remains active at 72, simply says, “I just wanted to do something that was real in my eyes.”

Technological advancements are pushing the field forward. As digital cameras have become more affordable and chemical film and processing labs have dwindled, virtually every photorealist artist has changed his or her allegiance from the latter to the former. Far from being traumatic, the transformation has been something of a boon. Several photorealists agree that digital images provide them with more information than chemical film images, and they hold their integrity better when they are enlarged. “I still use film for some things, but I’m almost exclusively digital now,” says Blackwell. “In the past few years, the availability and the sophistication of digital cameras made the switch easy.”

For the past few years, Spence has created paintings based on aerial photographs shot from a helicopter. She recently embarked on a new series that will rely on aerial photos of New York, Venice and Las Vegas taken during the day and at night with a 22-megapixel camera that can produce images with as much as 66 megapixels of resolution. “As soon as I had the opportunity to move onto digital about nine years ago, I did,” she says. “With chemical film, there’s much less detail, and they’re more blurry when you blow them up. With digital, it’s much easier now to control anything. There’s a lot more freedom when I

work with the material. There’s definitely a benefit to having no limit to what you can see.” Bollaert agrees that the change has been significant. “It’s like using a better brush or a better pigment to paint,” she says. “They produce more detailed images and give the artists better details of the subjects they want to paint.”

Interestingly, Penner and Peterson, the self-identified hyperrealists, are less enthusiastic about digital technology. Penner keeps an 8-megapixel Canon in his car for when he stumbles upon worthy landscape subjects while driving, and though he affirms that the greater amount of information afforded by a digital image is helpful, he is not sure that more is always better. “With an 8-megapixel, I probably get as much as I need,” he says, and mentions that he might acquire a 15-megapixel at some point. But he relates having heard of an artist who bought an 80-megapixel camera and asks, “Where does it stop?” Peterson, 65, is fondest of his inexpensive 1- and 2-megapixel cameras, and finds himself annoyed at receiving too much information. “Sometimes digital clarity works against me. To have a photograph that is not as clear, with not as many megapixels, is an advantage,” he says, adding, “By painting every nook and cranny, especially in an urban scene, you lose the convincing illusion of realism.”

Meisel expects to write his fourth and final book on photorealism sometime this decade, and it will recognize the impact of the technology; the book’s working title is *Photorealism in the Digital Age*. He is also heartened by recent interest from institutions. The Guggenheim Berlin did a major exhibition, *Picturing America: Photorealism in the 1970s*, last year, and Meisel is at work on a show for a Spanish museum for 2011. Bollaert adds that she is in talks with a few private museums in Europe who are interested in shows of their own. But perhaps the most telling sign of what is to come will take place soon at Bernarducci Meisel, which carries works by Spence, Bernardi and several other photorealists. Very shortly, it intends to move to a new space in midtown Manhattan that will double the gallery from 3,000 to 6,000 square feet. ■

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