

AT THE ALL-NITE CAFE:
SOME PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS ON PHOTO REALISM
AND RELATED MATTERS

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7

ABSTRACT

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The thesis examines Photo Realist painting from two directions, my personal involvement and a philosophical interpretation.

The first section, being mainly autobiographical, documents various factors leading to my doing Photo Realist paintings. Originating in specific personal experiences, my primary concern is the relation between the intense awareness of physical presence Photo Realism provides and the associations and meanings an individual viewer connects with the situations depicted.

The second section expands my view into a general examination of Photo Realism, which I define as a branch of Realism employing photographs to achieve a form of objectivity. Touching on contrary interpretations, a case is made that the non-interpretive nature of Photo Realism reveals the visual potentials of commonplace subject matter, thus endowing it with value.

Throughout I work from the assumptions that paintings are a form of entertainment, primarily non-literary in nature, for which a broad range of interpretations is valid.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE

I. THE FIRST SECTION

1. Introduction	1
2. Some Continuing Interests	3
3. A Description of What I'm Doing	5
4. A Chronology of Events	7
5. Photo Realism, What It's All About	11
New York City	12
At the All-Nite Café	15
Some Strange Occurrences in Boston	17
6. An Interpretation of What I'm Doing	19

II. THE SECOND SECTION

1. Introduction	22
2. Definitions	24
3. The Use of the Photograph	27
4. Other Interpretations	31
5. Subject Matter	37
6. A Personal Interpretation and Other Matters	43

III. BIBLIOGRAPHY

49

PREFACE

If I have any particular expertise, it is in making paintings, or more specifically certain kinds of paintings. This may be sufficient for being an artist. I've always believed that paintings provide essentially visual experiences which cannot be fully translated into language. I hold that the verbalization of ideas on painting is secondary to the making of paintings. Nevertheless no one can really deny that an exchange of ideas can affect the way people see paintings and can open various modes of understanding and appreciation.

I ordinarily would not write this sort of paper were it not required. But given this prospect I have attempted to make it a worthwhile project by dealing with those things directly related to my own concerns as a painter. I cannot pretend to be an art historian or theoretician. This paper is not so much an argument for my point of view as it is a description of it. What I've tried to do is to take the implicit assumptions and ideas I have about painting and then explicit and coherent. I've divided the thesis into two sections. The first section documents various beliefs, influences, and experiences which form the basis of my current work. From this specific base I've tried in the second section to develop a more general examination of the area of painting I'm involved with, Photo Realism.

THE FIRST SECTION

1. Introduction

I am going to examine how I came to be doing Photo Realist paintings. What I will try to document is the play between ideas and tendencies, and certain events and experiences. It will be sort of a case history of how I came to choose an existing art style as an expression of my personal needs as an artist. It is this personal involvement that has allowed me to develop more general ideas about art and provides at least the emotional justification for those ideas.

But to begin at the end. In examining my development as a painter I've discovered some implicit assumptions I accept on faith:

- 1) The motivation behind any painting is never simple or pure.
- 2) Art is not a very effective means for the communication of specific ideas.
- 3) In no way can literature fully justify any painting as being worthwhile or really explain why a painting works.
- 4) Paintings, like other man-made objects, are meant to be used. Looking at paintings ought at least to be a pleasant pastime, a form of entertainment and/or enlightenment. It seems unreasonable to believe that the only thing one can do with a painting is subject it to a formal analysis.

The factually minded might want to know some background information. I was born on September 4, 1952, in Speyer, West Germany. I came to Canada in 1957. I presently reside with my parents in Roxboro, Quebec. We are part of that undefined entity the middle class. I have few strong memories of childhood, none that shed much light on my being an artist.

When did I start doing art? I don't recall a time when I wasn't. By nature or circumstance I'm introverted. I've never taken too much pleasure in social activities and cannot fully define myself as a member of a group, even if the group is comprised of artists. Art is something I've always been able to do. When it came time to define my life in terms of goals and ambitions I concluded that I was an artist. Art fills an unspecified need, it settles any question of justifying my existence. In a world where values and meaning are no longer a part of our heritage I take the task of creating my own meaning quite literally - I make things.

I still surprise myself when a painting turns out well. A handsome handmade object is a proof that I'm using my time well. I feel uneasy when I go too long without painting. My friend and fellow artist Bob Montgomery told me that making art has to do with a fear of death, a desire for immortality. That view is perhaps a bit too extreme.

It might be that I'm really being competitive, trying to prove myself to others. Yet I recall waking up at 3:00 a.m., the night of a crowded and successful opening to an exhibition in which I was a major participant, and literally asked myself, "What's it all for?" Success and praise seem only desirable in that they can provide the security and confidence which will allow me more freedom to paint. The thought of being rich and famous does have its appeal though.

In revising this Introduction I've come to realize that I have the problem of sounding quite depressed when I take myself too seriously. I'm really more cheerful than I come across here. I actually enjoy what I do.

2. Some Continuing Interests

What has always fascinated me about painting is image-making. By accepting certain visual conventions the artist and the viewer can engage in world making. The painting becomes a representation of a reality, actual or imagined, which can be, at times; more intense than real life experiences.

This "other world" idea developed out of my interest in literature. In constructing a fictional world all the details become important. A great part of the interest lies in how the fictional details correspond or contrast to the details in the real world. Because of this I have never dealt with a painterly surface, the physicality of paint

4
can destroy the illusion.

My ideas about art first began to take shape around 1967. My interest did not come from "serious art" but from comic books, illustrations, and book covers. The artists I first came to admire were ones with strong literary content, such as Bosch, David, and Dali. Though my attitudes have changed greatly since then, I still am most interested in art that refers to things outside of art.

This involvement with figurative art has led me to have a definite bias against Formalism. I must admit to a certain insensitivity to the more subtle points of composition. I used to paint piecemeal, beginning with a central figure and composing the rest as I went along. I do not necessarily see a painting as a gestalt. I am equally interested in how individual elements are resolved. I distrust the Formalist approach because it conceives of a subject merely as a means to making a painting. I see the painting as a means of describing or revealing some aspect of the subject. Besides, most Formalist analyses I've witnessed dealt mainly with what was wrong with a painting, as if the faults were the most interesting parts.

One of the qualities that attracted me to photography was that it allowed me to compose intuitively. The viewfinder isolates part of the world in a rectangular frame. By justifying my point of view to the object I'm photographing,

eventually the view approximates what I consider an acceptable composition. Recognizing that the photo may require the elimination of some ambiguities, the essential composition is determined when I press the shutter. The photograph reverses the compositional process from constructing an image to editing reality. The camera records many accidental qualities. I prefer to retain most of these because I wish to abide by the visual logic of the specific scene as the logic of making paintings.

For me painting has always been primarily a form of entertainment. I reject the idea that paintings should be difficult to look at, that they demand rigorous intellectual activity. The rewards for this may not be worth the effort. I strive for broader and admittedly less defined goals.

3. A Description of What I'm Doing

I had best explain what it is that I do. I consider myself a Realist painter in that I make fairly objective paintings of real situations. For this end I employ photographs. In both style and subject matter my paintings fall under the category of Photo Realism. One reason for this is that I liked the sort of work the Photo Realists were doing and thought I could do something similar and equally likeable. Nevertheless I try to establish situations which result in photographs, and eventually paintings, related to my own experiences. I take field

6

trips to "exotic" places like New York and Boston. The resulting photographs relate both to the experience of the trip and to the contrast of familiar and unfamiliar environments. More recently I've begun by choosing a specific locale, a street corner, a car dump, and seeing what can be found there. At the time of writing, I've completed fifteen Photo Realist paintings; six of subjects from foreign cities, four from within half a mile of the university, and five from within two miles from my home.

(These are the mechanics I use in making a painting:

- 1) I take photographs with a Zenit 35mm camera.
- 2) I get a five by seven inch enlargement made of the chosen subject.
- 3) I crop the photo, if necessary, and acquire a suitable stretcher.
- 4) Using corresponding grids I make a line-drawing of the photo on the canvas.
- 5) With the photo as a constant guide I paint the picture. I use acrylic paint and various brushes.

There is yet little direction in my subject matter, though I'm somewhat attracted to mechanical things, often in a state of decay. What are consistent throughout all the paintings are certain stylistic traits. These include traits present in my pre-Photo Realist paintings. My current paintings are characterized by:

- 1) A limited color range, predominantly umbers and blues.

- 7
- 2) Linearity, a separation of colors into defined areas:
 - 3) A tendency to resolve unclear areas in terms of flat patterns.
 - 4) Little atmosphere.
 - 5) Static compositions with little suggestion of movement.
 - 6) A very clean finish, no brushstrokes.

All of the above traits seem to relate to control. They are a by-product of the way I transcribe the image and handle paint. I don't ascribe any meaning to them, other than that they identify the paintings as my own. Any significant differences between the photos and the paintings, taking in account the imperfect technique, are more the result of my trying to make a more coherent image. The photo is not always completely sufficient.

4. A Chronology of Events

I first became seriously involved with painting around 1970. The important events and changes that result in my present interest in Photo Realism occurred mainly between then and 1975. This period coincides with my undergraduate years at Concordia. What follows is a short documentation of the development of my work during this period.

1970 - That summer before I entered CEGEP at Sir George Williams my family took a vacation trip to Washington D.C. At the National Gallery of Art I had my first exposure to a large body of good art. I was particularly taken by the

Early Renaissance masters, especially Botticelli, Perugino, and Raphael. These artists became my models of excellence. It follows that anyone holding this attitude would be baffled by Sir George. My interests were at total odds with my new environment. My fine arts course emphasized happenings and group projects.

1971 - I began doing rather decorative fantasy landscapes influenced by Renaissance art and the cover illustrations Gallardo was doing for Ballantine Books. My aim was to create a decorative and beautiful strangeness. The painting was to be an object of contemplation or daydreaming. Around the same time I did a series of detailed pencil drawings from life. These were not integrated into my paintings.

1972 - Eventually my paintings approached a dead end. I was working from models I could not transcend. That winter Ballantine released a book on Magritte. I began to see the possibilities of using modern imagery in creating "strangeness". About this time I encountered a fellow student, Bob Montgomery. Heavily influenced by Magritte and Colville, his work was more advanced in a direction I was tentatively investigating. More importantly he shared my interest in figurative art in the face of the university's indifference.

1973 - That spring I did a large drawing and a painting both of which were strongly influenced by Magritte but based on life studies. My romance with the Renaissance finally culminated in a two-panel painting thematically related to Gau-

guin's "Whence do we come?" At this point circumstances took over. Well into the summer I got a job with the Norman Wade Company. I was often on the road assisting with deliveries. One hot hazy day we were heading east on Sherbrooke. In the distance, stark against the horizon, loomed several oil refineries. Had the Pyramids themselves been there I could not have been more impressed by the presence of these monumental forms in the midst of a vast space. This event became the unifying factor for a number of images and symbols. That fall I returned to the site and took photographs which I employed in making a huge symbolic painting. It was to be the first time I had used photos in making a painting and the first time I had used real experiences as subject matter. About the time I was beginning the painting we received, in my drawing class, an assignment to do an erotic drawing. Surprisingly I had little trouble producing something slightly pornographic and pseudo-autobiographical. This drawing and several that followed proved nasty enough to be quite popular. This all culminated in two large paintings in the summer of 1974. The latter painting contained a truck taken from a photograph. This was the element I most enjoyed. I felt the perverse sexual content to be somewhat unhealthy and exploitive.

1974 - That spring Bob Montgomery did a Photo Realist painting. I must admit that I was impressed. This was certainly a possibility opened up by my use of the photograph, but

I still clung to the mysteries of the created world. Then I discovered a world far superior in mystery and strangeness to anything I could hope to create - New York City. This was the decisive event leading to my doing Photo Realism. I will deal with it separately in a later section.

September 1974-April 1975 - That fall I took a second trip to New York and shot the photos for my first two Photo Realist paintings. By circumstances too complex and uninteresting to relate I became involved in student politics, helping to organize bus trips, exhibitions, a co-op, etc. I could draw a neat parallel between becoming a Realist and becoming involved in the real world, but I won't. In March I was invited to take part in a three-man show at Powerhouse Gallery. The undergraduate exhibition that spring was notable for the large number of Realist paintings in it. I was interviewed in the Gazette for my participation in the show. The forces of Formalism were on the run and I was in the forefront (or so it seemed at the time). It would be an understatement to say that things were happening for me. It seemed quite obvious that this was all linked to the change that had taken place in my work.

Some observations can be made about my university experiences. In my first year at Sir George I became increasingly alienated from the prevailing ideas about art. This meant that I had to clarify, at least to myself, what I was trying to achieve in my paintings. Through a variety

of reactions and non-reactions I came to question if I could really communicate anything in my paintings. I became aware that my "other world" idea was derivative and lacking in a meaningful base in life. The same held true for my symbolic work. The symbols were more sensational than evocative. It was only when I hit on my present line of work that there was a definite link between my life in general, my intentions in painting, and the general reaction to the paintings. All these decisions and discoveries were the result of outside pressures (admittedly some were imagined) as well as introspective questioning.

Circumstances may largely be responsible for my becoming a Photo Realist. Though it seems inevitable that I would have remained a representationalist, the actual direction of my work might have been different. Had I not gone to New York, or met Bob Montgomery, or seen a certain issue of Art in America, other things might have occurred. This does not really bother me since I do not believe that my current style provides for the only or total expression for whatever potentials I have as an artist. My style reflects my current attitudes but both are still receptive to change.

5. Photo Realism, What It's All About

I first encountered Photo Realist paintings, in reproductions and slides, in 1972. I was impressed but also

threatened and somewhat outraged. The problem was that even if I liked what I saw I could not morally approve of it. Copying a photograph seemed totally antithetical to the struggle for meaning in art. As a technique for making a realistic image it seemed like cheating. For reasons I've outlined my ideas began to change. If I could accept Photo Realism as a valid art experience I still lacked the motivational experience to do this sort of painting myself. That is until the spring of 1974 and the annual fine arts bus trip to New York City.

In writing this section of the thesis I've tried to give a rather literal transcription of my reactions to various situations. I make no secret that I'm fascinated with my subject matter. Everyone of my paintings is about the raw data (the physical situation) relevant to some meaningful experience. I realize that the situation and my experience of it are not the same thing. My paintings deal with the former, what follows deals with the latter.

New York City - Montreal is real but New York is realer. Having spent a good part of four years in downtown Montreal I was immune to it. It had become a grey backdrop, too familiar and undistinguished to be noticed. In contrast New York was in every way extraordinary; in variety, in scale, in quality (brass and marble, not aluminium and marbled cement). We had left Montreal during the last and worst snowstorm of the season, and arrived in New York to clear post-

card skys. As we approached, the towers of Manhattan were silhouetted in the sunrise. The streets were nearly empty, an immense stillness pervaded the sharp black shadows. A white mist rose from the manholes. Slowly the organic flow of the city began. Events unfolded as, in a ritual procession, as if we were on a pilgrimage to the shrines of our faith (as surely we were). I had come to see the art, but the city provided the real experience and revelation. There are streets in New York which, seen under the right light, look just like Richard Estes paintings. This is not as dumb as it sounds, Estes "discovered" those streets. I wouldn't have really seen them without him.

A bit of free association: We are in Greenwich Village on Bleeker Street, about which Paul Simon wrote a song. Bob Dylan used to play a club a few blocks from here. In some nearby alley the disillusioned poet had his fateful encounter with "He". In some nearby house, shrouded in enchantment, Dr. Strange practices his arts. We walk the deserted streets past abandoned boutiques, the last beatnik, alas, lies dying in a ditch just outside Gretna, Pennsylvania. We pass through Washington Square (another song) where the X-Men battled Mekano. A bus takes us north. "Hey, Horatio at da bridge, get to da back a da bus!" A drunken cripple hobbles along the sidewalk, or is it Kent Allard in one of his many guises.

Late that evening Bob Montgomery and I went to the

top of the Empire State Building. From the observation floor (the legendary headquarters of Doc. Savage) we see the lights of the city spread to the horizon, our Imrryr, our Drèaming City. Below (and it's farther down than up) all is serene and ordered, the blind chaos of nature has been bound. The height makes us all the more human.

When we returned to earth we flowed with energy. We ran down thw Avenue of the Americas to our waiting bbs. At night Manhattan stands silent, beyond passion.

Midnight approached. Our last glimpse of New York from across the river showed that the spotlights on the Empire State Building had been turned off. Someone passed me a bottle of sweet apple cider and the city slipped from sight.

We drove through a storm, arriving the next morning in Montreal. It was Saturday and early, the streets were deserted, covered with slush from the melting snow. Papers scattered in the wet wind. The buildings were too short, the streets too narrow, the shop fronts too shabby, the sky too grey. I boarded the commuter train and fell asleep and missed my stop. Montreal was real too (or all too real).

I should try to be objective about the New York experience. I went expecting to be impressed and I was. I saw the best museums and the best parts of Manhattan under the best conditions. There are no comprable counterparts in Montreal. I doubt if I'll ever have a similar experience. Indeed

things weren't quite the same when I returned to New York the following October. But that time I had my camera and a mission.

Some observations on the New York experience:

- 1) By encountering the far greater intensity of New York I was able to see my own environment anew.
- 2) My visual imagination could not compete with the reality of the city as a source of powerful imagery.
- 3) By being over-exposed to art of all sorts, my attachment to certain periods of art was lessened.

At the All-Nite Café

"At the All-Nite Café" - a poem

On the bus to Boston,
March 21st 3:47 AM
at the All-Nite Café
and Bus Terminal,
White River Junction

A clear night and cold,
the puddles on the parking lot are frozen.
The neon sign, red and white does not flicker,
you cast no shadow as you pass.

Inside, under the dim amber light, murmuring voices.
On the right, a clean dull formica counter behind
worn beige vinyl stools on chrome shafts.
A waitress serves but all you see are people's backs.
On the left, a glass case,
and racks of Life Savers, O'Henrys, Caramilks,
souvenir postcards, tourist brochures,
Time, Newsweek, Family Circle, and others,
things too familiar to register.

Thru a glass door, the waiting room,
brightly florescent and empty.
Rows of plastic chairs bolted back to back
on the floor.

Another door on the right, the men's washroom,
green tile and plaster, three porcelain sinks with mirrors,
one towel dispenser,
stiff brown paper towels.
The pay toilets have metal grattings to the ceiling.
No dime no crap. (I catch the door as someone leaves.)

Again out in the parking lot.
Run around, walk around keeping warm,
talking and laughing in low tones.
You knock twice, the driver opens, you board.
Three people are in their seats, in the dark they look
asleep.

Time passes,
The last straggler walks down the aisle,
eating a Granny Smith apple.
4:18 AM, back on the road, into the cold night.
on the bus to Boston.

The All-Nite Café is a real place, though it has
a different name. I encountered it on a trip to Boston in
March 1975. So far it has engendered a poem. the painting
has still to come.

Riding a bus thru the night is one of those curious things
I enjoy. I get very little sleep, but my thoughts are
heightened to a point where great truths are accessible.
There is a feeling of knowledge rather than the possession
of it, a feeling of detachment. There are no doubts. What
remains, in the light of day, is a sense of expectation
and purpose. The bus ride is a ritual of transcendental
monotony that endows value on the destination, a neat an-
alogy for the long labour of making a painting leading to
a marvelous creation at the end.

The All-Nite Café and all its fellows is a poig-
nant pregnant pause in the journey. As you prowl its
dim-lit interior all the world outside is asleep. But I
must move on, I am separate from the rest of mankind,
I have a goal, a mission.

The above thoughts are a transcription of notes
made during and just following a second trip to Boston. I
think they give a fair approximation of a state of aware-
ness which, in reacting to a strange environment, endows
subject matter with meaning. It is this initial reaction

which establishes the relation with the subject necessary for me to carry the project to completion. I think of all my paintings of exotic locales as souvenirs.

Some Strange Occurrences in Boston - The paintings resulting from my second trip to Boston were to be my Bicentennial project. Some other interesting things happened in the process.

I had spent the day doing the museums. After countless Madonnas and Colonial portraits I stumbled into the Morris Louis exhibition at the Boston Museum of Art. Maybe all the old varnish had clouded my senses, but suddenly a secret of modern art was revealed to me. Louis' paintings were so bright, undemanding, and dumb, in contrast to the somber burden of history the other paintings carried. Let's face it, even a great Madonna loses its effect placed next to a hundred mediocre ones. The past has been done and redone, and I wanted no part of it. My reaction to Louis seemed direct, pleasurable, and without filter of theory, history, or varnish. The room provided a wonderful recovery area for weary perception. Formerly I could not enjoy so-called Formalist painting because I had been trying to see a meaning or theory. Now seeing them as objects for disengaging the mind in a rather flat pleasant way may not get me into Artforum, but it did lead me to draw some conclusions. Paintings are not necessarily meant to be "read", but rather to be used for

a variety of purposes. It may be a tired cliché but visual pleasure is wherever you find it. I will continue to enjoy paintings for whatever reasons I enjoy them. If this frustrates some people, that's their problem.

Another event took place that day which really makes little sense in terms of painting. However, things that effect my paintings and attitudes do not always come from proper sources. I'll give you the event and my reaction. You can draw your own conclusions.

After the museums had closed and we'd had dinner there was really nothing to do. One of our group had originally come from Boston and he suggested a place to go. The place turned out to be the basement of a discotheque called "Katey's". It was a thoroughly unpleasant experience; the waitresses kept trying to sell me beer (which I don't drink), a cloud of cigarette (and other) smoke filled the low-ceilinged room, and a three-man rock ensemble did a passable imitation of an SST. A few of us decided to leave early and head back to our bus in Cambridge. When we arrived we heard that moments after we had left the discotheque a fight had broken out. The member of our group who had lead us there had been gashed with a broken bottle. Our departure was delayed while the unfortunate fellow received stitches at a hospital. At 12:20 that morning I wrote:

The strange circumstances that surround our impending departure somehow confirm a previously unspoken feeling

that the city is threatening, the art is threatening. I can see more clearly than ever before the true origins of modern art and the weight of history that numbs to insensitivity and indifference for the past, and the break must be made to create something new, and clean, and whole.

While I may not be interested in many areas of modern painting, for odd reasons I am no longer alienated from it. In turn I am more receptive to changes in my own painting.

6. An Interpretation of What I'm Doing

Sometimes my mind works by delayed reaction. Something happens and weeks or months pass before it registers. In the summer of 1976 I heard part of a literary discussion on the CBC. I don't remember the name of the program or the speaker but I do recall an interesting point. The topic seems to have been about what makes for lasting literature. The speaker stated that Shakespeare was still read and performed because his work touched on so many human concerns that each succeeding generation could use it to illuminate contemporary concerns. We are probably perverting his original intentions. But even if we knew what they were they would probably be meaningless to us. The quality of his work rests in how we can use it to generate meanings today.

At one time I used to be frustrated with what other people saw in my work. I once made a humorous painting and someone saw in it the depths of existential despair. I've

concluded, for the present at least, that art is not meant for precise communication. When I examine my honest reactions to paintings (as opposed to my professional reactions), as well as other's reactions to my own work, all I can really expect an artist to do is to provide a situation that allows various potentials for meaning.

I have my own concerns for which, personally, my work is an adequate expression. I've had various interesting experiences out in the real world. These seem to come from an intense awareness of the physical presence of real things. This awareness in reaction to my own associations and memories is what interests me. This is the sort of situation I try to make available for others with my paintings. Everyone brings to a work unique visual and personal experiences. I believe my paintings can act on these experiences, engendering emotional and intellectual activities which are pleasant and which can possibly lead to a greater appreciation of all manner of visual events. Part of the meaning therefore lies outside the field of art. If all one of my paintings does is to make you recall your summer vacation I would accept that as a valid meaning.

The value of a painting lies in the personal pleasure, enlightenment, and/or insight it can provide. These things, and not a correct "reading", are what make art worthwhile. I do not wish to imply that the most popular art is therefore the best. The artist may rightly prefer

one audience to another as being more reflective of his concerns and values. I will, however, not tell someone who enjoys my work that he is enjoying it for all the wrong reasons. I have my intentions but I can only expect them to come across to a degree, as I only understand them myself to a degree. This explains why I usually prefer to keep silent and let people do with my paintings whatever they can.

If there is such a thing as progression in art it may lie in discarding things artificial and superficial. I've tried to rid my art of any second-hand notions of what a painting ought to be about, and deal with matters relevant to myself, yet without being self-indulgent. My life is not a passionate clash with fate. Most of it deals with commonplace occurrences. These are what make life so uninteresting if you just take them for granted. When I began to draw from life I found it was my eyes, and not my hand, that I had to train. I can enjoy a rusted car or a shopping mall, not because I necessarily approve of them culturally or politically but because I accept them as part of life. An object is not only those meanings I ascribe to it, it exists in itself. Potentially all visual events can be a source of interest (and subject matter), and that can make life quite rich and meaningful.

THE SECOND SECTION

1. Introduction

It has been some time since Hilton Kramer made his now famous and notorious statement about the critical lack of persuasive theory in Realist painting. In the ensuing period critics, seeing the apparent viability of the art form, have done their best to assimilate at least the newer forms of Realism into the orthodox structure of art. As I'm attempting to examine the area I practice, Photo Realism, I must in some way deal with the vast body of literature about it. My own bias comes from having seen and done Photo Realist paintings before I ever read about them.

There seems to be an a priori assumption in the literature that art is something created by specialists for the benefit of other specialists. This is a rather arrogant belief, especially when applied to representational art. While I do not think one should proceed out of ignorance, there must be some limit to the amount of literary information necessary for understanding visual information. Some middle ground must be acceptable. Examples of this might be Kenneth Clarke's various television series which attempted to make art available to anyone with only a limited knowledge of art and history. I don't believe you should be re-

quired to devote your whole life to art to have a valid appreciation and opinion of it. The literature and my paintings seem to address somewhat divergent audiences.

With Photo Realism we have a body of a posterior literature to which I cannot give more credence than to my own reactions to the actual works. The paintings are the primary and only essential statements with which it is necessary to deal. From this point of view many contrary, though not necessarily contradictory, interpretations seem possible, and are, I think, acceptable. If I disagree or even ignore various interpretations it is not because I necessarily find them invalid, but because I find the underlying philosophical assumptions personally disagreeable. I prefer a rather loose approach to art that allows it to have broad functions of entertainment and/or enlightenment.

Before beginning this section I felt it my odious duty to read some of the relevant literature. Now I don't usually read art magazines, though I do look at the pictures. I finally read several articles and Battcock's anthology, Super-Realism. But only snatches of information remained with me. The trouble seems to be that the critics prefer dealing with the general conception of painting from a photograph rather than dealing with real paintings. I had the greatest difficulty relating what I read to what I saw.

I'm limiting most of my references to the Battcock book. It seems that there are few ideas elsewhere that are not also touched on here, as far as I remember anyway. I suppose I felt it necessary to prove that I'm not totally ignorant. It is however an integral part of my beliefs as an artist that I question the validity of most art criticism. Since this paper is not a literature survey I will refer to the literature only as I find it useful.

2. Definitions

Linda Nochlin points out that when Realism became a coherent movement in the mid nineteenth century its "aim was to give a truthful, objective, and impartial representation of the real world based on a meticulous observation of contemporary life".¹ I accept this as a useful working definition for Realism in general, realizing that it also raises some issues. For an art form based in objectivity it shows little consistency in style. When Courbet proclaimed that "imagination in art consists in knowing how to find the most complete expression of an existing object"², we must realize that (aside from the fact that he means "Realism"

¹Linda Nochlin, Realism (Baltimore: Penguin, 1971), p. 13.

²Gustave Courbet, "To a Group of Students", letter, (Dec. 25, 1861). Translated by E.H. Muench in Elizabeth Gilmore Holt, ed., From the Classicists to the Impressionists (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1966), p. 352.

when he says "art") "the most complete expression" is dependent on a number of factors. To make a representational image you must first have some system or structure by which the information about the situation (meaning an object or location in the real world as seen under specific conditions) is perceived and transcribed. Various systems exist. The "Ash Can" painters created a sort of analog of the physicality of the situation through gesture and the plasticity of paint. Harnett and Peto attempted a one to one correspondence of situation and image. The "Luminists" strived for precise tonal fidelity, perhaps under the influence of photography. In all these cases some aspect of reality is depicted. But the approaches are dependent on the conventions the artists accept, which in turn are dependent on the possibilities history, society, technology, and artists' imaginations and abilities make available to them. Perhaps this is why contemporary Realism seems the realest. "Realism" cannot stand up as an absolute term under rigorous examination. Nevertheless we can use it to describe a general preoccupation with the representation of real visual situations in art.

With Photo Realism I make the assumption that the operative word is "Realism". The term has been applied to the works of such artists as Richard Estes, Robert Bechtle, John Salt, and Audrey Flack. What their paintings have in common is that they are all derived from photographs and

resemble the photographs to a large, if varying, degree. What the Photo Realists seem to be doing is accepting the photo, being a truthful representation of a real situation, as a means for rendering "the most complete expression" in paint. The photo replaces "meticulous observation" from life.

A certain type of photograph seems generally favored, one which depicts the situation in bright light, sharp focus, and from a conventional point of view. The situation is primarily of a descriptive and non-evocative type, thus fulfilling the criteria of impartiality. One problem with this whole definition is that some Photo Realists don't claim to be Realists at all. This is a question of intention versus image. If the image does not convince me of the stated intention I can assume that other interpretations are equally valid.

As I've described it "Photo Realism" refers primarily to a technical process. As such it does not necessarily carry with it any philosophical function. It did not begin as a coherent movement with set objectives, and I hesitate to ascribe any unity of intention or philosophy. As a body the paintings do elicit a general reaction or interpretation. This leads me to conclude that they present related potentials for meaning whether this is intentional or not.

3. The Use of the Photograph

The question naturally arises as to why one would prefer the photograph over direct observation from nature. When I was first pondering this question, since I'm sometimes asked it, I ran across a list by Audrey Flack, in Kulturman's New Realism, which explained some of the technical reasons. What follows is my own list, partially based on Flack's, dealing with my own reasons.

- 1) The photo is a drawing aid, it's easier to draw from a photo than from life.
- 2) It eliminates problems of models that move and shift, light that changes.
- 3) It has the unique properties of freezing light, motion, and gesture. It allows the element of time to be used.
- 4) The model is unchanging, it allows an indefinite time for study and work.
- 5) It allows for scenes which through location are otherwise inaccessible.
- 6) It gives a demanding model against which to compare your work.
- 7) The resulting image is more particular and less referential.
- 8) The photograph reveals all sorts of patterns and shapes you may otherwise miss and which are interesting in themselves.
- 9) The camera replaces the sketchbook, it records more in

less time.

An important difference between Photo Realism and other Realisms lies in the relation of the painting to the subject. All Realists use systems to transcribe, and thus transform, their subjects. A portrait by Andrew Wyeth is as much about Wyeth's experience as a painter, his philosophical concerns, and his human relation to his subject as it is about the subject itself. The portrait refers to a Wyeth archetype and a whole area of concerns in the history of portraiture. Chuck Close, in contrast, establishes a defined mechanical system by which the subject is transformed. After this initial decision is made, he attempts total objectivity in copying his processed image. Because we can so clearly comprehend how the painting came to be its relation to the situation it depicts is more obvious. Close tells us nothing about his subject other than how its surface features appear when subjected to certain conditions.

Linda Chase quotes Robert Bechtle to indicate this difference in attitude. He states that the traditional Realist "is really more interested in the differences between the marks he makes on paper... and the thing itself... I think we're [Photo Realists] not. We try to eliminate the differences... and resort to the camera to do it."³

³ Linda Chase, "Existential vs. Humanist Realism", in Gregory Battcock, ed., Super Realism (New York: Dutton, 1975), p. 85.

The example of Close does show us that the photo is quite different from the subject it depicts. Yet the differences Close is interested in result from how the camera records, according to objective principles, and not from personal subjective interpretations. Close's personal contribution lies in establishing the situation. One could, knowing Close's system, produce a painting containing the essential meaningful qualities of a Close painting. One could only fake a Wyeth because one could never share his emotions and experiences.

The basic difference between Photo Realism and other Realisms lies in the nature of transforming a real life situation into an image in paint. The Photo Realist sacrifices a large part of personal content in establishing a more direct and objective relationship.

It may be asked why paint at all if the photo contains the essential information. In examining this question I might remind you that Photo Realism generally involves a particular type of photograph. These photos are passive in that they record ordinary situations in an ordinary way. They resemble photos we are all familiar with, we see them reproduced, we take them ourselves (Though with less technical proficiency). We can ignore them. There is nothing that compels us to see them as more than momentary sources of information, or souvenirs to be kept in a shoebox. The paintings of the photos, on the other hand, are active. Every

mark, even those describing "accidental" qualities, is made through the conscious act of the artist.

We can accept the photograph, because it is mechanical and familiar, as a true and objective image. The painting, because it is created through choices (even the decision to copy) , is a work of fiction. It engages, with our cooperation, in the grand fiction of making us see or recall something that is not there. Photo Realist paintings may resemble photographs, yet they also resemble real situations. The photo source, because it is so real, becomes an almost invisible intermediary between the painting and reality. While the painting derives its verisimilitude from the photograph it does not carry over the overly familiar quality of the photo. Photo Realism doesn't seem at all involved with the photograph as a work of art. It exploits photography for the possibilities it offers to painting. Photo Realist paintings are after all paintings and thus bear comparisons with other types of representational paintings.

I realize that this point of view rests on the assumption that paintings, perhaps for historical and cultural reasons, are not considered merely as sources of information. For purely documentary purposes they are inefficient. Whatever value Photo Realist paintings possess seems to lie in how, by drawing on both painting and photography, their form of documentation allows for richer and more intense pos-

sibilities than their photo sources. One cannot discount the fact that they are also beautifully crafted objects, the result of a great deal of work and skill. This is an important part of the content and surely influences one's reaction to the subject. The very act of painting singles out the subject as worthy of attention.

4. Other Interpretations

I realize that my examination rests largely on opinions. Others hold the opinion that Photo Realism is not Realism at all. While I certainly do not wish anyone to agree with this contrary point of view, I must in all fairness give it some recognition. There are actually two sorts of interpretations I will touch on; the first questions the very validity of Photo Realism, the second sees it as having a valid function, though outside the Realist realm.

J. Patrice Marandel notes that traditional figurative painters, through the process of painting, build up information about what they perceive. In radical contrast the Photo Realists begin with "an exact reproduction of their subject"⁴ and proceed to reduce the information through the painting process. "What is left out is almost as important as what is put in. The result is a deductive

⁴J. Patrice Marandel, "The Deductive Image", in Battcock, p. 42.

image".⁵

He further notes that not only do Photo Realists not attempt trompe l'oeil effects but actually exhibit many concerns abhorrent to traditional Realists: "The paintings have been influenced by the recent devices of abstract painting: enlargement or distortion of the scale, flatness of surface, straightforward recognition of the painting as a picture, wholeness of image, all of which forbid the beholder to take what is seen as real".⁶

Painting from a photograph as a means of giving information about reality is inefficient:

... the reason that painting today cannot be in the pursuit of a real image has something to do with the quality of the artist's experience of reality. From an informational point of view painted images have too much to compete with: photographs, movies... Today's painters' aim has changed: They cannot discover reality any longer. Their subjects are photographs, illusions...⁷

Gerrit Henry believes Photo Realism to be the "unfortunate result of artists "taking in deadly earnest the self-consciousness inspired in them by their art-magazine scribes".⁸ The artists sidestep any question of the rela-

⁵ Ibid., p. 42.

⁶ Ibid., p. 41.

⁷ Ibid., p. 48.

⁸ Gerrit Henry, "The Real Thing", in Battcock, p. 7.

tion of style and perception to reality by promoting the questionable absolute objectivity of the camera. Photo Realism does not examine reality at all, but deals with "the artist's purely political beliefs about modern art".⁹

It is basically conceptual in nature:

If reality can no longer be forced to yield up an ideal situation as it once was by the classical painters, then unreality will be forced to do the same. In Photo Realism reality is made to look so overpoweringly real as to make it pure illusion... the actual is portrayed as being so real that it doesn't exist. What does exist is the mind which conceived of the idea of the painting of a photograph of reality, in all its intrinsic implausibilities".¹⁰

One of the most vitriolic criticisms of Photo Realism was made by the art editor of Time, Robert Hughes. His point is that Photo Realism is nothing more than simple-minded reproduction. The artists reveal nothing new about reality or the photograph. The paintings are "a ... trivialized mix of deadpan description and goblets of 'modernism' - the picture-plane wistfully trying to be flat despite its illusionist loading".¹¹ Photo Realism does not go beyond a simplistic variation on Pop concerns with signs and symbols.

A number of points are central to this kind of

⁹ ibid., p. 13.

¹⁰ ibid., p. 11.

¹¹ Robert Hughes, "An Omnivorous and Literal Dependence", Arts Magazine, XL (June 1974), 29.

criticism. Photo Realist paintings are seen as essentially flat images reproducing other flat images and thus can only be read as flat. Whatever illusionism is present is a contrived falseness. Adherence to the photograph destroys the possibility of meaningful subject matter and does not allow for traditional Realist concerns. Neither can we see the paintings in purely formal terms since the artists allow too many decisions to be determined by the photograph. What we are left with are paintings that provide a sort of false front for purely conceptual concerns. Photo Realism is suspect of being a valid example of the sort of thing Tom Wolfe attacks in The Painted Word.

In contrast to these negative views we should consider the ideas of Chuck Close. He is perhaps the best example of a Photo Realist whose primary concern is with the photo as subject. In elaborating Close's ideas William Dyckes suggests that the paintings should be read "in terms of field painting".¹² They are an exploration of the visual conventions associated with various reproductive systems (photography, three-color process, etc.). Their scale and particular depth of field make us aware of the difference between the painted image and the human face as we normally see it. We are "forced to relinquish this [real-

¹² William Dyckes, "The Photo as Subject: The Paintings and Drawings of Chuck Close", in Battcock, p. 147.

Istic] Image and deal only with the real content of the painting: how the details of a face as recorded by a camera have been transformed into color and shapes in paint".¹³ Dyckes points out, however, that "so many persist in seeing these paintings as highly factual representations of people... proof of the total assimilation of photographic syntax as visual fact".¹⁴ Perhaps it is this assimilation that allows Linda Nemser to read the paintings as "topological maps exploring the nature of human matter and revealing man's basic relationship with other material essences. Close has made contemporary icons out of mortal flesh".¹⁵

All representational styles rely on some convention or syntax. When I saw a Close painting I "read" it as Realism, accepting its syntax for what it could reveal about the face. It all depends on how one reacts to the information presented. Close does provide documentation for his process which should make his intentions clear. His more recent work, employing grid systems, leaves little doubt of where his interests lie. I question however if we must necessarily take these factors into account when con-

13 Ibid., p. 150.

14 Ibid., p. 152.

15 Linda Nemser, "The Closeup Image", in Battcock, p. 59.

fronted with a single close painting. The painting certainly deals with his concerns but unintentionally it deals with other things as well. This is inevitable when one uses an image as loaded as the human face.

Perhaps the artist who most successfully emphasizes process as subject is Malcolm Morley. His early work faithfully reproduces the grosser qualities of cheap reproductions. What results is the "invisible painting, it reverts back to being a photographic reproduction".¹⁶ Morley placed importance on cutting his photos into strips and painting individual squares on a grid. In never seeing the whole image until completion the subject matter becomes a by-product of the process. Morley "chooses the simulated experience of reality, the counterfeit, and subverts it from within with an abstract eye".¹⁷ What enables Morley to pursue this somewhat questionable concern is the realistic content in his paintings, the illusion he first establishes and then breaks down. Morley has since changed his style considerably, indicating that his interests are quite different from those artists who adhere to the photograph. Morley is perhaps an accidental founder of Photo Realism.

¹⁶ Kim Levin, "Malcolm Morley: Post-Style Illusionism", in Battcock, p. 177.

¹⁷ ibid., p. 179.

Any interpretation is dependent on the mental constructs the viewer brings to the work. Adherence to contemporary art ideologies requires the critic to categorize Photo Realism within the possibilities available in those ideologies. Realism, unless linked to past tradition and thus reactionary, is not a likely possibility. The process involved in Photo Realism bears a resemblance to the processes used by some Conceptualists. One could be tempted to draw other parallels. Informational theories do not allow the photograph to stand in for reality. I have tried to point out that a much different reading of the photo can take place, though not if one holds a hyper-serious and pseudo-scientific view of art.

It should be noted that most Photo Realists do make conscious changes from the photograph. This can be seen in the comparisons of paintings and photos in Art in America (Nov.-Dec. 1972). One has to determine why these changes were made. They seem to me to be primarily for pictorial reasons. Ralph Goings' "Airstream Trailer" is clearly a better image about an Airstream trailer than the photograph it is based on.

5. Subject Matter

A rough count of the Photo Realist paintings illustrated in the Battcock book tells me that almost three-quarters of their subjects deal directly with some man-

festation of the urban technological society: Typical are automobiles, storefronts, street scenes. Least typical are subjects with a rural or nature setting, subjects which dominate more traditional contemporary Realism.

One might speculate on the origins of Photo Realist Imagery. Pop Art seems an obvious source, with its use of photography and commercial art techniques and its introduction of banal and unaesthetic subject matter. But where Pop engaged the imagery of commercial products Photo Realism employs the imagery of the environment itself. Its images are specific and, most importantly, do not come from a naturally flat source. Realism has traditionally dealt with contemporary society. For a Realism to exist today, considering the changes in both art and society, it will evidently look different from the Realism of Shahn and Hopper. It seems a long and futile task to ferret out Photo Realism's specific origins; a case can be made for Pop, Surrealism (Dall claims it), commercial illustration, Conceptual Art, and traditional Realism. Bob Montgomery sees it as little different from Canadian High Realism. Indeed, Mary Pratt, Christopher's wife, practices it and Ken Danby has been accused of practicing a disguised version.

What seems to have happened is that the very idea of faithfully transcribing a photograph into paint, along

with the examples of the earliest practitioners, especially Estes, have tended to direct Imagery. The process itself, being an important part of the content, establishes relationships with certain types of subjects. Tom Blackwell's "Enfanta" (the nose of a propeller aircraft) illustrates this. The painting records a specific object and its surroundings under specific conditions of light. The transitory qualities of light and reflections do not lend themselves to detailed life study. One might recall how Constable employed engravings by Cozens to facilitate his cloud studies.¹⁸ Some system is necessary to reproduce events which do not allow sufficient time for study. The properties of the photograph give us a greater awareness of the particulars of such events (as they showed us how a horse really runs) and, it can be argued, allow us to paint them more satisfactorily and more specifically than possible for artists of previous times. Blackwell's painting could not look as it does without the use of the photograph, the subject and process are intrinsically related

Robert Cottingham's paintings of sections of store signs use the camera's property of isolating and framing. Just by looking through the viewfinder images are composed, reality is edited.

Richard Estes' paintings apparently require more

¹⁸ Nochlin, Realism, p. 18.

than one photo each to capture all the reflections. Now the natural bias of the eye is to either see the reflections, as in a mirror, or to see through them. The camera, with its controlled focus, makes us aware that they both exist simultaneously thus making us aware of the bias.

To a large degree Photo Realist paintings deal with the surface qualities of the technological society. It might be argued that these are best revealed by the technological means of that society. This is why I find no issue with the somewhat garish colors the paintings assimilate from Kodachrome film. It has been pointed out to me that the film's colors were determined by market research and not by a desire for accuracy. Well we live in an artificial society in which the colors of our clothing, automobiles, homes, and even food are determined by market research. In a perverse way the film is faithful to its subjects.

The use of the photo is the most efficient means for getting certain results in painting. If one wished to paint an accurate picture of a store window or a chrome bumper and it did not resemble a photograph, what would it look like? True, the photo introduces distortions, but to an order far less idiosyncratic than those introduced by the personal judgement of an artist. All this is not to say that only those artists who employ the sort of qualities I have described can be considered Photo Realists. I only wish to indicate that these qualities have established and

directed types of Imagery. What links Photo Realist painting is a type of objective rendering and the possibilities this presentation makes available.

A somewhat pretentious friend of mine once asked me if I was involved with my subject matter. I said that I was. "Then," he replied, "You're not a Photo Realist." Apparently he had taken Ivan Karp, the great Photo Realist entrepreneur, to heart. The interpretation Karp has successfully promulgated about subject matter is one of banality. The "Image is the focus: there is a sense of detachment and non-involvement with the melancholy or distasteful subject".¹⁹ Using John Salt as an example, he notes that "the selection of subject or photograph is an act of conviction undertaken to satisfy the philosophy of non-conviction".²⁰ It is exactly this vacuity of meaning that allows us to "thrill in wonderment at how much, and how many ways, there still is to behold".²¹

Linda Chase gives another variation of this argument, the existential orientation. She sees the photograph as a tool for increasing objectivity since "the artist's

¹⁹ Ivan Karp, "Rent is the Only Reality, or The Hotel Instead of the Hymn", in Battcock, p. 24.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 30.

²¹ Ibid., p. 35.

Interpretation does not equal the object depicted".²² The Photo Realists' primary concern is to revalue the visual presence of things by stripping away all assigned meanings. Seen in this light even the artificial and banal "offers an incredibly fascinating and diverse array of visual information".²³ All the essentially meaningless activity of painting actually affirms "the value of human effort... The triumph of skill becomes a triumph of spirit as well".²⁴ This all ties in with other aspects of the Avant Garde. Linda Nochlin relates Photo Realism to the writings of Robbe-Grillet, from whom she quotes: "Let it be first of all by their presence that objects and gesture establish themselves, and let this presence prevail over whatever explanatory theory may try to enclose them in a system of references ...".²⁵

Some of the above statements are true, the artists do refuse to ascribe overt meanings and their subjects are commonplace. What bothers me is the simplistic nature of the argument. Battcock points out, for example, Nochlin's unwillingness "to accept the viewpoint the the very exist-

²² Chase, p.92.

²³ Ibid., p. 94.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 95.

²⁵ Linda Nochlin, "Realism Now", in Battcock, p. 118-120.

tence of referential subject matter in art automatically means there is a literary or symbolic content in the work".²⁶ Her belief is that "our responses [can] be restricted to the... pictorial statements themselves rather than the subjects of those statements".²⁷ Can we suppose that an exact representation of an object will be stripped of all associational relationships precisely because the representation is so exact? Robert Cottingham has stated, "The things I pick out to paint say more about a man than a portrait of a man. Who made this thing, who put this sign up? It's a statement in itself".²⁸ Perhaps the critics demand too much of us and allow too few possibilities.

6. A Personal Interpretation and Other Matters

One November day I was returning to 1230 Mountain after an afternoon of taking photographs. In front of the building was Guido Molinari, unloading paintings from the back of his stationwagon - the exact sort of stationwagon you find in a Robert Bechtle painting! I just looked at him for a few seconds and turned away, muttering to myself,

²⁶ Gregory Battcock, Introduction to Nochlin, "Realism Now", in Battcock, p. 112.

²⁷ Nochlin, "Realism Now", p. 125.

²⁸ L. Chase, N. Foote, and T. McBurnett, "Photo Realists: 12 Interviews", Art in America, LX (Nov.-Dec. 1972), 79.

"It's all the same. It's all the same." Art and life may not really be the same but sometimes they overlap in a most peculiar way.

While it is true that Photo Realists do not ascribe meaning in the manner on some other representational artists, the very choice of objectivity may imply a certain relation to the subject. If they don't like their subjects, though some surely must, at least there seems a reconciliation with the subjects' existence. To quote Robert Bechtle:

I can identify with my subject in a sense - I like it and I hate it. There is a realization that my roots are there. It deals with a very middle-class lifestyle which I tried to get away from when I was younger. But eventually I had to admit to myself that that was who I was and, like it or not, had to deal with it.²⁹

I can't speak for Ivan Karp, but I spent a good part of my childhood in suburban shopping centers and riding in the backseats of 50's Chevys. I've eaten at MacDonal'd's and slept at Holiday Inn, and ridden the New York subway. What I'm trying to say is that so much of the subject matter of Photo Realism is concerned with commonly shared experiences, with things intrinsically related to our lives and values. I can't simply dismiss them as banal and thereby strip them of their real functions and associations leaving only interesting visual phenomena. Now the photograph treats the subject exactly in this manner, recording

²⁹ ibid., p. 74.

without "knowing" what is recorded. We don't expect this in painting, one of the chief aspects of representational art being recognition. The Photo Realist painter seems to be trying to convince us that he has no knowledge of his subject. We do not see those conventions of the artist's relation to his subject which ordinarily might allow us to categorize and thus dismiss the work. But neither are the image and the situation it depicts the same, so we do not dismiss the image as we would the real-life situation. It is this interaction between the painting, which strives for pure presence, and all those memories, experiences, and associations the viewer possesses, which allow him to recognize the image, which makes for one of the prime qualities of Photo Realist painting. I cannot look at a painting such as Estes' "Valet" without recalling a certain spring morning, at a spot just across the street from Jack Dempsey's restaurant. Yet this is only possible because the artist does not impose his personal relationship on the subject.

Herein lies the reason why so many Photo Realists deal with banal subjects: by depicting them they can revalue for us a world so familiar that we no longer are aware of it. With this realization the subjects are no longer really banal or unmetaphorical but are a force for reintegrating art into the concerns of society. Photo Realism is a materialist art form that can make all the mater-

ial world, whether natural or artificial, a source of enriching experience. It sharpens our awareness in a way that allows for various levels and varieties of experience and meaning.

There are limitations to any argument. I may be diverging a bit but let me give a hypothetical scenerio: A friend and I are standing in front of a canvas I have recently completed. It is a desert scene, brick-red rocks and sands, a pale copper sky. The conversation turns to the identification of the locale. The friend studies it and asks tentatively, "Is it the Utah Salt Flats?" "No," I reply, "It's Mars."

This situation presents us with some problems. I began by identifying Photo Realism as a technique, but because a discussion of this sort requires generalizations, most of what I've said applies to a certain kind of subject only. Disregarding the philosophical impossibility of defining common experience, what happens when the technique, which is such an essential part of the content, is applied to subjects clearly beyond common experience? I suspect the result is not that different. We can all relate to plains, rocks, sky, and sand, though our knowledge of deserts comes usually from secondary sources in literature, film, and photography. But by stating that the desert is on Mars the whole meaning of the scene will likely be altered. You

might question the argument that all you can really deal with is the painting itself. I'm guilty myself of not letting paintings be. By writing this I'm trying to convince you that my way of seeing is correct. I think anyone involved in painting has operational values, that is, certain implicit beliefs necessary for one to act. It is necessary for me to believe that literature and specialized knowledge are irrelevant and that paintings are basically simple things. If I carefully examined this, I would find it more complicated than I believed. But if I had to consider every theoretical problem I could not possibly begin to paint. I realize that some people honestly see paintings in a way totally antithetical to my own view, yet in certain contexts all our views are valid. Art is big enough to contain many diversities

Photo Realism is still fairly new. But eventually the environment that engenders any art form ceases to exist. Photo Realism, being so tied to time and place, is extremely vulnerable to change. In twenty years most of what the paintings now depict will either no longer exist or will be in museums. We have assimilated the past to the point where Van Gogh can become a decorator item in even the most bourgeois home. Whatever meaning or power a painting originally had, it is reduced through time and familiarity to something far less. We become jaded. The artists I know rarely speak of paintings over forty years old. The

impetus for new art may lie in old art getting too comfortable. That our tastes in old art constantly change may be because the past draws its vitality from the present. Photo Realism happens to be one of the more interesting novelties around. It hedges on having lasting qualities by establishing relationships outside art. Whether Photo Realism can keep renewing itself when there is an Estes print in every living room is still up for question. Perhaps the possibilities of the technique of Photo Realism have hardly been tapped. There is an enormous body of potential subject matter, both commonplace and exotic, still to be explored. As in any art form, imagination and creativity are still vital. What fun would art be if it did not still hold a few surprises?

111

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