PHOTOREALISM

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Photorealism: Fixing the Fleeting Moment

by ROBBIN ZELLA

For hundreds of years some form of the camera has been used as a tool to aid artists in both seeing and drawing. Such luminaries as Da Vinci, Rembrandt, Caravaggio, Vermeer, Monet, and Sargent, to name a few, have all relied on the optical technology of the age to observe nature, render perspective accurately and to study the behavior of light. With the development of the first camera obscura or "dark room," dating back to the Roman Empire in 50 A.D. to present-day digital cameras, reproduction methods have provided artists with two important outcomes: enabling the tracing of images and the faithful recording of forms, colors, and optical distortions. For centuries these tools have helped artists to closely and convincingly translate three-dimensional objects onto a two-dimensional picture plane.

Photography, with its ability to realistically record people and places, had a profound effect on the visual arts. Andre Breton, founder of both Dada and Surrealism noted, "The invention of photography has dealt a mortal blow to the old modes of expression, in painting as well as poetry. … Since a blind instrument now assured artists of achieving the aim they had set themselves up for … they now aspired … to break themselves of the imitation of appearances."[1] Artists, like Edgar Degas and James Abbott MacNeil Whistler, began to incorporate the optical effects unique to the camera, such as shutter-drag, into their works resulting in soft, blurred edges.[2] Conversely, the optical veracity of the lens can be seen in the heightened realism of such painters as Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and Thomas Eakins. And so, photography brought artists to a crossroads: one way led to pure abstraction while the other travelled deeper into the concepts of mimesis.

Rejecting both emotionality and gestural mark-making, which had become the hallmarks of Abstract Expressionism, and offering a counterpoint to *Pop Art*, with its colorfully rendered depictions of commercial culture and mass-produced products from soup cans to comic books, the rise of *Photorealism* signaled a return to strict and accurate representation. The artists associated with this movement revisited the challenge of replicating what they saw in a hyper-realistic style, but rather than painting from life they preferred using photographs as inspiration. For Fran Bull, Charles Bell, Robert Bechtle, John Baeder, Arne Besser, Noel Mahaffey, H.N. Han and C.J. Yao, the camera and the photograph became both a tool and a resource respectively, amplifying the qualities they prized most: sharp focus, depth of field, perspective, color and contrast.

The term *photorealism* was coined in 1969 by art dealer and author, Louis K. Meisel. He opened his gallery on Prince Street in the newly emerging arts district of Soho in 1966 specializing in photo-realist art,[3] and formulated the following criteria for artists interested in developing this style:

1   The photo-realist uses the camera and photograph to gather information;

2   The photo-realist uses a mechanical or semi-mechanical means to transfer the information to the canvas;

3   The photo-realist must have the technical ability to make the finished work appear photographic;

4   The artist must have exhibited work as a photo-realist by 1972 to be considered one of the central photo-realists; and,

5   The artist must have devoted at least five years to the development and exhibition of photo-realist work.[4]

His criteria eliminated the loose brushwork of the Abstract Expressionists and replaced it with a style that relied on extreme detail and painstaking precision, in order to render images of gleaming motorcycles, gas stations, and storefronts. Not without its detractors, Photorealism was criticized for using cameras, projectors and grid systems to achieve meticulously crafted images, nevertheless the style gained favor with both art connoisseurs and the public. By 1970, the Whitney Museum of American Art mounted *Twenty-two Realists*, an exhibit that included the first-generation Photo-realists Robert Bechtle, Audrey Flack, Chuck Close, Richard Estes and Malcolm Morley, among others. Although this disparate group of artists had emerged independent of one another, according to associate curator James K. Monte, they shared a "snapshot aesthetic…that dovetail[ed] with the painting concerns of traditional artists."[5] And though each used different methods and techniques, the end result was a hyper-realistic image with a photographic appearance.

Fran Bull's work was influenced by her mentor and former-husband, British-American artist Malcolm Morley and, by the late 1960s and early 70s, both were considered Photorealism's leading artists. Morely referred to his own work as Super-realist and relied on found images, like postcards and travel brochures, as source material. Bull's *Lincoln Center, Dusk*, seen here, effectively captures the soft pinks of the setting sun in the reflective surfaces of both the glass and the fountain pool. This piece, along with *Flamingo Stereopticon* and *Winged Narcissus*, are among her most well-known works.[6]

Fran Bull
American, 1938

Lincoln Center/Dusk, 31/250, 1979
(from the City-Scapes Portfolio)
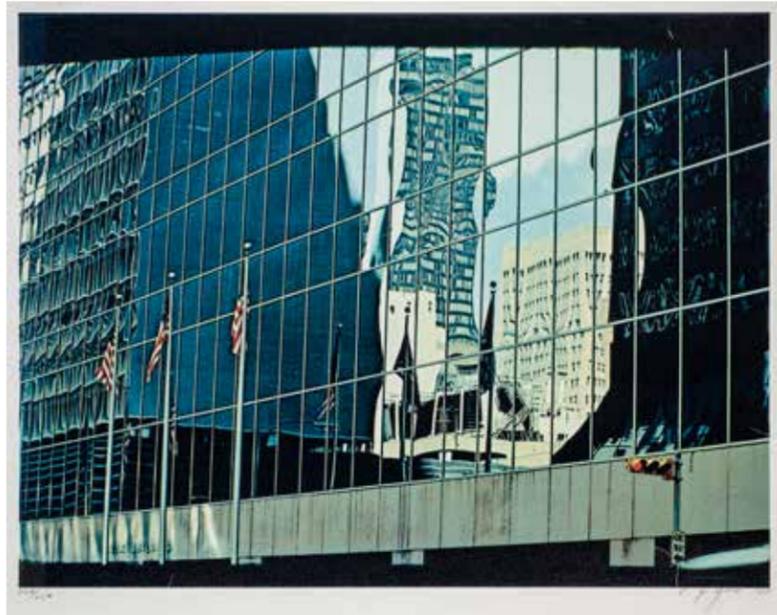*Screen-print on Somerset white satin paper*

Gift of Bruce Cappels

1991.19.110

[5] Monte, James K. Twenty-Two Realists, 1970; The Whitney Museum pf American Art, (New York, New York), p 12.

[6] Bull, Fran. https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fran_Bull

Also fascinated by changing light and reflections was Taiwanese-American artist C.J. Yao. *Entex Building, Houston*, part of his Reflection series, features an urban environment with office buildings clad in glass as its subject. The multiple glass planes fracture the image and also contain smaller mirror images of other buildings, flag poles and traffic lights. This print is energetic and alive, showcasing the artist's breathtaking ability to create a solid composition of overlapping images, regaling the eye with a visual symphony of color and light. Similarly, the raucous colors of Noel Mahaffey's *Night: Times Square* conveys a sense of seedy excitement. Neon lights of bright reds, orange and golds scream out across the sidewalk, demanding our attention, juxtaposing brilliant luminosity against the deep shadows of the street.

Embracing the qualities of the camera, Charles Bell used his own photos of close-up views of gumball machines, marbles, vintage toys and pinball machines to produce extraordinary paintings. The camera lens captured flaws that were imperceptible to the naked eye. By using large-scale canvases, Bell transformed ordinary objects into mythical proportions. Never formally trained as an artist, *Little Italy*, seen here, underscores Bell's stylistic virtuosity.
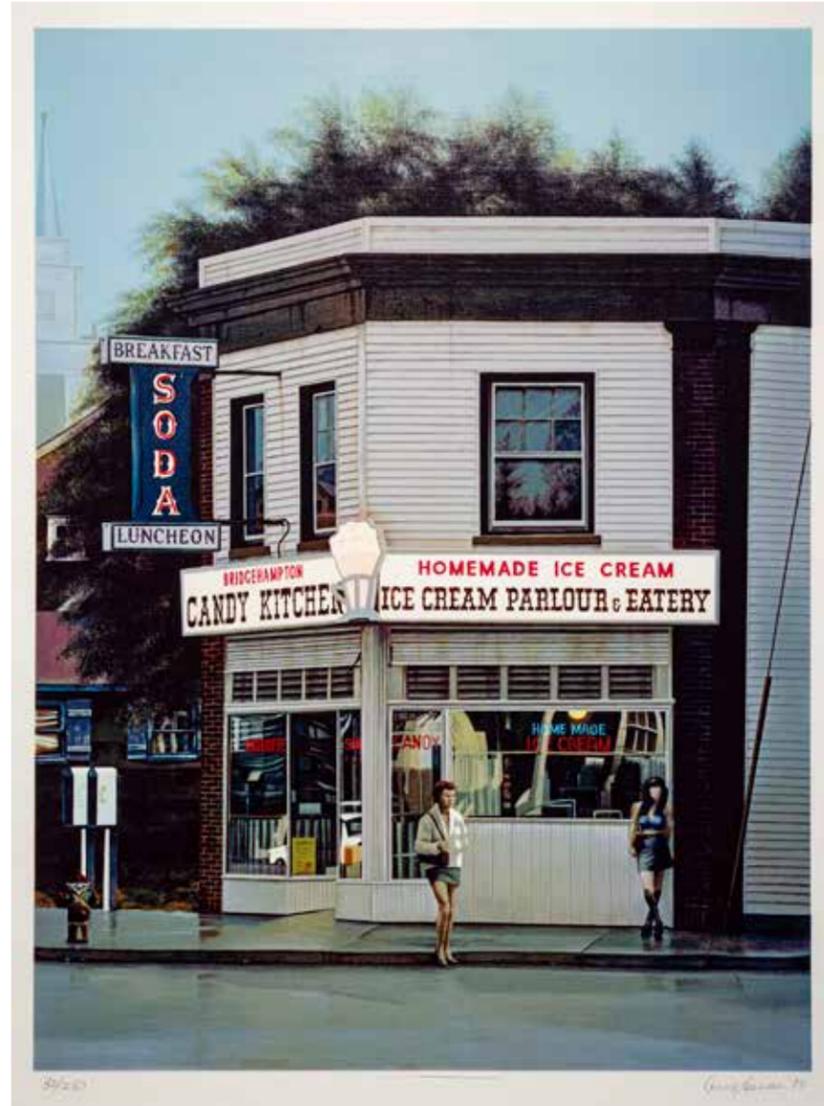

C.J. Yao
Taiwanese/American, 1941-2000

Entex Building, Houston, 224/250, 1981
Screen-print on off-white Somerset wove paper

Gift of Bruce Cappels

1991.19.99

Noel Mahaffey
American, 1944

Night, Times Square, 32/250, 1979
(from the City-Scapes Portfolio)
Screen-print on Somerset white satin paper

Gift of Bruce Cappels

1991.19.67

Charles Bell
American, 1935-1995

Little Italy, 31/250, 1979
(from the City-Scapes Portfolio)
Screen-print on off-white Somerset wove paper

Gift of Bruce Cappels

1991.19.107

Arne Besser is best known for his portraits of the sketchy denizens that populate the grittier neighborhoods of New York City, imbuing those at the margins of society with an edgy elegance. Besser began selling his paintings on the corner of 5th and 14th Street where he also met his life companion, Duke Morrell, who opened a gallery that featured the artist's work exclusively. The couple toggled back and forth between the city and Long Island's East End until moving permanently to the seaside enclave of Amagansett. Besser's silkscreen, *Bridgehampton*, takes as its subject the Candy Kitchen Ice Cream Parlour and Eatery located on Montauk Highway and that is still in operation today. One of the Hampton's only diners, it is a study in grays and whites. The street and sidewalk have the wet sheen of a sudden summer shower and, as evening begins to fall, , the white shop sign contrasted against the darkening sky glows that much brighter.

John Baeder is renowned for his depictions of roadside diners, and has spent a lifetime chronicling the disappearance of these iconic American eateries. He worked as an art director for several advertising agencies before leaving the field in 1972 to pursue painting full-time. Always an avid collector, Baeder began amassing vintage postcards of gas stations, motels, campsites and, of course, diners.

Market Diner, seen here, depicts a taxi cab parked in front of a classic diner. Its windows are Illuminated by the sun while the long shadows cast by tall buildings stretch out across the road. The curtains in each window are set at varying apertures to allow or omit the strong light, while every feature, from signage to pay phones, are perfectly rendered and highly detailed. Steeped in nostalgia, Baeder's print illustrates the complexities of light, color, contrast and tones.

Arne Besser
American, 1935-2012

Bridgehampton, 32/250, 1979
(from the City-Scapes Portfolio)
Screen-print on Somerset white satin paper

Gift of Bruce Cappels

1991.19.09

John Baeder
American, 1938

Market Diner, 31/250, 1979
(from the City-Scapes Portfolio)
Screen-print on off-white Somerset wove paper

Gift of Bruce Cappels

1991.19.106

Robert Bechtle, one of the founders of West Coast Photo-realism, records the "ordinary fare"[7] of life: cars, houses, streets, family and friends. He claims to have a "no style"[8] way of painting, striving to be non-narrative, detached and unemotional. Using his camera as a sketchbook tool, his snapshots are turned into slides and projected onto the canvas. Bechtle's work emphasizes planning, draftsmanship and traditional painting techniques comprised of barely visible brushstrokes. Author and art critic, Peter Schjeldahl said of the artist in a *New Yorker* review, that "Bechtle exploits the strangeness in humdrum photographs of the obvious, and he does so with [a] sort of reticent, stubborn grace.[9]

Initially interested in Pop Art, Taiwanese-American artist H.N. Han adopted a Photo-realist style that utilized the airbrush. This technique allowed the artist to apply thousands of miniscule dots to build up the surface of his canvas in a kind of "pointillistic" style. *N.Y. Skyline* depicts the Chrysler Building and midtown Manhattan as seen from Long Island City on a bright, clear day.

Han's paint application process incorporates atmospheric perspective to create the illusion of depth; colors become lighter and objects less detailed as they get further away. The soft-focus effect accentuates the scenic quality of this postcard view. An avid photographer, Han documented significant architectural landmarks which resulted in the creation of an important photographic archive of SoHo, begun in 1967, as well as providing a historic record of the ever-changing Manhattan skyline.[10]

Each of these artists presented here found endless inspiration photographing the cities in which they lived and the places that they visited. Mechanically reproduced, these images form the basis of their work, combining the camera's objective eye with the artist's touch. Resolutely transferring an exact copy of a photograph to a canvas and then again into multiple prints becomes a kind of mobius strip of endless repeating images. The duplication process, so central to Photorealism, continually folds in upon itself, and ironically, produces art that is powerful, authentic and wholly original.

Robert Bechtle

American, 1932

'68 Nova, 1972
(from the suite Documenta: The Super-Realists)
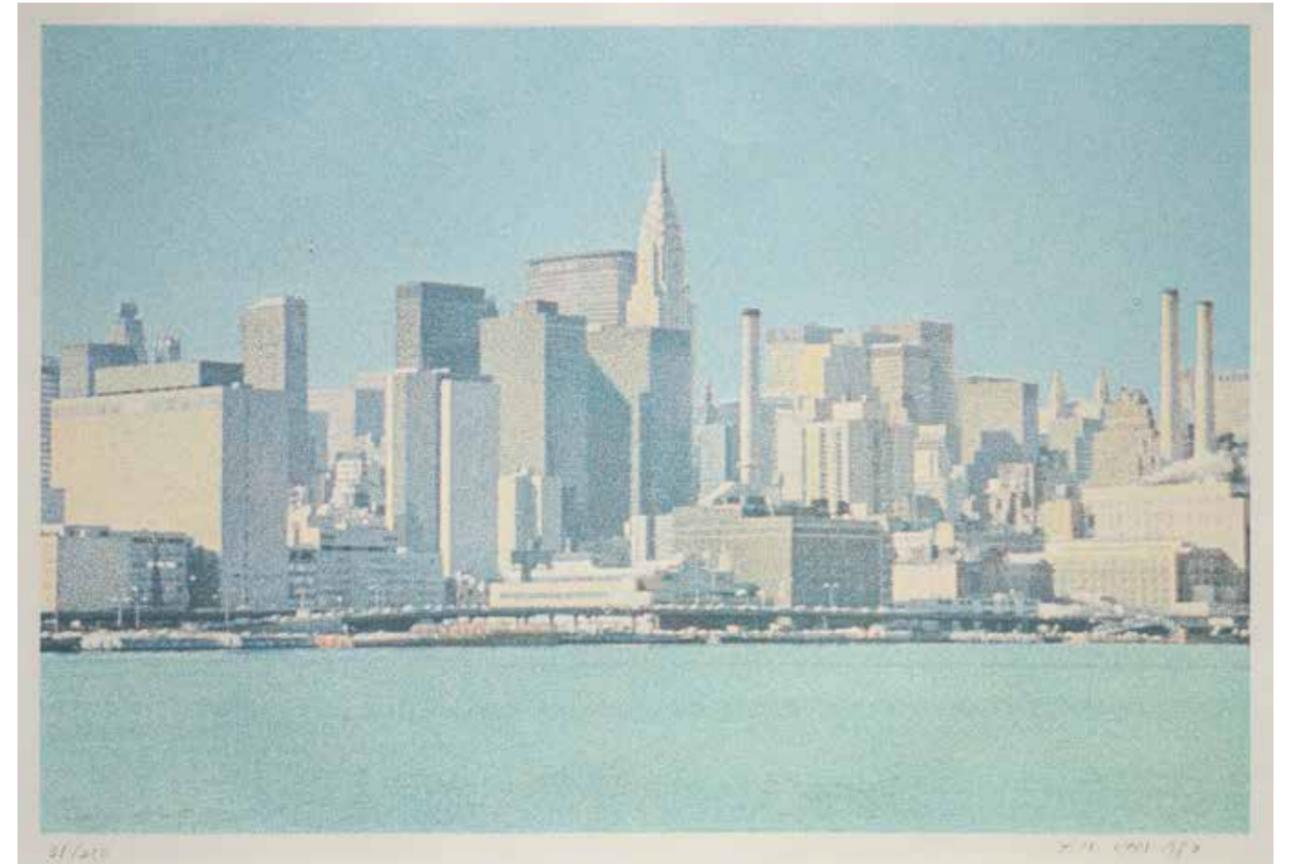*Six color lithograph on Arches paper (Printers Proof)*

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Arthur Kahn

1984.24.08

H.N. Han
Taiwanese/American, 1939

New York Skyline, 31/250, 1980
(from the City-Scapes Portfolio)
Screen-print on Somerset white satin paper

Gift of Bruce Cappels

1991.19.112

END NOTES

[1] Hertzman, Aaron. "How Photography Becomes an Art Form." https://Medium.com@aaronhertzman-how-photography-becomes-an-art-form-7b74da777c63

[2] "Mastering Intentional Blur," Digital Photo Magazine. https://www.dpmag.com/howto/tip-of-the-week/mastering-intentional-blur-7-8-131

[3] Louis. K. Meisel, *Photo-Realism* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1980), p. 9.

[4] (Marshada: Superrealism, Hyperrealism & Photorealism.) www.mashada.imara.de/superrealism.php

[5] Monte, James K. Twenty-Two Realists, 1970; The Whitney Museum pf American Art, (New York, New York), p 12.

[6] Bull, Fran. https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fran_Bull

[7] Robert Bechtle."The Intensity Embedded in the Paint," (February 7, 2012) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c7DGmC9eNCU

[8] Ibid.1

[9] Scheldahl, Peter. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/05/09/parked-cars

[10] Han, H.N. https://www.hnhan.com/about