



THE ART OF RICHARD ESTES:

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INTRODUCTION

Richard Estes studied at the Art Institute of Chicago between 1952 and 1956. Using the life model as his subject he concentrated on a figurative approach, employing standard mediums such as oils and charcoal. After graduating from the college he worked as a part-time commercial artist.

In 1959 he moved to New York to work as a full-time illustrator with a magazine publisher, during which time he managed to continue painting by night.

In 1965 he gave up his job to paint full-time, financing himself through freelance illustration.

Although he was still only interested in "very old-fashioned traditional" painting his approach had changed considerably since his student days. Working as an illustrator had taught him a variety of drawing techniques and he developed the ability to work quickly. The use of the camera also began to have a significant influence on his approach to painting. Whereas previously he had used the traditional method of doing preliminary sketches and drawings from the model in a posed situation he now employed the camera to record the necessary information for his work.

The choice of environment changed from the studio to the restaurants and subways. The figures he painted were engaged in typical urban activities; waiting for a bus, crossing the street or sitting in a cafe, painted as they were against a generalised urban background.

The camera provided him with the opportunity to capture the unexpectedness of the figures relaxed within their environment. In "Subway Passengers" (Illus. 1.) the expressions and poses of the

figures are captured naturalistically and without contrivance, as would have been the case had the subjects been aware of the artist's gaze.

The other immediate (and probably most enduring) influence of the camera on Estes' work was that it increased his awareness of the way things look. His renderings of people became more realistic as his awareness of colour and form became more accurate, to the extent that by 1967 he was working in a fully realistic style.

It was about this time also that he began to develop particular preferences in subject matter. Since leaving college his primary interest had been the figure but by 1967 his fascination with the environment had become much more pronounced. "Automat" (Illus. 2.) graphically describes the artist's disenchantment with the human figure as the primary subject of his painting. From then onwards the surroundings become much more distinct and the figures become enclosed in very specific architectural elements, e.g. buses, phone booths and restaurants.

Since the early seventies Estes has come to be regarded as one of the most influential and respected artists of that group of contemporary American figurative painters generally known as New Realists.

This thesis presents a profile of the artist in relation to his artistic concepts, working criteria and personal attitude with reference, where appropriate to relevant artistic influences and similarities in order to define the artist's position as a contemporary painter.

In Chapter I, I will be referring to Estes' early works (1968-71) to discuss the development and refinement of the artist's perception and technique.

In Chapter II, I will evaluate the artist's exploitation of urban imagery for visual and aesthetic purposes.

In Chapter III, I will examine three paintings which typify the variety of concept and execution characteristic of the artist's work.

In Chapter IV, I will refer to various influences and similarities with other artists and movements of this century and discuss Estes position in relation to the New Realists.

I will conclude with a brief analysis of the artist's attitudes towards painting and towards the art critic.

CHAPTER I

The Formative Years

About 1967 Richard Estes began working towards his first one man show. He now considers that the selection of works which he had at the time were rather varied and confusing; a collection of figure paintings and a number of reflections. Pop art was the dominating style in the New York galleries at the time and most of the dealers failed to see the potential in Estes work. Eventually on showing his work to Allan Stone, Estes was promised a one-man show for the following year.

His first show in the Allan Stone gallery in 1968 included a number of figure paintings e.g. "Automat" as well as "Auto Graveyard" (Illus. 3.). Paintings such as "Bus Window" (Illus. 4.) illustrate the immediate visual stimulation the artist was discovering in dealing with reflective surfaces.

The dominating subject of his work though was the urban architecture and the omnipresence of glass, "Horn and Hardhat Automat" (Illus. 5.) being a typical example. Here, the subject matter of most of his earlier work (i.e. figures and cars) become encased in the architectural setting of the urban environment. His rendering of details throughout the piece is loosely painted and simplified.

Although his work for the 1968 show can be compared to New Realist works most of the paintings included can only at best be described as signature paintings. They did, however, lay the basis for Estes development of technique and style, and the show was formative in providing a particular direction within his choice of subject and approach. Since then his work has continually progressed according to his own particular skills and preferences.

These preferences include the eventual exclusion of figures

from his painting, although for some time he did employ the figure as a useful element in his compositions.

In "Telephone Booths" (Illus. 6.) for example the use of the figure can be interpreted in various ways. Their presence provides a sense of immediacy as well as functioning as elements of the illusion of glass. In other works, e.g. "Grand Luncheonette" (Illus. 7.), Estes has reduced the figure to a purely formal role, that of providing a sense of depth, carefully proportioned and positioned to lead the viewer into the painting. Their features and activities are generalised so they become totally impersonal and exist only as elements of the composition. The artist is conscious of this but argues, "... that's the way they are; when people are crossing the street there's no emotional connection. That's all they're doing - that's simply what I saw". 1. Glimpsed rather than seen, their presence does not distract the viewer from appreciating the purely aesthetic qualities of the painting. He describes the exclusion of the figure as being a natural progression as he had become totally engrossed in the visual excitement inherent in the structures of the urban environment itself.

Apart from the use of figures "Telephone Booths" is characteristic of his work in other ways, particularly his paint application. The reality of the light, colour and glitter of the city and the reflectiveness of the chromed surfaces, are transformed into dabs and strokes, the subject becoming a vehicle for his expression in terms of colour, texture and light.

In "Grand Luncheonette" as in many of his pieces from this time Estes reiterates this "celebration" of his syntax and searches for new ways of applying the paint. He exploits the ambiguity or lack of detail in areas of his photographs providing a reality in painting which the photograph doesn't have ... the reality of

the paint itself.

In this way he re-evaluates the visual qualities inherent in his photographs and consciously decides whether and what aspects of the photograph to emphasise or reduce.

His use of colour in these early works could be considered almost illustrative, possibly due to his experience in commercial graphics. In "Candy Store" (Illus. 8.) reds, yellows, blues and white seem to be used directly from the tube as if emphasising the garish commercial qualities of his subjects in reality. In "Candy Store" he has used "Day-Glo" paint for the lettering in order to achieve the effect of neon. Depth is emphasised by extremely dark colours.

By 1971 his appreciation of colour values had matured considerably. In "Helena's Florist" (Illus. 9.) we see that colour relationships and tones are more consciously mitered to establish a more sophisticated visual balance; whereas previously, as in "Grand Luncheonette" colour was balanced by its intensity, subtlety, through the careful mixture of colour, is now a predominant factor.

This sense of quality prevades other aspects of his technique also. While discussing his choice of mediums with John Arthur, 2 Estes explains the suitability of acrylics for the initial rendering of the subject. But he argues that although a painting may appear finished, painted with acrylic in as little time as a week, he finds it necessary to repaint every area in oils. His reasons are practical; "the oil gives a greater depth and more control of the gradations of colour, blending for example. It's just polishing, getting the quality". 3.

Estes use of pattern and perspective are some of the more consistently visually engaging aspects of his work. His early work such as "Telephone Booths" illustrate his fascination with

pattern and design. The repetitive patterns of the booths and the windows in the background impose a rigid order on the chaotic refracting of imagery and colour on their surfaces. The result is a strictly rectangular composition echoing the boundaries of the surface while carefully placed within it. Perspective is suggested rather than analysed.

From then onwards however Estes becomes increasingly aware of depth and perspective and begins to use them as more integral elements in the overall design or composition. Whereas previously he had been observing the subject primarily as two-dimensional on the surface he now becomes more aware of the subject as three-dimensional volumes in space defined by perspective. And in "Candy Store" he endeavours to exploit their relationship. The fluorescent tubes of lighting on the ceiling of the store provide a two-dimensional pattern on the canvas while conforming loosely to the theory of perspective, thus providing the necessary sense of depth while simultaneously reminding the viewer of composition and surface.

By 1970 Estes had had a number of exhibitions and gained sufficient exposure and recognition to be regarded as one of the leading New Realist painters. Ironically, until then his style had been in the process of development. The following two years work show a more mature style and deeper understanding of the various elements of his work.

As his technique develops he turns to views such as "Peoples Flowers" (Illus. 10.) chosen for its spatial and compositional complexity. Such works through their definition of the monumental size of the buildings combined with the more particular characteristics of the storefronts capture the visual excitement of the city while at the same time offer engaging spatial ambiguities. In "People's Flowers" the calculated organisation

of reality and reflection of interior and exterior verifies the artist's ability to impose order on the chaos of reality without disturbing our perception of depth and perspective.

His method of applying paint also develops as is obvious in works such as "Diner" (Illus. 11.). Although the broad loose passages of paint characteristic of earlier paintings (e.g. Candy Store) have disappeared passages throughout the painting reveal the expressive placement of pigment. The effect is a more complete and subtle balance of colour and tone. In reality the subject of "Helena's Florist" would be a dazzling array of colour and texture, yet in the painting the artist presents every individual characteristic of the subject as a particular mark or brushstroke. It is this syntax so characteristic of Estes painting that continually reminds the viewer of both the two dimensional and three dimensional aspects of his work.

The artist has thus used various subject matter in his work as vehicles to understand particular aspects of his perception of reality and by 1970 these various aspects of his work finally fuse in a sophisticated manner. It is from this point onwards that the carefully disciplined impressions of his vision become mature and perfected.

FOOTNOTES

- (1) Richard Estes: Richard Estes: The Urban Landscape. P. 18
- (2) Ibid. P. 39
- (3) Ibid. P. 42

CHAPTER II

The Photograph and the Deducted Image

On first encountering a Richard Estes painting one would be forgiven for interpreting it as a direct transcription of a section of the urban landscape. On closer examination one realizes that the structural and visual characteristics of the urban environment are continually adapted rather than recorded in an Estes painting. The artist re-evaluates the spatial order and the linear perspectives of his subject as captured by the camera, and manipulates the interactions of reality and reflection and the properties of light and colour inherent in his subject to conform to the internal needs of the painting.

Since the early 1970's Estes has attempted to exploit the visual properties of perspective relative to his chosen subject in various ways. Unlike other American artists associated with New Realism, (e.g. Robert Cottingham), who exploit the visual inadequacies of the camera, Estes corrects, in his painting, the oblique angles as captured in the photograph. He alters perspective to clarify the rectangular design of various aspects of the compositions. As in "Downtown" (Illus. 12.) the vertical angles of the buildings are parallel to the vertical parameters of the canvas whereas in the photographs the angles are slanted, due to the monocular vision of the camera.

He also alters and manipulates various angles of perspective to re-evaluate the spatial order of the subject. In "Canadian Club" (Illus. 13) the foreground, although it covers almost half the painted surface does not visually impose, yet its linear characteristics are almost forceful in leading the viewer into the piece. Thus defining the site within which the subjects are carefully organised while simultaneously providing the dynamics of the composition.

His use of perspective quite often creates various kinds of visual tension. In "Baby Doll Lounge" (Illus. 14.) the dynamic perspective of the buildings in the foreground are balanced against the horizontal wedge provided by the frontal view of the buildings on the left side of the piece. Alternatively, in "Supreme Hardware Store" (Illus. 15.), the sweeping angles of perspective exploit the use of a vanishing point, as compositional balance, to the full. It is just such non-photographic manipulation of perspective that clarifies and unifies an Estes painting.

Yet while being aware of perspective as a fundamental element of the composition it also helps clarify the three-dimensional qualities of his subject and achieve authenticity as it were; "I find that a certain diagonal helps strengthen the illusion of perspective, a certain angle that really looks deep. It has to look right". 1.

Nor does he define a fixed horizon line arguing that to have one vanishing point or have perfect camera perspective is not realistic. In reality ... "your eye travels around and over things. As your eye moves the vanishing point moves". 2. Such alterations have caused various writers to compare him with Cezanne. Ralph Pomeroy explains the comparison:

"Estes deals with perspective, but plays around with it. Like one of Cezanne's typical tables with the edge starting at one place and coming out from a vase at another, a street is shifted as it recedes, making the viewer aware of the space beyond whatever it is that comes between it and his perception of it". 3.

His perception and alteration of the subject permeates other aspects of his work also. He is ever conscious of using various objects to balance a painting compositionally, to lead the viewer around the painting and to define space and depth.

In "Baby Doll Lounge" the height of the buildings have been adjusted. Estes feels that such formal alterations help balance

the painting so that all parts are equally important. In other areas we see a kerbstone, a lamp post or a car placed compositionally to move the viewer through the painting. The angle of perspective of the highrise office block or the careful positioning of a vehicle control the way one looks at the painting, leading the viewer into the carefully organized chaos of deep space, ultimately suggesting the expansiveness of the city in reality.

But if his manipulation of perspective provides the compositional order so does his vast enumeration of detail convince the viewer of its reality and give it its character. The artist transforms the haphazard conjunctions of numerous types of paraphernalia inherent in every aspect of the urban landscape into a harmoniously organised matrix that would be violated if any of its multitudinous bits and pieces were excised from the mass.

In "Supreme Hardware Store" the complexity and integration of detail from both the interior and exterior of the store windows are subjected to Estes' analytical gaze, presenting the viewer with a carefully orchestrated harmony of detail which has been filtered through the artist's perception of visual balance. Complex as it is "Supreme Hardware Store" has a formality that is characteristic of the artist's work, a formality that does not exist in the photographs. The paintings have a self-sufficient order of their own without becoming static or inert.

Working from a number of photographs he depicts every detail in sharp focus, albeit a sharp focus that is also in some way a simplification. Since he is aware of the aesthetic character of the paint he translates his subject into a rigorous interaction of colour, form and line. The reflectiveness of chrome, the polished surfaces of cars and the texture and colour of flowers are reproduced in paint but modified and transformed as necessary to conform to the painting's internal needs. Quite often he edits

out or improvises by adding such information as he feels necessary: "It happens quite a lot. Its just a matter of making things hold together better". 4.

The resulting "realism" is to some extent contrived since in reality the eye tends to focus on either the reflection or the subject in the window, but as both are painted with equal emphasis the viewer is confronted with integrating definitions of various depths which exude the visual effect of glass, as the viewer sees reality and reflection simultaneously. In this way Estes' paintings surpass the capabilities of the photograph as every detail is rendered with equal definition, regardless of proximity or distance. In reality the eye is incapable of taking in the enormous amount of realistic detail seen here or giving each the same, flat equal value. Neither does the eye have to re-focus as in reality to see clearly what is near or far. Thus a tension is created in the painting as everything is brought into sharp focus without making a distinction between one part of the surface and another, between the real object and its reflection.

The focusing of what is reflected on the reflecting surface creates the visual intrigue characteristic of the artist's work, while also being the most important process on which the illusion depends. His reflective surfaces have an all-over distribution of imagery though in some cases the distorted reflections of reflections make it unclear where they originate from, thus intimating that Estes' interest in his subject does not come from their "reality" but from the visual drama their interaction on a flat surface can create, or, as he says himself, ... "I think you can be more interesting and more mysterious if you use whats out there in the real world". 5.

In his use of light and colour his "using" as opposed to rendering of aspects of reality is also extensive.

Light, and its capability through the figurative painter's manipulation of it to capture exact time and atmospheric conditions holds little fascination for Estes, yet its descriptive properties pervade numerous aspects of his work, employed in an objective rather than poetic manner. Rather than making particular reference to the weather, the season or the time of day he concentrates on achieving an evenly illuminated scene, with equal definition in highlight and shadow areas. Relative tonalities of light and dark are constantly modified to produce a harmoniously balanced composition. Estes' subtle adjustments of these relationships are most impressively demonstrated in his control of illusionistic reflections like that of the interior and the reflected buildings in the windows of "Bus Reflections (Ansonia)" (Illus. 16.).

Though the light source is rarely apparent it casts shadows and highlights defining space and form as it interrelates objects and describes their character and orientation; a shadow on the side of a block of highrise flats may define its exact position in relation to another building as nuances of light may define the shape of a surface or the type of vehicle.

Quite often a painting may have more than one light source resulting in a preternatural sense of light. Highlights or shadows are often invented if the artist feels it is necessary; "to make an area look like sunlight I have to adjust certain values and contrasts". 6.

Such measured consideration and detached study of light indicate the formalist tendencies in the artist's work.

His colours generally approximate those of reality yet without being emphatic there are often subtle adjustments, though the extremity of such alterations can only be described as tidying-up to clarify particular aspects of his subjects;

"So what I'm trying to paint is not something different but something more like the place I've photographed. Somehow the paint and the intensity of colour emphasise the light and do things to build up form that the photograph doesn't do". 7.

The textural character of a pavement or surface of a building may be achieved by careful rendering of colour and tone gradations whereas a chromed surface or aluminium lamp post can be created by a number of brushstrokes varying from very light to very dark colour.

FOOTNOTES

- (1) Richard Estes: Richard Estes: The Urban Landscape. P.38
- (2) Ibid. P.38
- (3) Ralph Pomeroy: Contemporary Artists. P.284
- (4) Richard Estes: Richard Estes: The Urban Landscape. P.38
- (5) Richard Estes: Art and Artists - August '74
"The Real Estes" P. 28
- (6) Richard Estes: Richard Estes: The Urban Landscape. P. 39
- (7) Ibid. P. 27

CHAPTER III

Three Paintings

Although in the majority of Estes' works since 1970 an individual and sophisticated style is easily identifiable there are, within his chosen subject matter and approach a variety of viewpoints, both visually and artistically. Most of these are used repeatedly in various formats to produce different spatial and illusionistic results. "Miami Rug Co.," "Downtown" and "Central Savings" are works which typify the various concepts prevalent in the artist's work.

"Miami Rug Co." (Illus. 17.) is typical of the artist's employment of emphatic perspectives and complex spatial and compositional organisation. The dramatic lines of perspective lead the viewer into the painting making one aware of Estes' calibration of the scene into near and far segments. The reflected image in the glass panel is dramatized by our need to compare it with its original and by the spatial ambiguity the reflection creates. Ultimately this ambiguity dissipates as one examines the painting more carefully and what remains is a rigorous assymetric composition. The real street and its reflected image combine to create this dyptych like composition which emphasises the strong vertical accents of the carefully balanced composition. The buildings in the far distance also repeated in the reflection act as a horizontal check to the recession into deep space of the street itself. And as one compares the reflection with its "reality" what at first appeared to be a literal transcription of the real world turns out to be a sophisticated manipulation of space and illusion.

The artist thus presents such challenging spatial ambiguities while simultaneously allowing himself to get lost in the individually satisfying engagement of looking; in such works he

adds more gloss and emphasises more nuances of the polished reflective surfaces than is apparent in the slide. Whenever necessary he can work from his experience of the subjects, from his repertoire so to speak; ..."I know from tons of chrome strips that I've done that I can put in certain little reflections and things that will make it more interesting". 1.

The correctness of the rendering is only apparent as the more accurate the painting seems the more imaginative it is. In this way the relationship of the painting to reality is reminiscent of the relationship between films and "real" life.

"Paintings of ugly things are more successful than paintings of beautiful things". 2. so says the artist and many of his works reiterate this attitude, "Downtown" (Illus. 12.) being a particularly good example. Rather than further demeaning the visual ugliness of such shabby inner-city facades Estes seeks to re-evaluate it in terms of colour and light. He transforms such unglamorous aspects of his environment into carefully orchestrated harmonies of colour and tone relationships. Although he says he dislikes the environments which he paints he presents the viewer with an almost immaculate version of the rational world in which even the litter and pavements seem to have a cleanliness or preternatural polish. If one of the purposes of art is to help us realize what we know subconsciously than Estes is a powerful agent. He presents us with a vision of New York and the Urban scene in general which we realize was the one we held in our mind's eye all along.

By choosing a viewpoint parallel to the picture plane and by subtle alterations of proportion and form he presents a finished piece in which the horizontals, verticals and perspectives are judiciously balanced so that every area of the piece is of equal importance. And by using the architectural articulation of such

a potentially mediocre facade he reveals an assertiveness of visual information that makes it difficult for the eye to dwell on any one object, thus allowing himself to present the viewer with greater amounts of visual information than he is used to receiving. Thus he creates a tension as the eye is led into and around the painting. The importance he places on the careful inventory of objects is explicitly evident here as an area of light; a car or a facade is altered or introduced for balance or simply because the artist feels it looks right.

The meticulous application of paint with regard to tonal fluctuations highlight the artist's measured consideration and detached study of objects and light and forms in space, and as we can clearly perceive from the close-up of "Downtown" (Illus. 18.) his brushwork is still quite painterly. Although whereas previously he admits to having been emphasising the paint qualities he now becomes more preoccupied with creating various illusions of space and depth.

In most of his works since the early 1970's people rarely if ever play a major role yet the paintings seldom seem empty or airless. This is due largely to the fact that unlike many contemporary realist painters Estes captures an "atmosphere" that is really there.

The emphasis he places on purely formal aspects of his works often results in paintings such as "Central Savings" (Illus. 19), in which the subject matter acts merely as a point of departure into space and form. This painting which is full of visual deceptions illustrates how some of his works play on our perception of reality. Our interpretation of the scene is confused not only by the reflections in the expanse of glass in the immediate foreground but also by the window on the side, the mirrored columns and the stainless steel equipment within the restaurant

itself. The clearest objects in the painting are the stools which provide the "reality" of the piece while essentially defining the exact visual description of space between the viewer and the mirage of depth created as the image appears to converge at a vanishing point somewhere in the centre of the canvas; an illusion of course, the background being reflected in the background. The plate glass surfaces in such works at once reflective and transparent produce an elaborate play of overlapping planes. Lettering, often used to establish depth, appears directly and in reverse. In such paintings the space is layered and the artist makes it difficult for the viewer to perceive the exact spatial arrangement. The reflection in the glass doubles the space as we see not only inside the picture plane but also what happens in front of the picture plane or facade. In this way they differ from traditional receding planes as they also define the space in front of the canvas.

Faced with this scene in reality our eye would either focus on the reflections in the glass or the view through it. Yet in Estes' paintings we are forced to look at both simultaneously. The frontal viewpoint coupled with the geometric shapes inherent in the subject result in paintings which identify as easily with geometrically abstract painting as with figurative work, and can be analyzed in two senses; either as planes in depth or as a series of geometric forms, most of the rectangular and existing in two-dimensions on a flat surface. The existence of these patterns and their logical visual balance suggests that that the original material has been considerably reorganised and as the images are carefully arranged to confound the viewer and create visual ambiguities we are made aware of the surface of the canvas. As Battcock points out, the Photo-Realists in such paintings for all their illusionistic techniques, and indeed because of them

... "go deeper into flatness than heretofore thought possible". 3.

Estes achieves the ultimate in veracity and, although in works such as "Central Savings" realness is processed out of things, we are forced to believe in it because of the accuracy and subtlety of the paintwork. Colour and tonality are modulated to maintain our perception of the spatial relationships even while our perception is being confounded. The images in such paintings may be incredible but in these paintings they appear perfectly normal, or, in the words of critic Paul Vogt;

"Reality becomes an illusion that elevates a new synthetic pictorial reality, a mixture of what the eye or camera records and what the imagination produces". 4.

In such works the image is merely a vehicle for the artist's exploration of the complexity of spatial perceptions in a two-dimensional medium.

Although the works discussed here typify the more prominent elements of the artist's selection, his choice of subject and/or location is much more varied than might seem to be the case. He has painted a number of scenes using Paris as his subject e.g. "Murano Glass" (Illus. 20.) and works like "Airstream" (Illus. 21.) illustrate the artist's subjective range of selection.

Nor is he strictly limited in choice of medium or scale; he has worked with gouache, tempera and watercolour etc, and feels that a painting can be large or small depending on his preference.

Over the last decade he has also produced three sets of prints; "The Urban Landscape", I, II and III, which date 1971, 1979 and 1981. They are all screenprints of unprecedented complexity, using between fifty and eighty screens each and conceived as compositions in their own right quite independantly of his paintings.

FOOTNOTES

- (1) Richard Estes: Art and Artists - August 1974
"The Real Estes" P. 29
- (2) Richard Estes: Richard Estes: The Urban Landscape P. 43
- (3) Gregory Battcock: Domus June 1975
"Art in New York" P. 54
- (4) Paul Vogt: Contemporary Painting. P. 128

CHAPTER IV

Influences: Past and Present

Although the ideals of the New Realists are very different from those of the American figurative painters of the earlier part of the century there are certain comparisons between Richard Estes' work and that of a number of earlier realist painters.

Many authors and critics compare his work with that of Edward Hopper (Illus. 22.), yet the comparison is a tenuous one.

Both artists employ and comment on the structures and paraphernalia of the urban environment. It has been said of Hopper that he was the first American figurative painter to recognize the visual potential of the structures of the urban landscape, and indeed his organisation of perspectives, rigidly rectilinear compositions and judicious placement of the subject within the boundaries of the canvas are also lessons of compositional organisation obviously not lost in Estes' meticulous spatial arrangements. But the social comment so vital to Hopper's work is far removed from the cool detached renderings of Richard Estes. In fact many of Estes' restaurants and diners are attempts to overcome the iconography of loneliness set up in Hopper's late night bars and cafes.

Comparisons with other American artists of the first half of this century have been drawn by various art critics and art historians:

"His interest in the use of buildings is akin to that of Sheeler and O'Keefe in the 1930's. Buildings are, after all already abstract in their forms, as are many man-made objects. Thus does a "New Realist" re-define our ideas about the process of abstracting". 1.

Sheeler can also be considered as the first American painter whose precisionist works quite naturally necessitated the employment of the camera, and a forerunner to Photorealist

practitioners like Estes.

The artist himself recalls having seen a number of Turner watercolours of distorted reflections in windows and many of his store windows like Van Eyck mirrors, reflect scenes and objects that the viewer couldn't otherwise be aware of.

Yet it is to Canaletto that Estes refers when asked to suggest a comparison for his own work. And to quote Edward Lucie-Smith;

"The choice is apt ... Canaletto is essentially a painter who represents society very accurately without ever suggesting any close social involvement. His paintings usually contain numerous small figures busy with their daily activities. But the way in which they are presented is entirely emotionless. No statement about work is either implied or intended". 2.

And in various interviews and reviews Estes' admiration for other great painters such as Vermeer, Degas and Eakins is constantly reiterated.

But although his art does contain certain traditional characteristics many of Estes' works could not have come about without the influence of twentieth century abstract art.

Close examination reveals certain typically Cubist compositions, with one plane floating in front of another in typically Cubist shallow space. Braque (Illus. 23.) for example wanted to see the object as part of the network of spatial relations of everything else surrounding it. Thus in many of his works this ambiguous space or sensation of an indefinitely extended field is caused by the interaction of objects or linear forms, resulting in a sense of transparency. Braque was also very conscious of the calibration of every aspect of a scene into paint; he wanted the distances or spaces of his subject to have a reality in paint as solid as the objects themselves.

This concept of "tactile space" so important to early Cubist work still seems very relevant to the tastes of contemporary

painters such as Estes. In works such as "Central Savings" Estes has a similar tendency to intersect various transparent planes and relate everything to its surroundings. The "transparency" of many of his works depends largely on such interaction of objects. So too does Estes emphasise the reality of the paint.

During the time Estes was a student at the Chicago Art Institute Hans Hofmann was a lecturer there, and Estes recalls learning Hofmann's spatial concepts; clamshell space, as opposed to the frontal or planar articulation of space.

Numerous writers have pointed out other very definite abstract influences. It has been said that there are details of his paintings which are as concisely mitered as the rectangular sections of the most ascetic of Mondrian's.

Martha McWilliams Wright summarises such connotations:

"His uncomplicated objectivity has nothing to say about human experience and becomes as rigorously formalist as any abstract work. It insists on the visible experience". 3.

Estes himself states that he is not particularly interested in other forms of artistic expression but does admit to learning from them and applying them to his own work; "... everything that happened before has a certain influence". 4.

But Richard Estes' paintings can best be described as Photo-Realist, though the description can be misleading, as the term itself is to an extent ambiguous or even inadequate. Photo-Realism or Super Realism is the term generally applied to those artists of the late 1960's and 1970's whose work tended towards a detailed figurative description of various aspects of reality. In some instances the description can, if not explained, insinuate that such artists are part of a "movement" or have shared ideals. In fact many of the better known American Realist painters to-day began painting in that particular manner, largely

unconcerned or even unaware of each other's work. Thus many of these artists' ideals are contradictory and so the term, or the style of painting in no way constitutes a "school" or movement. Chuck Close for example exploits the essentially monocular vision of the camera as his giant facial blow-ups emphasise out-of-focus as well as in-focus areas. Others seek to glorify the uniqueness of the moment as captured by the camera. Some only use photographs which evoke a personal response within their own personal psyche.

Estes employs the camera as a tool to capture the various aspects of reality to which he is attracted. A method of recording for reference the information he needs throughout the process of making a painting.

Phillip Pearlstain uses his nudes for the exploration of artistic problems; he is not just painting figures, but figures translated into problems of volume on a flat plane. Thus, due to his modernist concerns, the figurative reality of his nudes is minimized.

As with Pearlstain the value of the subject for the majority of New Realist painters has been in their use of it for the exploration of artistic problems. Many of the New Realists have been influenced in various ways by abstract art as Linda Nochlin adequately summarises:

"The largeness of the scale, the constant awareness of the field-like flatness of the pictorial surface, the concern with measurement, space and interval, the cool, urban tone, the rejection of expressive brushwork, or, if it exists, the tendency towards bracketing its evocative implications through irony or over emphasis ..." 5.

Such characteristics defy the viewer to take what is shown for real and ultimately such works can be considered as art about art.

Estes' work is comparable in ways to some of these Realists, especially in terms of conception and treatment of the subject. His attention to detail in every area of the surface is not unlike

the work of Jack Mendenhall (Illus. 24.) among others. Mendenhall's ability to create various illusionistic spatial relationships which confound our perception of the subject is similar in concept to many of Estes' pieces.

As with Ralph Goings, Estes is drawn to his subject not because it is beautiful in itself but because ... "it is terrifically beautiful to paint". 6.

And in the case of other New Realists such as Salt, Blackwell, Cottingham and Bechtle, Estes paintings are characterized by a coolness in regard to what is being portrayed but suffused with an intensity in relation to the art of painting itself, and an intensity in relation to the art of seeing directly without concern or preconceived notions of the subject.

The differences though are as numerous as the comparisons. Estes' tendency to emphasise the paint qualities is contrary to the ethics and ideals of many of the American Realists, most of whom work from a single photographic image. With Estes different shots are taken at different lighting and focus settings; some are details of areas. He feels it is necessary to combine a number of photographs to make a good painting. And in order to be in full control of his recorded information he develops and prints his photographs in his own darkroom. For him the camera has replaced the sketchpad, but he is aware of its limitations:

"The photograph doesn't give me all the information I need. Also the camera is like one eye and it really deals only with values. And painting is trickery, because you can make people respond by guiding their eyes around the picture. The photograph doesn't do that because a camera doesn't have ideas. It can only reproduce". 7.

For him the use of photographs, process, medium and scale are all subservient to the overriding concern of making a painting.

The one quality that he does retain from the photograph is the emotionlessness, as there is no more apparent comment on the

scene in his painting than there is in the photographs.

He sees the reflections, the colour; the visual excitement of the urban landscape and he continually attempts to wrest "harmonious beauty" from the disorder and chaos of reality. "Estes is making a painting, a work of art. Everything is secondary to this primary concern". 8.

His interest in composition, drawing, colour and form is evident throughout his work and his urban scenes are really explorations of visual experience. And by combining the illusion with the objectness of the painting he illustrates his interest in the surface as being a thing to experience sensually.

FOOTNOTES

- (1) Ralph Pomeroy: Contemporary Artists P. 285
- (2) Edward Lucie-Smith: Super Realism P. 22
- (3) Martha McWilliams Wright: Art International. April '79
"Washington Letter" P. 39
- (4) Richard Estes: Art and Artists - August '74
"The Real Estes" P. 26
- (5) Linda Nochlin: Super Realism - A Critical Anthology.
"Realism Now" P. 115
- (6) Linda Chase: Art International - March/April '76
"Photo Realism: Post - Modernist Illusionism". P. 14
- (7) Richard Estes: Richard Estes - The Urban Landscape. P. 27
- (8) Martha McWilliams Wright: Art International April '79 P. 39

CONCLUSION

Estes' opinions about painting and his attitudes towards art-world ideals are revealing, and go some way towards explaining the reticence of his work.

To him a painting is either good or bad, he either likes it or he doesn't, without concern for anything other than visual aesthetics. He wants his work to be considered by these standards. There are no hidden meanings, or philosophical implications in his images.

It is just such visual aesthetics which have gained for him the appreciation of the critic and art market alike. Martha Mc Williams Wright vividly defines his work while explaining one of the reasons for his popularity:

"Taking the objective world and denying it any reality except the visual one is the achievement of Estes' painting and this is why he is one of the best New Realists painting today". 1.

In artistic terms this approach could be described as continuing to examine the elements of art, its means, its essentials and goals. On a more accessible level such art expresses the period in which it is made. And in an artistic climate where there tends to be little relation between aesthetic and human experience New Realists such as Estes attempt to rationalize the latter in terms of colour, texture and light through the process of painting.

The artist himself has little interest in what the critics say about his work. Neither laudatory or venomous articles evoke any emotive reaction or variation in his working attitude or approach. But, although he is unconcerned with such art-world aesthetics and without seeking to be an innovator, he has inadvertently become one of the most influential of the New Realists.

He feels that the less a work has to be explained the more

successful it is: "I don't think a painting is successful if it has to be explained to anybody within certain limits". 2.

For him nothing need be said about his work, the painting says it all. Nor does he agree that art requires an education to appreciate it, given that the viewer is visually responsive:

"I don't think it takes a special mentality to respond to art. Its a natural thing, like enjoying good food. Art is not something that requires indoctrination". 3.

Thus he does not want his paintings to be intellectualized but rather he wants the viewer to evaluate them simply as visual objects. This uncomplicated attitude permeates all aspects of his work.

Nor does he feel limited by the parameters of his style preferring to develop and expand on one idea. Distrustful of theories and unconcerned with academic or formalist ideals his attitude is frank, believable and revealing: "I don't see any reason why I shouldn't do anything thats interesting, no matter where its at". 4.

It is just such straight forward objectivity combined with his visual perception and technical skill that enables the art of Richard Estes to transcend the barriers between the layman, the artmarket and critic alike.

FOOTNOTES

- (1) Martha McWilliams Wright: Art International - April '79 P.39
- (2) Richard Estes: Art and Artists - August '74
"The Real Estes" P. 26
- (3) Richard Estes: Richard Estes: The Urban Landscape. P. 20
- (4) Richard Estes: Art and Artists August 1974
"The Real Estes" P. 26

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ILLUSTRATION 1.



ILLUSTRATION 2.



ILLUSTRATION 3.

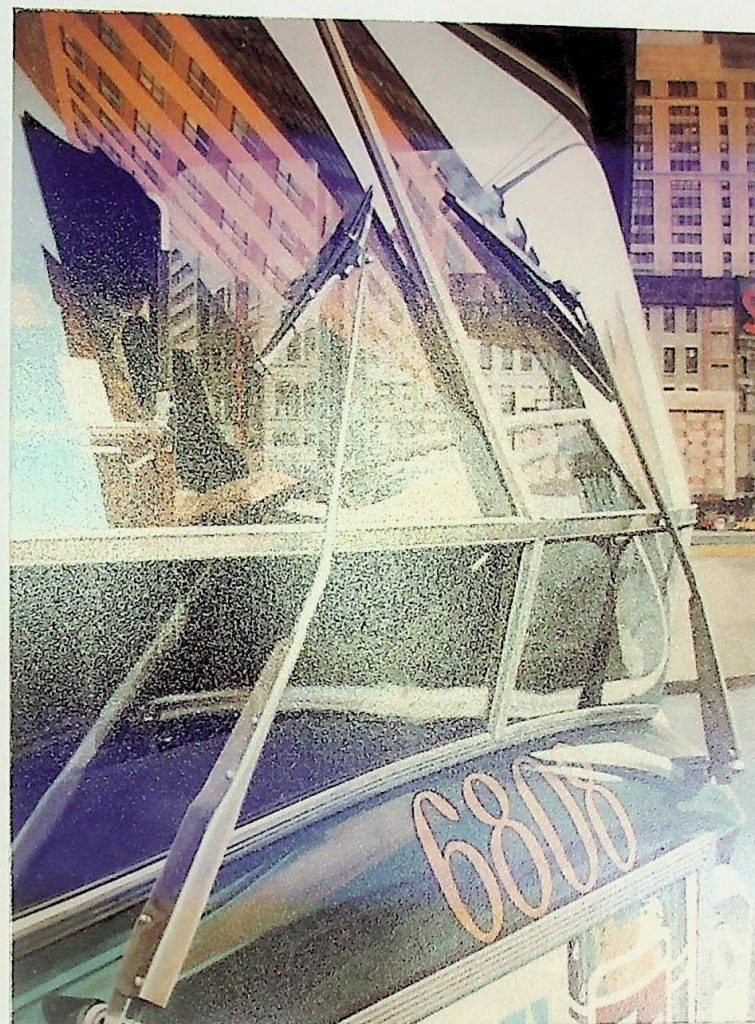


ILLUSTRATION 4.



ILLUSTRATION 5.

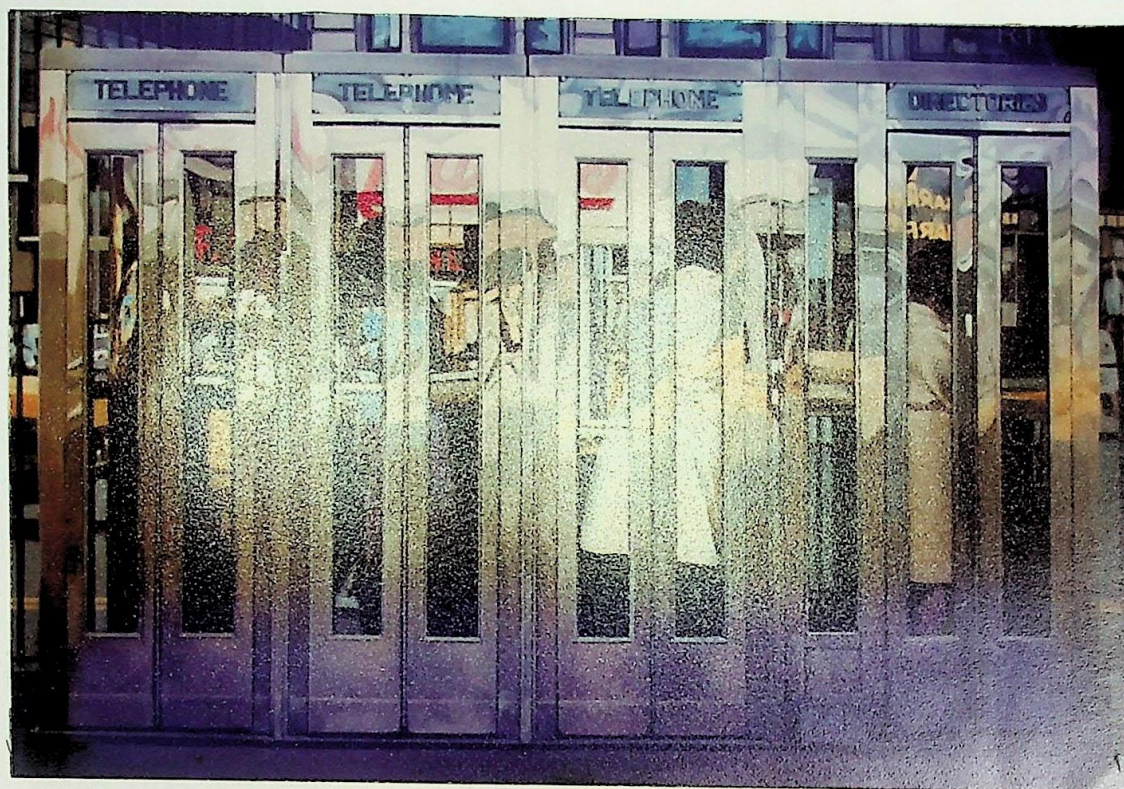


ILLUSTRATION 6.



ILLUSTRATION 7.



ILLUSTRATION 7.



ILLUSTRATION 8.

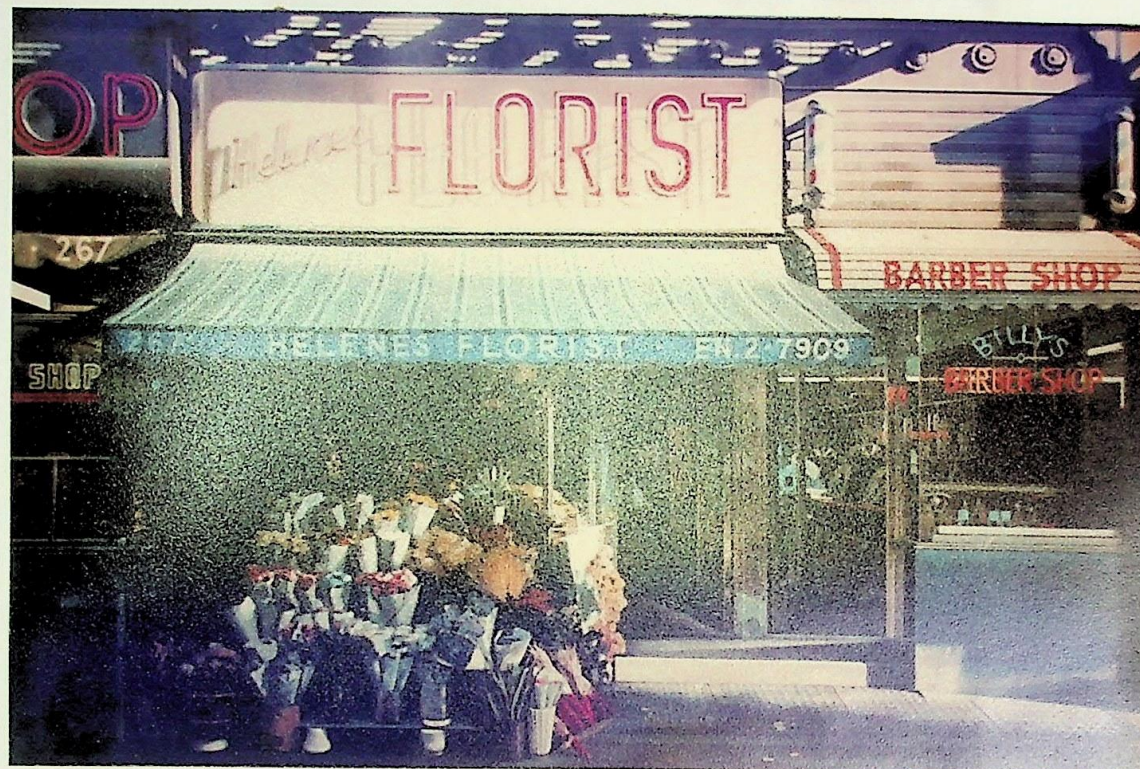


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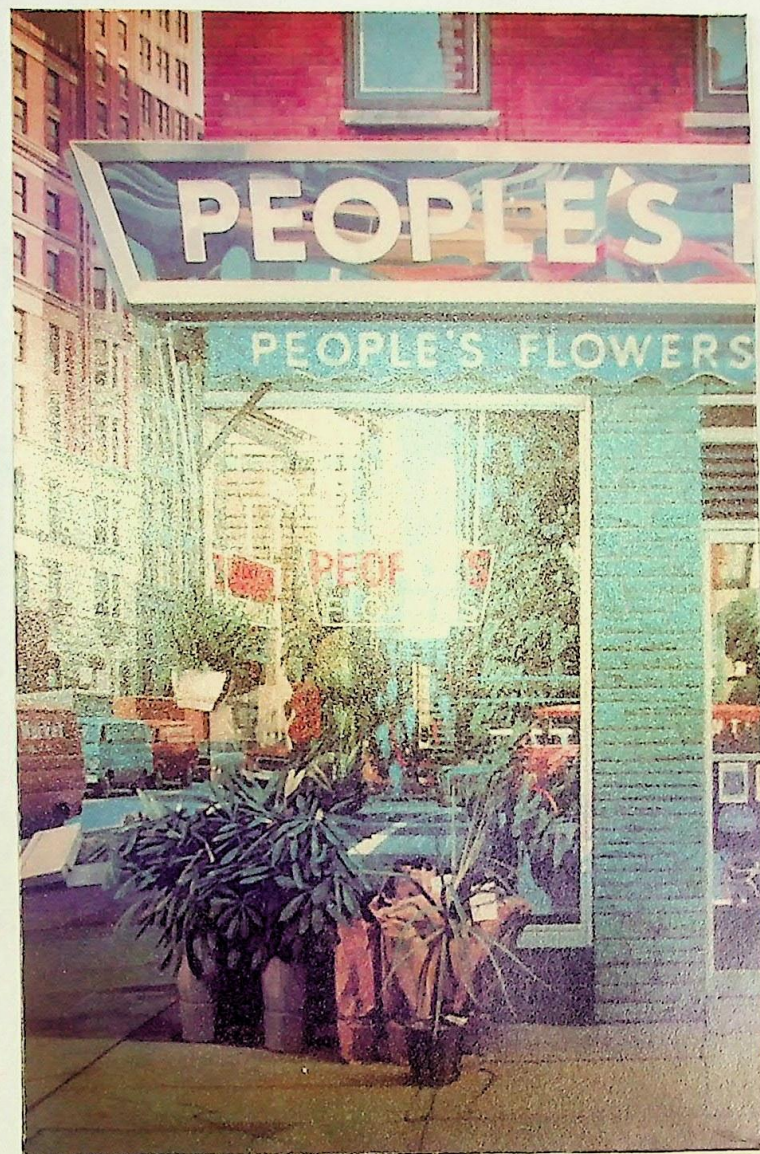


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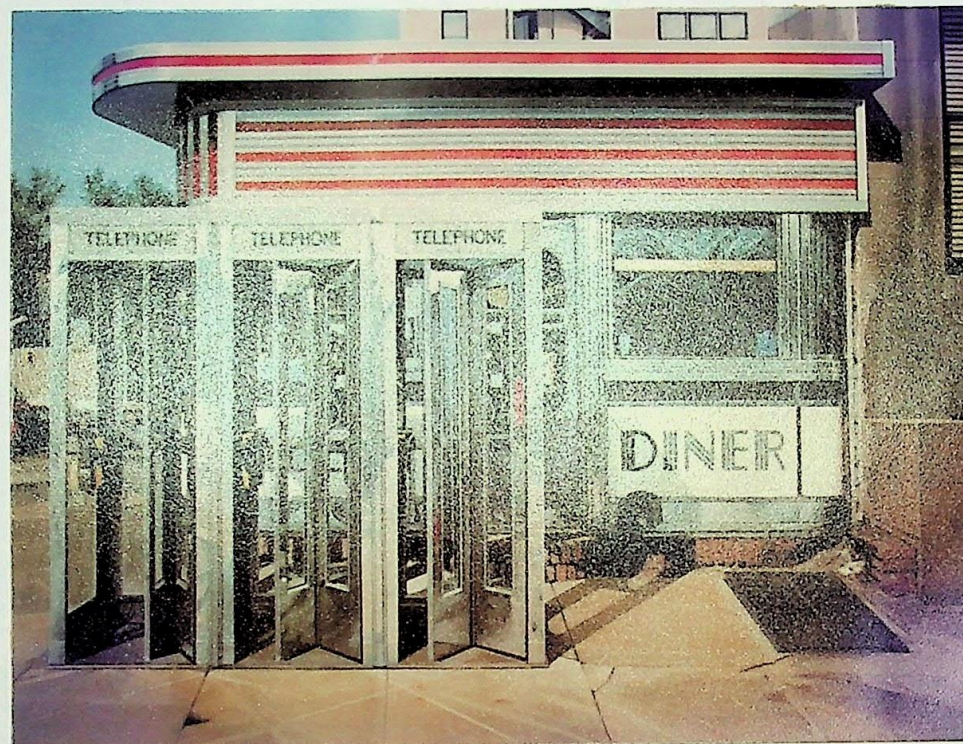


ILLUSTRATION 11.



ILLUSTRATION 12.

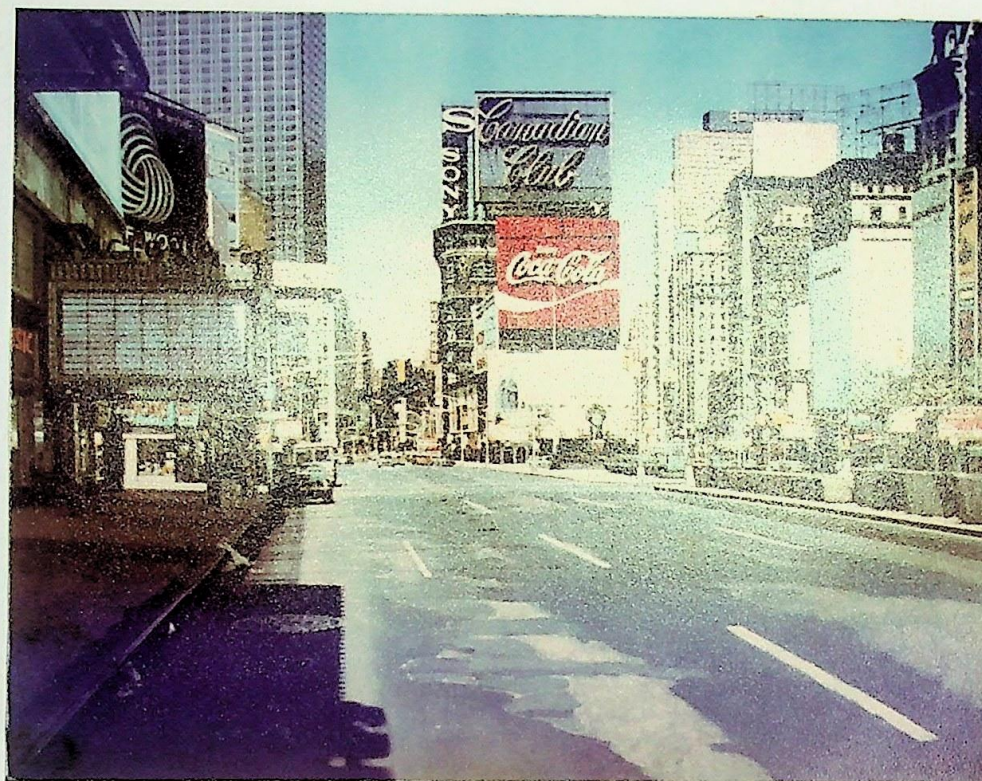


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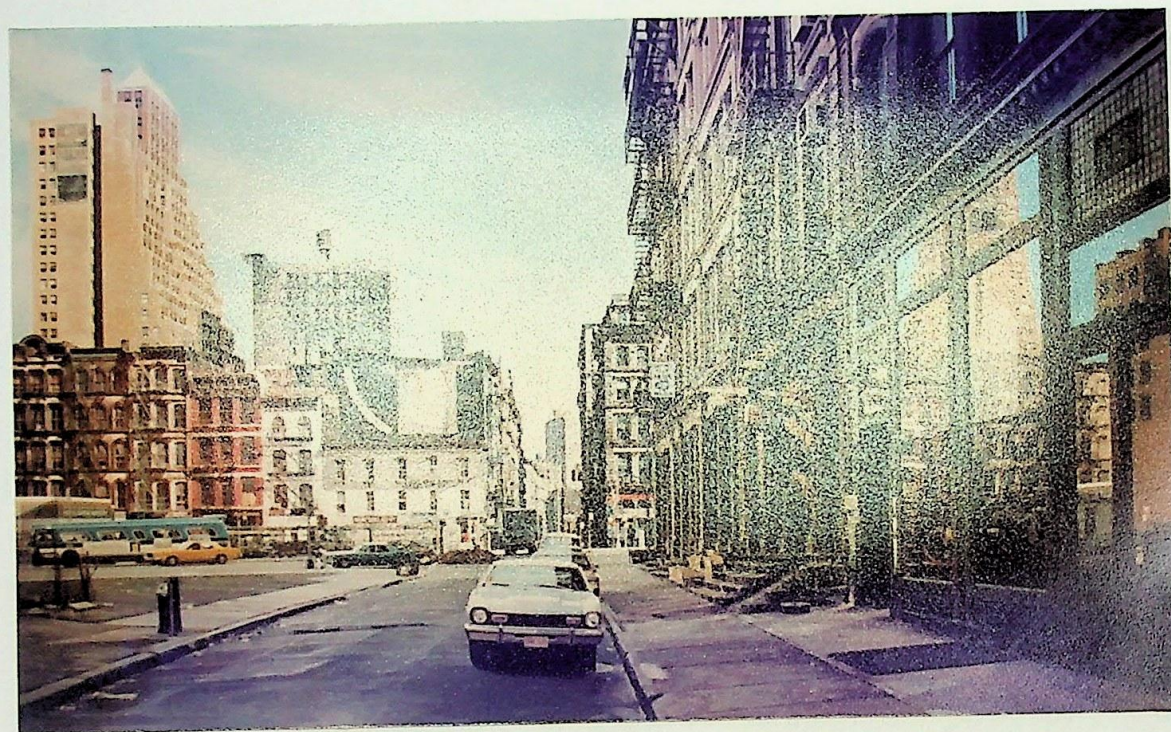


ILLUSTRATION 14.



ILLUSTRATION 15.



ILLUSTRATION 16.



ILLUSTRATION 17.



ILLUSTRATION 18.



ILLUSTRATION 19.

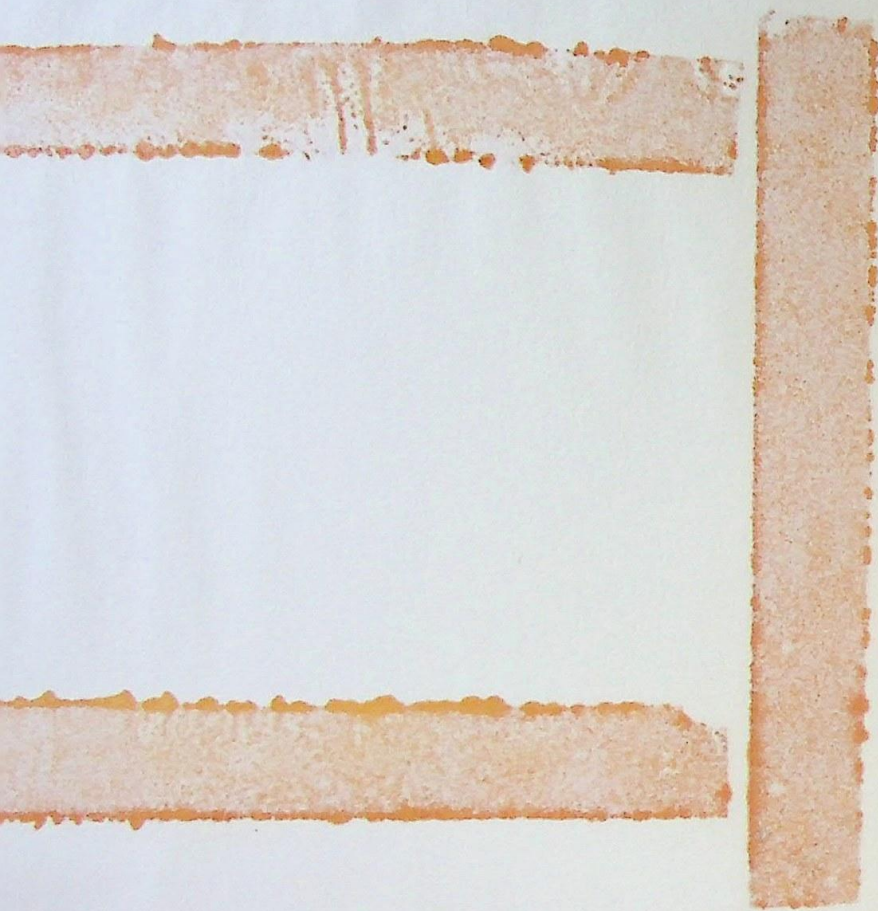


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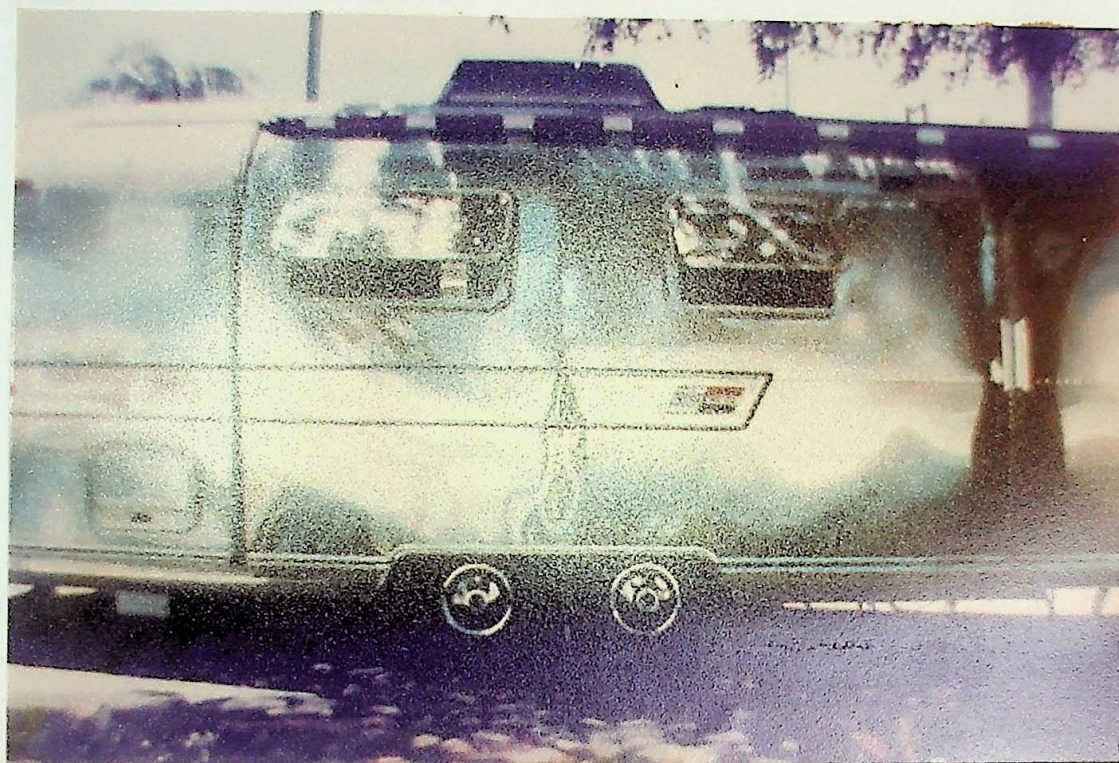


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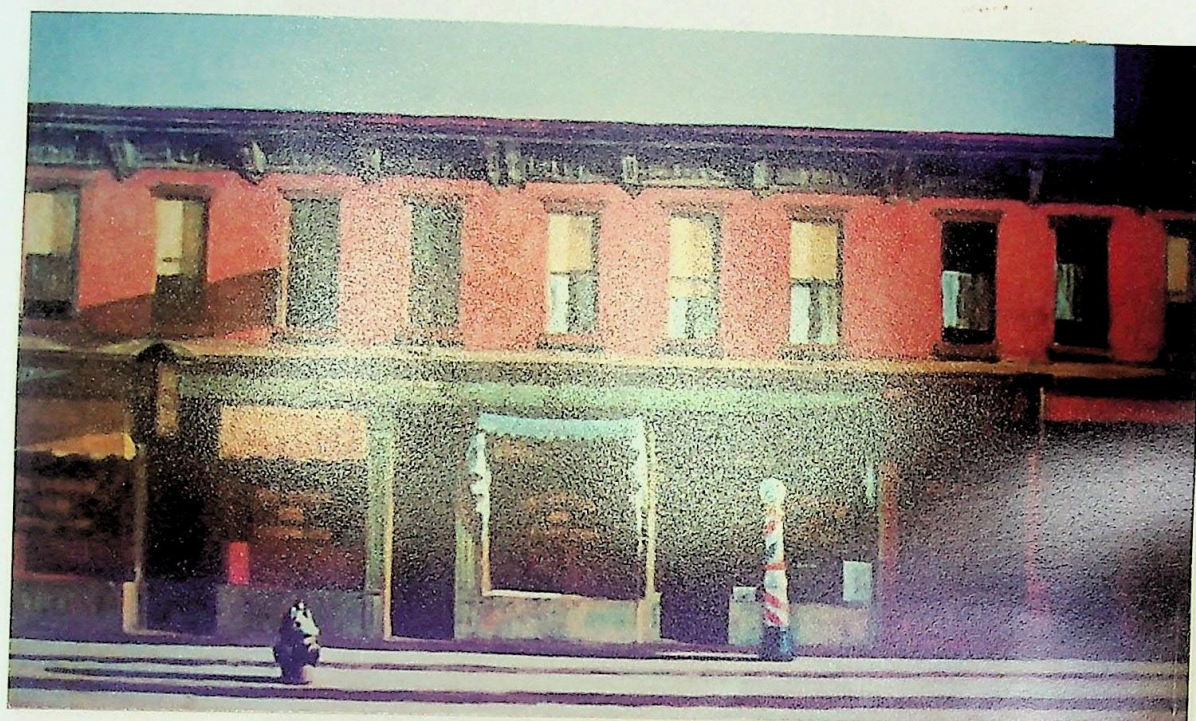


ILLUSTRATION 22.



ILLUSTRATION 23.



ILLUSTRATION 24.