

T61

THESIS.

M.J. Bermingham,

FACULTY of FINE ART.
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A question of Realism.

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SYNOPSIS.

With this short summary I shall attempt to resolve the question of the value of realism or rather photo realism in Art and to try establish what indeed constitutes Art. In this direction, However I could not truly reveal these attributes without also referring to some of the main practitioners within this concept of painting and of my own awareness of identity.

How radical the new realism is or how reactionary and even materialistic is still open to continuing debate, however, stressing that the more a work of art looks like a photograph the more misleading it will be to encounter it, only in the form of photographs and reproductions. It is more than ever essential to confront the actual object, to assess scale, colour, texture, to determine what else went into the work, and indeed the artist himself.

For a very long time, art worked within, a matrix of realism, that is within a matrix of the imitation of appearances. Relatively lately it has given up this matrix. There is a long history behind realism and perhaps something more.....This only implies that art worked within a mould of realism rather than art was the imitation of nature, which was never really a satisfactory essential definition of art.

To try to assert the value of realism in Art would be a highly formidable task but I can only offer my own interpretations and ideas and other sources of information and tracing, my own intentions, besides other painters of a more established and important nature in this area, to illustrate some of the aspects involved.

DEFINING REALISM.

4.

To apply a definition to realism as a definitive area in art one could suffice with the following words of Mario Amaya:

Realism attempts to state a point of view about recognizable reality as we know it to interpret, to select, to inform and to show.

There is new realism which overlaps too many old new realisms to be useful. There is radical realism which has the disadvantage of originating with a dealer thus mixing the functions of promotion and criticism, and sharp focus realism upon which the same term could be applied. Or there is photo realism which uses a contraction meaning photographic. (Paintings that pertain to photography and are suggestive of a photograph.) In the 1960's began the cool reappraisal of our perceptions of reality and a renewed interest in photo derived images which, despite much misunderstanding, has expanded and enriched the realist vocabulary. The idea of "progress" in painting may be broadly described as the power of works to substantially change or to increase the intensity of visual experience.

The use of photographs by artists is not new however since the invention and perfection of the camera has made the Renaissance mimetic tradition in painting more irrelevant, exact realism had come less and less to matter. But what occurs when an artist quotes a photograph not simply as an "aide Memoire" as Delacroix and Courbet did but in such a fashion that the photographic quality as well as the depicted object are readable in the paintings? To quote William M. Ivins Jr. regarding this, "A photograph is today accepted as proof of the existence of things and shapes that never would have been believed on the evidence of a hand made picture."

In this sense the photographic realist can count on the evidential content of photographs reliable to him as a source of visual data and trusted by the spectators who share his belief in the medium. One of the reasons for the believability of photographic reproduction is the fact that to quote Ivins again "the lines of the processcould be below the threshold of normal human vision." Hence it was a way of making visual reports that had no interfering symbolic 'linear syntax' of their own. Although now we have become aware of the limits of the photographic process itself thus the medium has also acquired its syntax too, its specific channel characteristics. As a result when we look at a photographic realist painting ~~and an image clearly derived from a photograph.~~ *there is a double image; we are confronted with both a painting and an image clearly derived from a photograph.*

The painting carries a reference to another channel

of communication as well as to the depicted scene or object. The reality of photographs however is not the reality of slow hand done paintings, but indeed a photograph is a realism in itself, that defies paradox. To use as an example to, imply that the subject matter of Damby's painting "Pulling Out" is not of the rider and motorcycle but a photograph of these images. The photograph corresponds as much to the photograph as to the rider and motorcycle, it is perhaps the photograph that functions as the primary reference.

There is obviously no built in restriction in the subject matter of photographic realism but then why should there be. Art, or realism as we are dealing with here, should not readily have to interpret or record an important event or situations to be deserving of respect. To make a useful comparison between Soviet realism which is closely related to Genre and history painting and aims to mould images that are historically significant, - and the American Realists who aim at the statistically familiar, depicting typical randomly chosen subjects. What the latter seem engaged with is the typicality of the present, the conjunctions of objects that are normal in our society not its precious monuments.

The actuality of everyday happenings, of mundane every day things and events are more important in themselves, to us as individuals, because they are necessary to our life style - they are our lives, whether we are willing to accept them as artistic achievements or not. Consideration of these seemingly unimportant aspects of our lives is just as important as of the major aspects of our universal system. This I think is where realism, in all its aspects, can relate much more so to these small trivial situations of daily life - as the actual technique can entice the observer closer to the artists obvious feeling of these simultaneous occurrences of daily life, of life itself and his very own existence.

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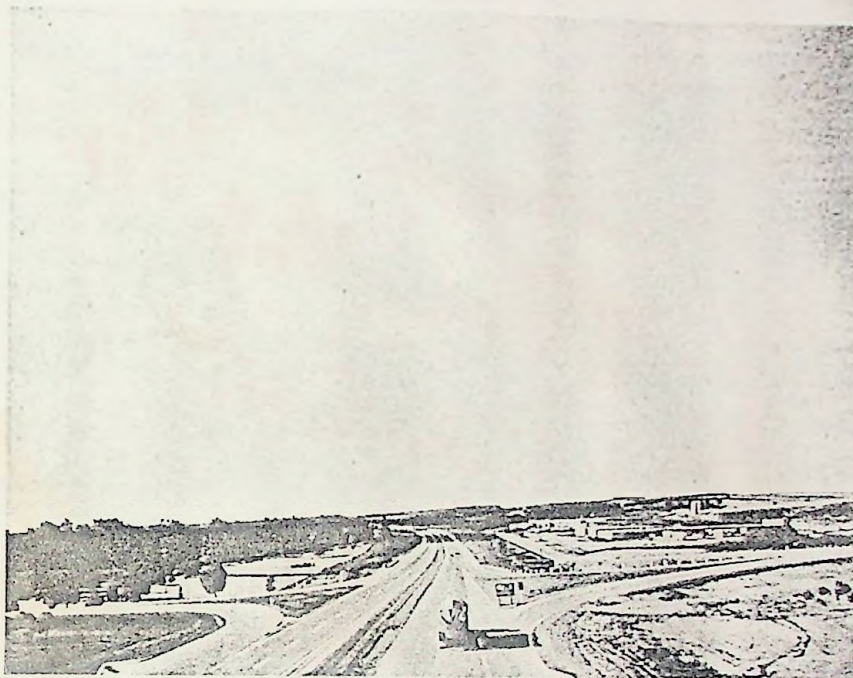


Plate 63. J. Chambers, *The 401 Towards London. No. 1*. Oil on board, 1968/9, 72 x 96 cm.

PROFESSED CONTEMPORARY REALISTS.

6.

To illustrate more clearly, I would like to introduce the work of Canadian artist John Chambers, whose paintings and philosophical reflections, are important to anyone who wants to understand contemporary realism(s). His current commitment to an exact, painstaking, realism, must be understood in relation to his highly conceptualized account of what he is about. Chambers adoption of the photograph as a 'matrix of mimesis' results from a very (self) conscious, change of view about the nature of painting. The photograph marks for him, not the end of mimetic art, but the beginning, of a new era.

In his dense article, entitled 'Perceptual Realism', Chambers makes the paradoxical point that mimetic art, becomes absolutely possible only with the invention of the camera, and so has become, as a source of information, the proper basis for future mimetic art. The photograph cannot of itself 'do it better', but can enable today's artist, 'to do better than his predecessor', inciting the fact that the painter can and ought to work from photographs. (See opp. page.)

Chambers, 'The 401 Towards London, No. I' (See Opp. Page) is a particularly outstanding painting- and its literalness is essential to its beauty,- the landscape being presented in all its actuality, with certain lucid qualities, which transfer beyond the ordinary, without pertaining to the extra-ordinary. This view of southern Ontario, displays a metaphysical dimension, common surate, in a similar way, to its reality. The painting was constructed according to Chambers own theories and from a photograph. However, this does not imply that the process of transcribing reality from mechanically made images of it, is a short cut for artists, but quite the reverse. For Chambers it is proper for Art to be photographic in a sense more literal than metaphorical, and his paintings show this point of view. For if life already speculates in values, why not art as its reflection.

Having so investigated Chambers, I would now like to turn to some of his contemporaries, in this field, Alex Colville and the Mount Allison School, who are realistic to the degree-almost- of being photographic. However, their notions of 'mimesis' are not phenomenological, like Chambers but intentional.

Colville's work, particularly, invites criticism of the expression to be used in good sense. The film-still effect of Colville's paintings, have previously drawn attention. And indeed the paintings do resemble movie frames in two obvious ways: in their composition, and in their freezing of moments, their arresting of time. Colville's realism is instinctive, having lived most of his life in small Canadian towns, he regards himself as belonging to the great and old tradition of North American Realism. But this acquaintance is indirect, as it was not until his own personal style

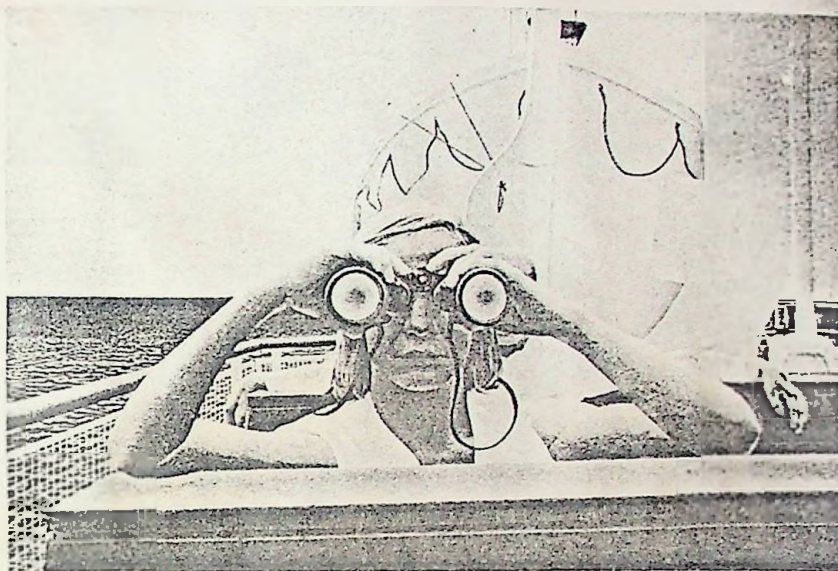
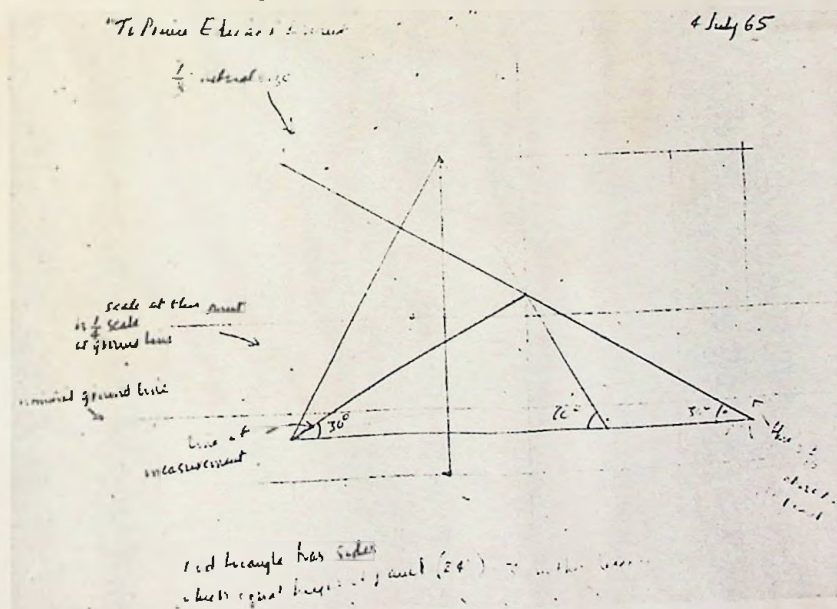


Plate 65. A. Colville. *To Prince Edward Island*. Acrylic polymer emulsion, 61 x 91.5 cm.

Plate 66. A. Colville, diagram of Plate 65



7.

had evolved that he saw the works of the North American Realists in the original.

Colville's style has the same concern for realism and fine craftsmanship as, for example, Norman Rockwells. Seemingly accepting the same values as Rockwell, - values of a middle-class, prosperous, unexciting provincial kind of North American life. But these obvious similarities are set off by obvious dissimilarities, - while Rockwell is cute, whimsical, and determinedly folksy, Colville, is much more intense and cool. He is really much more serious about the small-town values than Rockwell and he paints more serious pictures - immeasurably more serious.

One of Colville's most realistic and evocative paintings is "To Prince Edward Island". (see opp. page.) The symbolism is apparent enough; the feminine Sea and the woman, instinctively prophetic, staring straight out through us, like a sybil; the man, relaxing on the bench while the ship, a complex machine, the fruit of endless calculations, carries him effortlessly over 'la mer'. The picture and the symbolism could even be so obvious as to be uninteresting, - but one can't help regarding the tough, intense feeling which emanates behind the picture. He structures reality on a geometrical grid, in order to assure himself that the pictures will be read for the precise reality which they represent.

Two interpretations of his (Colville's) view, offered by Patrick Hutchings in "Some Contemporary Realisms", are as follows:

- (i) One can come at first sense, of his celebrative realism which takes ordinary, everyday actions very seriously as things of value;
- (ii) One can come at the deeper sense of his ontological fascination, his passion for being and quiddity. If you want to see the point of Colville's photographic style then it is essential to realize how far from photography it is, in its genesis.

However Colville's attitude to the use of the camera differs somewhat from that of Chambers. These arrested moments are produced in all their tough, realism from extensive studies sketches and composition plans, which owe nothing to the camera and everything to Colville's eye and hand. The photo effect is absolutely hand made.

Colville values realism for the sake of his public. People like to recognize objects and places in paintings, hence,

- (i) People like to know what is represented, what is 'going

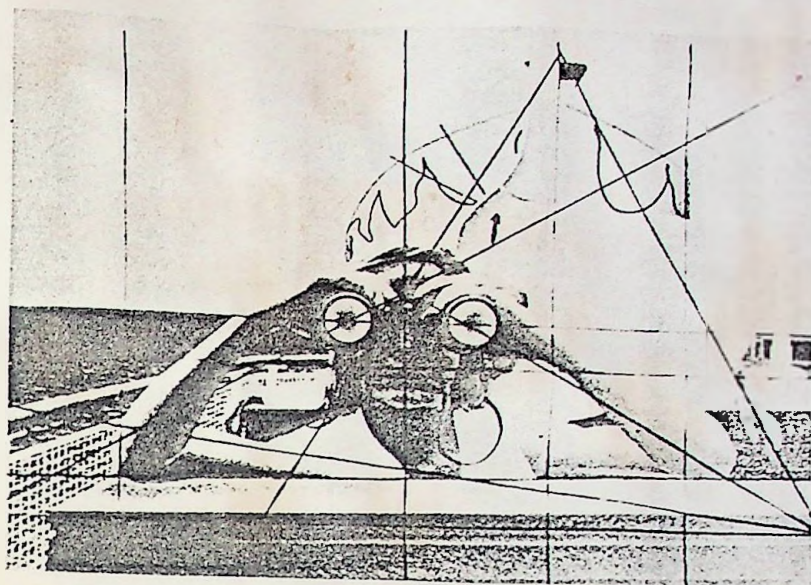


Plate 67. A. Colville, analysis of Plate 65

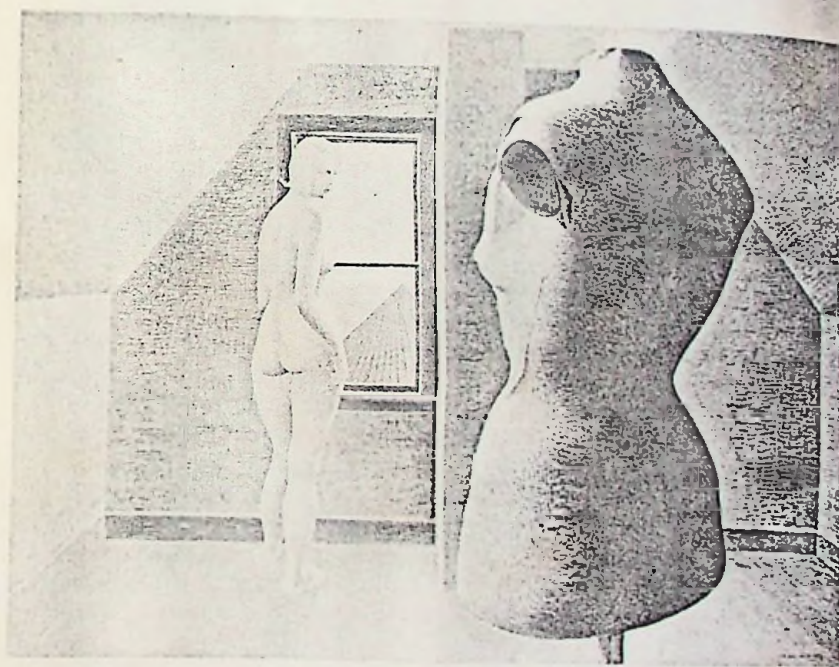
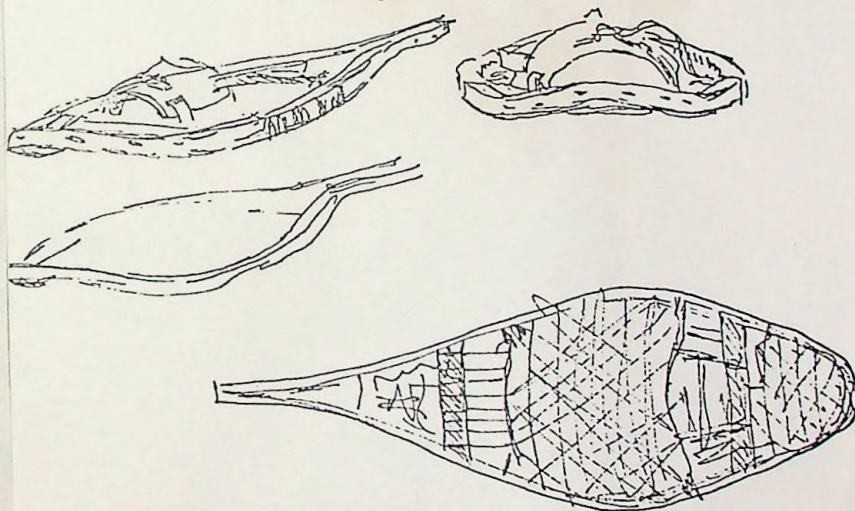


Plate 64. A. Colville, *Nude with Dummy*. Glazed gum emulsion on gessoed masonite, 61 x 81 cm.



Plate 68. A. Colville, *January*. Acrylic polymer emulsion, 61 × 81 cm.

Plate 69. A. Colville, drawing of snow-shoes for *January*



8.

on' in a picture to recognize, in this flat, literal sense; (ii) They like to see in a picture memorials, celebrations, of their own lives, of events from the common provincial round. Colville, like previous painters sees this double recognition as a value and as a 'raison d'etre' for works of art. As a celebrative realist, this is the surface sense of his pictures, - a celebration of life. His work is about being, the being- there and the being thus of things. The being behind the looks, the being, part of whose being it is, to look like this.

With regard to Colville's latest painting 'January' (See Opp. Page) the intensity of concentration is stunningly obvious. Here the artist, his photographic realism assaying visual reality for us, shows himself true to being first, then to appearances. Considering that it may produce a superficially bland and exact look, it is, in fact, a realism of interpreted reality, and offers its interpretation of reality. Colville looks at things according to the logic of those things, and the logic is one of pure existence. He makes no claim to have rediscovered realism, for him it has always been there, in the old Renaissance tradition, and the newer North American one. Colville's theory could be summed up by the following words, which he himself offers:

"The provincial because he sees less, can see more of it and more intensely. Ontological realism has a point to make- that provincials have a large vision. Are realisms in this part of the 20th Century still realisms or are they essentially, now something else? What is there still left for realism to be about?"

Hugh MacKenzie shares Colville's visual voracity, this is especially evident in his splendid nude in 'The Window' (see *fold page*) and the way in which it illustrates the ontology of Canadian Contemporary realisms. He paints as does Colville, with a sociological dimension, depicted through scenes from contemporary life.

Ken Danby the last of our Canadian contemporary realists provides a link with Andrew Wyatt, the great American master of realism, whose influence and teaching the former greatly acknowledges. Danby's work is generally softer than that of Colville's, the surface of the tempera is hard but the feel with the metaphysic, and reveal an involvement much more full of memory. They are about the object as it is now, but they refer us to its past, as much as to its present. Yet, it is Danby who painted the Easy Rider picture- 'Pulling Out' (See Opp. Page) - revealing a paradox? Here we are brought up face to face with a moment of our own time in a hard and uncompromising image, cracking any nostalgic feelings, that have been so far created, and perhaps inviting an uneasy

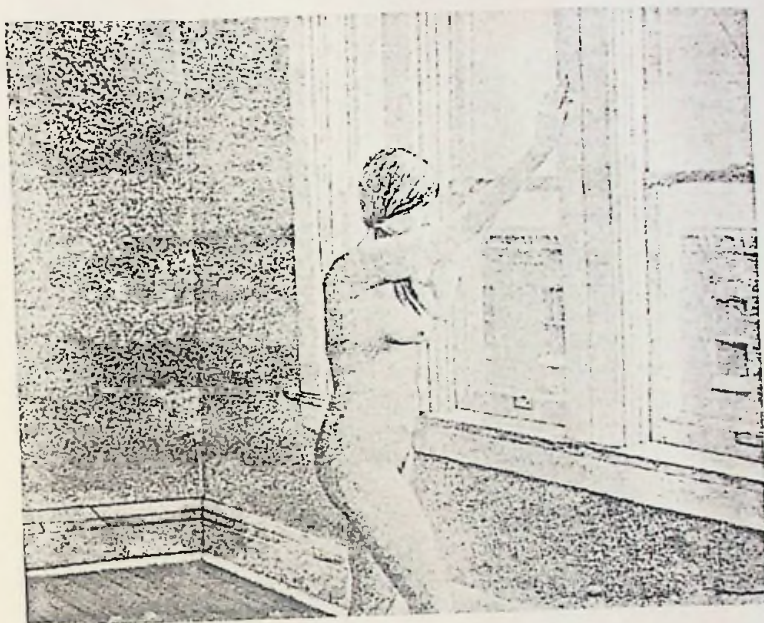
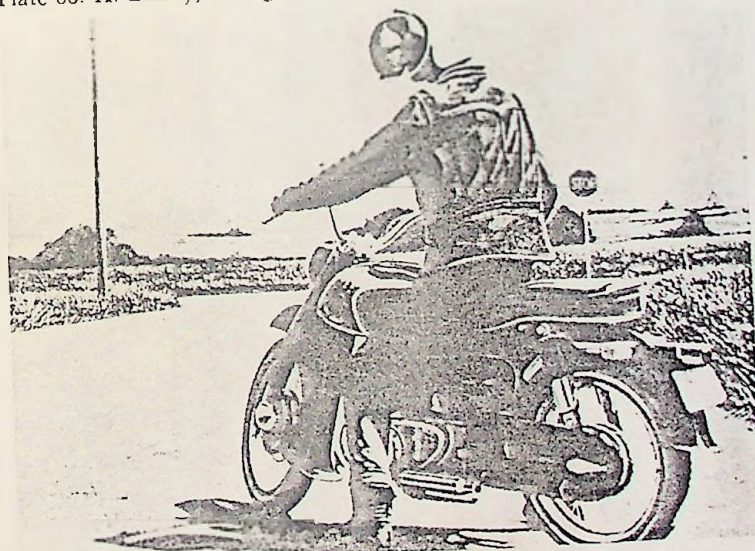


Plate 59. H. Mackenzie, *The Window*. Tempera, 21 × 25 cm.

Plate 60. K. Danby, *Pulling Out*. Egg tempera, 32 × 44 cm.



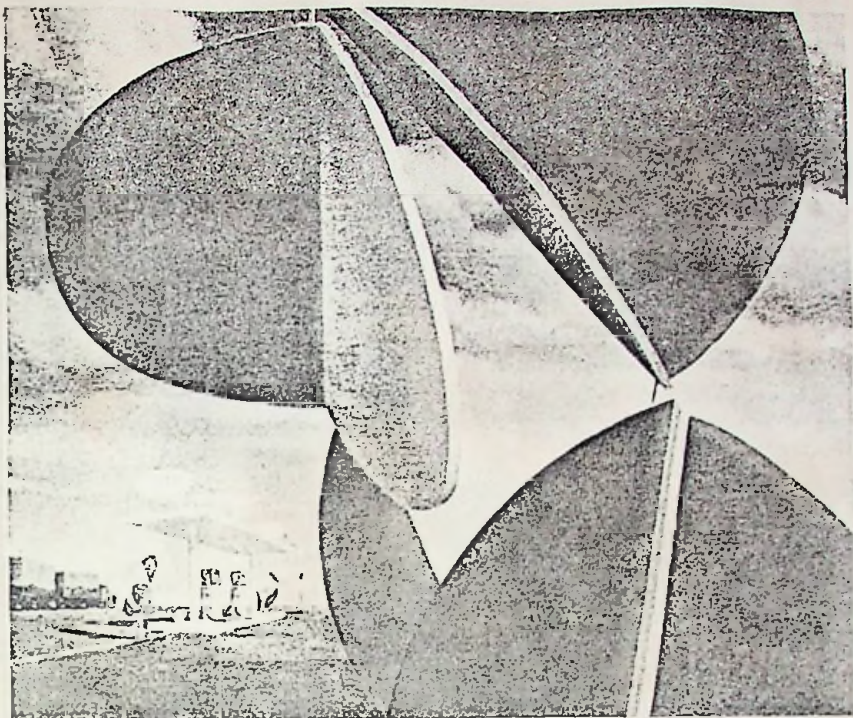
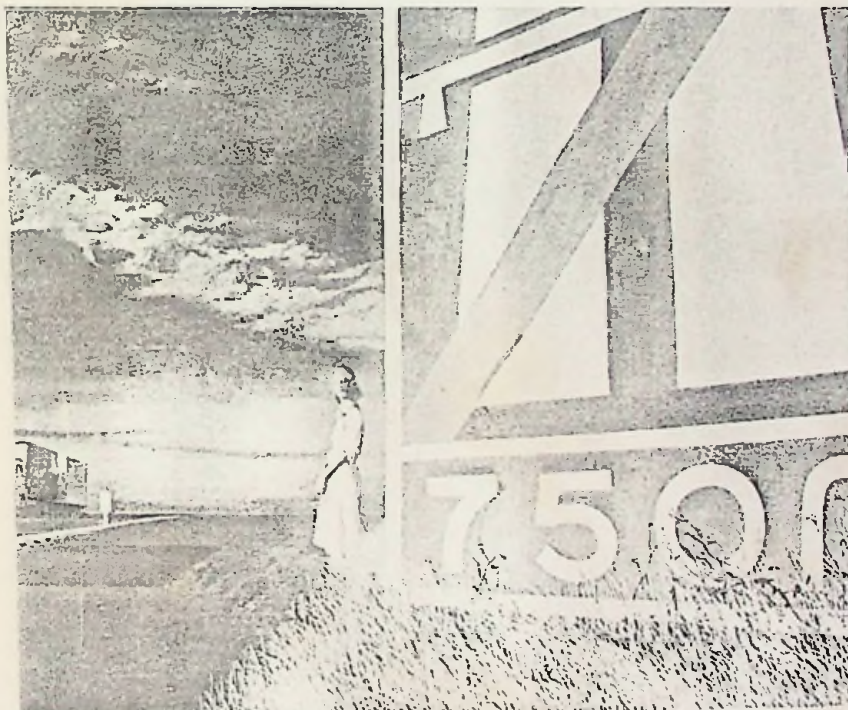


Plate 74. J. Smart, *The Plastic Garden at the Petrol Station*. 80 × 80 cm.

Plate 71. J. Smart, *The End of the Autostrada*. 31½ × 39 in.



9.
feeling of misunderstanding. In this case, maybe we should consider, both what realism is and what realism is not.

Here perhaps, we could consider Jeffrey Smart's remark, used to clarify his own work and intentions.

"A man on horseback is logical,
but in a satellite he is surreal."

Surrealism for Smart lies in the world, and not in, particularly, his pictures. His concerns, like Colville's, are on the surface, with the enigma of things, with their surreal life-oddness, and at the bottom with the being, simply of things. Smart is concerned, not with topography but with man's finding himself wherever he may be.

To illustrate further, using a couplet from Heidegger

"I, a stranger, and afraid,
In a world I never made.

So this tells us we are strangers, and afraid even in the parts of the world which we, ourselves, have made. We are the strangers, and afraid, and the proprietors, the makers of it all yet very much at home? It is this sort of contradiction which is revealed in Smart; and it is the sort of contradiction, which we recognize in our lives, what moves Smart, often is the surreality of the real world, the mixture of those things, manmade and natural, from different periods of time, from different life-styles, the attraction and repulsion of all these things.

In all his paintings, Smart records and clarifies, producing emblems, visual metaphors which at once imitate and interpret reality. The woman depicted standing in his painting, 'The end of the Autostrada', is enigmatic, (see opp. page) isolated and symbolic. Here we have, as often with Colville, a frame from a film, however this depicts a film of reality, a cool slice of an anonymous moment. And we have also, an elevated phrase of the present condition of western man.

Taking a concrete situation) Italy with its layers of the past, its perfect Renaissance cities like Florence and Sienna, through which travel on foot is necessary for complete observation, and its autostrade, which need to be taken in a G.T., is truly surreal. And this surreality, this obvious displacement of context by context is both a fact and an image of the situation of contemporary man. It is not difficult to read Jeff. Smart's paintings in this way: they are about daily oddnesses. But one must look deeper again, past the smile to the face itself, or past the face to the smile itself, if that is possible; beyond the look of things to what things at bottom are. He responds equally to the beautiful and to the odd, and sees the beautiful in, or through the odd. In Smart's very latest picture 'The Plastic Garden at the Petrol Station', (see opp. page),

where here, the commercial eye-catchers the plastic abstract folwers are depicted as beautiful as their designer intended them to be-or even moreso. Smart takesthe plastic garden absolutely seriously no irony or sophisticated reservations. As he sees it in its common situation -half-abstract half realistic and absolutely entrancing. This he shows back to us in an image which is resolutely literal-a literal image so entrancing because it is itself entaanced. This somewhat envelops Smarts total concern with realism and indeed with the intricacies and simplicities of our contemporary life-style.

Having so far dealt with artists who have expressed as realists their commitment to objects or situations that inspire and reflect their (our) outlook I would like to introduce the work of Robert Bechtle. This paintings establish a progress in that they depict objects, places and people through a sensibility that describeswith marvelous subtlety the very substance of our time. Bechtle, like many others including those previously mentioned, has been too easily assigned to a 'movement', rather than being identified for his singular achievement. Despite this quotation concerning his attitude towards his work:

'I am certainly aware of the social implications of my subjects but I try to preserve a kind of newtrality,' Bechtle's people, cars and places retain their identities, bestowing on each its proper importance within the Humanist tradition. Representations of family and friends are more a statement of fact rather than a projection of feelings the works cannot totally be decribed as sentimental or emotional. This "involved neutrality", or dispoint participancy pervades the paintings of urban buildings, bland sunshiney streets and empty parked cars. Formally the works are more dependent upon the overall conception or "atmosphere" than the strict relation of elements in the proper order; as if a particular tone were struck to announce the "posture" of the painting. This characteristic peculiar to recent American realism more so tends to be "overall rather than perspectual. This enigmatic quality probably derived from the artists reliance on photographs, employed by Bechtle simply as a means of recording and presering a subject. The spatial mood of a photograph is defiant yet the artist cansistent with his outlook will report on what he sees.

Concerning his primary tendencies towards this style Bechtle says-"I was drawn to realism as much for negative reasons as for any other (I would not admit to the label of "realist.") I first started working in a realistic manner in 1963 as a way of avoiding some of the problems of style that were bothering me at the time. Painting something as it looked in a direct and straightforward way was a rejection of the more obvious expressionist mannerisms of the late fifties although it also seemed to me a logical outgrowth of what the figurative painters were doing. The negative reasons become less



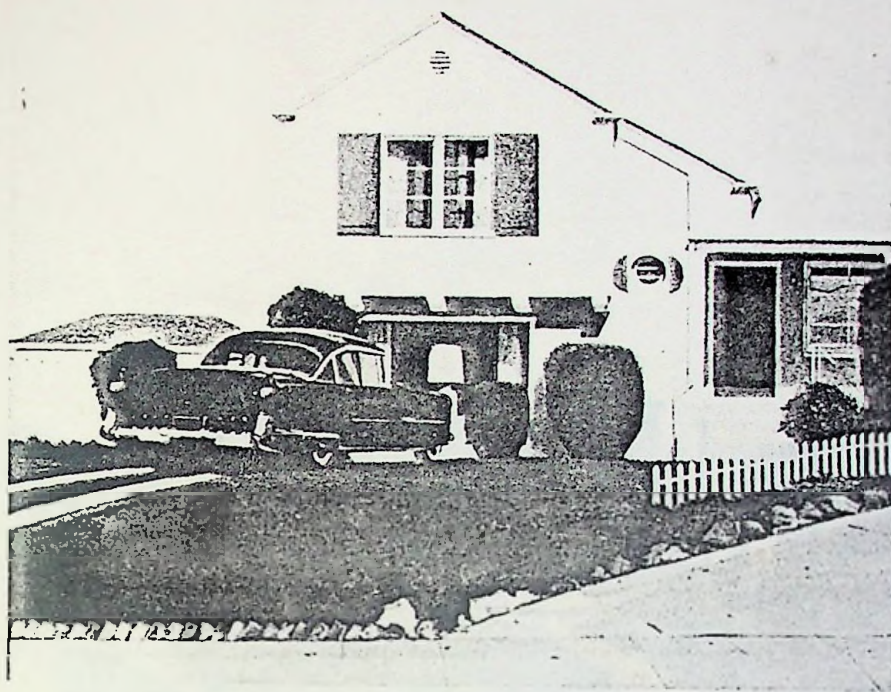
29. Nancy Sitting 1964

important as the implications become more clear to me. He became more and more convinced of the need of drawing the substance of my art from my own immediate surroundings and background.'

This realization came about while the artist was on a trip to Europe, evoking memories of East Bay streets with parked cars and stucco houses, and of growing up in a similar neighbourhood. The sunlit sameness of those streets provided an importance which Bechtle was unaware of, previously. His interest in these subjects has nothing to do with satire or social comment, but because they are part of what he knows, he is interested in their commonness and in the challenge of making art from such ordinary fare. Bechtle started using photographs as a way of avoiding the inconvenience of using a model, also allowing him to paint with enough accuracy that the reference to the 'real thing' is direct and not distracted by the distortions of style. The photograph in addition to being a reference source, also serves as a kind of structure for the painting, which limits the choices of colour and placement, preventing some of the traditional concerns of the painter (drawing, composition etc.) from assuming too important a role, for they are not what the painting is about. Regarding the painting, Bechtle would hope that the observer would relate to it much as he would to the real thing, perhaps, even to wonder why anyone would bother to paint it. But his paintings reveal a natural beauty without any loss of the pictorial unity fundamental to painting. In the works of other figurative painters of the Bay Area, Richard Diebenkorn and Nathan Oliveira, Bechtle confirmed his own perception of order and mood which has persisted as an undercurrent into his most recent, more highly keyed and apparently more casual compositions.

His 1964 composition "Nancy Sitting" (see opp. page.) is at once an unfolding of Bay Area figurative principles and a new display of commitment to fact. He gives 'feeling attention' to the objects on the table which is held together by a harmonious light which quickens into sparkling accents upon the utensils. The thoughtful silence and the proportional arrangement are familiar enough devices to observers of Bay Area painting, but the authority and importance with which Bechtle accorded the image was new.

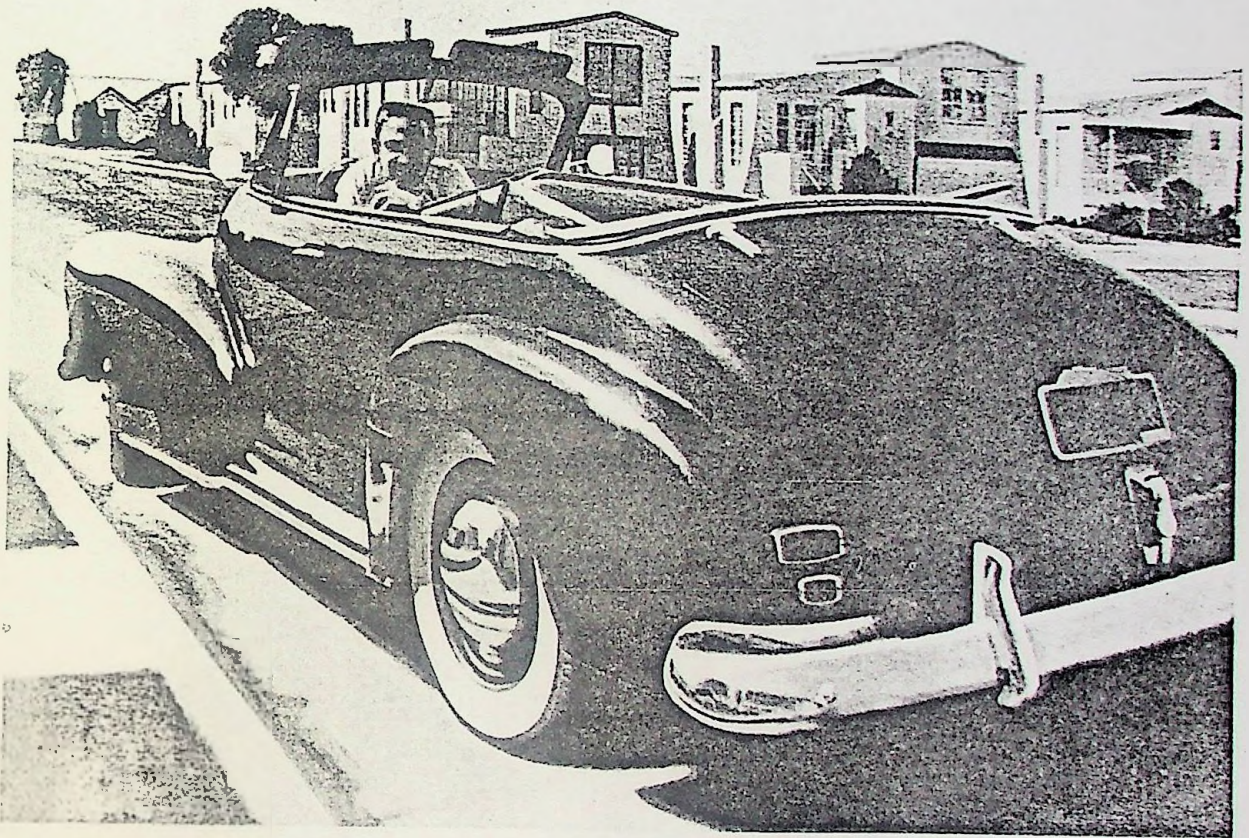
His '56 Cadillac', of 1965 (see opp. page.) is an early example of a photo derived painting, its composition surprisingly considered, easily displays the new accidental element resulting of his camera. This painting on a superficial level transmits the values of a real estate photo, but communicates decidedly more. The disposition and magnitudes of the building provide the stable element, the car offers a potential transience. Here again light and its varying reflections remain a counter theme mutually existing with the newfound problem of resolving tensions between the object, the photograph and the painting.



21. '56 Cadillac 1966



22. Thelma 1965



46. '46 Chevy 1965



7. Fosters Freeze 1970

Probably the most obvious recognition of the photo, of all his works, can be found in "46 Chevy" (1965) (see opp. page.) made after an aging snap-shot from the family album. Here optical distortations are evident as Bechtle diminishes the presence of the occupant and emphasizes the setting by manipulating the focus. This notion of recording exactly as the camera seizes it is a device to which he returns periodically; but often minimizing this effect, thereby yielding an increased order of permanence. Other examples of optical distortations are evident in '68 Oldsmobile' (1969) and 'Fosters Freeze' (1970).

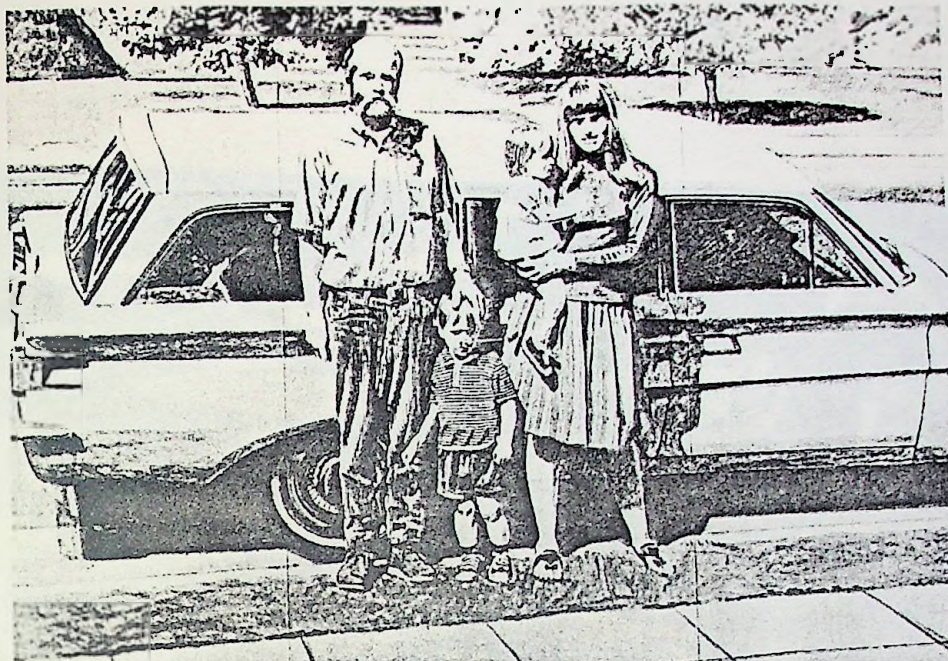
With '61 Pontiac' (1968-'69) (see foll. pages.) the details are so entirely convincing that if even intrusive, absence of commercial qualities or false exoticism, is quite evident. Here it is the artists home and family, and his slightly awkward, slightly self-conscious pose, reflects pride in what is near to him. Yet these elements, are reserved for the Bechtle of the photograph, not the painter, who denotes equal attention to his neighbour's lawn, as to his sons shoes and the reflection in the station wagon's rear window. He has succeeded in capturing the essence of the middle American photo., a record of personal things captured without sentiment, the substance of future nostalgia. No longer does the artist seem to interfere with the organization; it is left to the camera, which of course, is equally the instrument of the artist.

In 'Fosters Freeze' (see opp. page.) the arrangement seems totally incidental, the camera catching a moment, seeming so inconsequential as to be otherwise unremembered. Yet this taking of the photograph establishes the artists opinion of what is important to be depicted, his fascination with the formally noticed but never quite seen. He has given it proper status stressing that impermanence is the ostensible subject, relationships are both incidental and enduring between the participants, their setting and between various facts of the setting itself. The painting is in fact a subtle essay on levels of reality and orders of permanence.

"Thelma" (1965) (see opp. page.) may have been the last of the "artist composed" works in this genre, or it may be the first of the photo-derived pictures so much does it represent the exact threshold between the two approaches. However, on the other hand, his most recent work "Roses" (1973) presents a combination of themes already used before.; the middle-American photo; the middle-American car, the middle-American pastime, and the middle-American family, -his family. Behind Bechtle's artistic impulse lies a deep compassion for human life, with which he endeavours to understand the human condition through the fragmentary artifacts that serve its necessities.



11. '61 Pontiac 1968-69



Underpainting of '61 Pontiac



Underdrawing of '61 Pontiac



1. Roses 1973

CONCLUSIONS

In the previous section, I introduced my main 'witnesses' or contenders of the realist tradition, with which I hoped to assert the values of this said tradition and establish its meaningful and necessary constitution. Although it may seem, that I used, or favoured, Robert Bechtle's work more so than the others, this was not intentional, but purely, a matter of using the amount of information I could avail of, to its fullest. Throughout, I have used these artists work and intentions not only to establish the value of realism but also to discover and maintain my own reasons for painting.

But has realism any aesthetic validity, in this the 20th Century? This is what we set out to establish, and that this implies a silly question or one expecting the answer 'of course' should be obvious from illustrations which we have seen. Neither as a technique, nor as an intentional affective aesthetic mode, is realism dead, and I have deliberately placed the accent on painters who give us 'the most realistic representations of things in Art, to underline this point.

Chambers, with his 'Perceptual realism', demands with his insistence on a photographic 'matrix', and on the "embodying of the prime impact," of perception, a visual reality, recorded without interpretation. Colville (and the Mount Allison school) gives us objective, realistic, 'Photographic' painting, but unlike Chambers the do not offer us interpreted reality. It all depends where you think it best to go for reality, Chambers, austere sticks to the surface of things, to sheer visual appearance; while Colville, toughly and resolutely looks for the reality beneath the appearance. Colville, knows that part of the reality of such things, is their actual appearance. What they are makes them look as they do. Colville, then, par excellence, paints ontologically, where this entails painting realistically.

Smart, of all the painters introduced has the most fantasia, in his work but does not take credit for it. Rather, he gives credit for it, blames it on the world. The world with its surreal juxtapositions are not just surface things, they are emblematic of human-doubts, anguishes and puzzlements. Even, if all realisms were as objective and as 'doctrinarily unnuanced' as Chambers, realism would still be a live mode. What the artist does in imitating nature is very like what we each of us do in living our lives. It has all been done before, we cannot be original. Each bit of life, or imitation, aesthetic or real, this has validity, interest, authenticity.

These realist painters, at whom we have looked all affirm the world, its appearances, the values, of a certain life style a flourish of townscape, -the being of things. Who can still

approve of the world, of life? Obviously, these painters can and do. Speaking humanistically, there is at bottom, perhaps no obligation whatsoever, to approve of the world and of life. But if you are a painter and do feel an enthusiasm for reality then realism is a very appropriate mode in which to express your valuing of what there is. Art as the imitation of nature could be resolved in two ways; as a continuing mode and or as a mode to be modishly contradicted.

Of my own reasons, for painting in this style, I think I could identify with Colville's and Bechtle's own intentions moreso than the others, although there is an element of overlapping in what each of them say. However, I do not feel that I had to 'resort' to this particular style, to establish my reasons or values in painting, for I have always worked accordingly. The obvious outcome of my fairly recent discovery, of other realist painters has just helped to intensify and confirm my beliefs in this mode of painting. Discovering reality through a 're-birth' or rebuilding the situations of life in realist paintings, can only help to ascertain the importance and necessity of realism.

Therefore, it is probable to say that, *mimesis* is the thing against which reactions define themselves. Contemporary art may, quite contingently, be non-realistic; but realistic art, the imitation of our existences, can always be contemporary. This so establishes what was set out to do, and positively asserts the value and necessity of realism in today's contemporary modes.

Mary Jo Bermingham.

Mary Jo Bermingham

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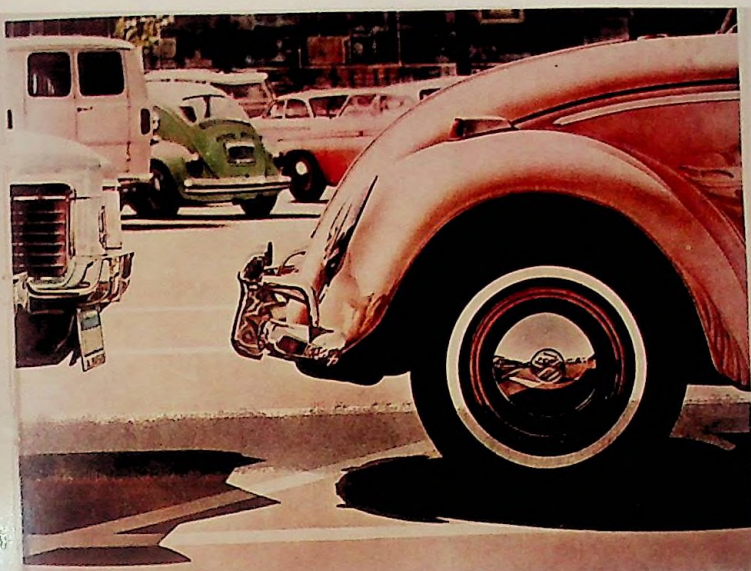
CATALOGUE OF ROBERT BECHTLE'S EXHIBITION,
'A RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION. 1973.

CATALOGUE OF SERPENTINE EXHIBITION, 1973,

LONDON.

SOME EXAMPLES OF THE WORK AT THE 'PHOTO-REALISM'

EXHIBITION, SERPENTINE GALLERY, 1973.



VOLKSWAGEN.

Eddy.





GOINGS -

AIRSTREAM

TRAILER.



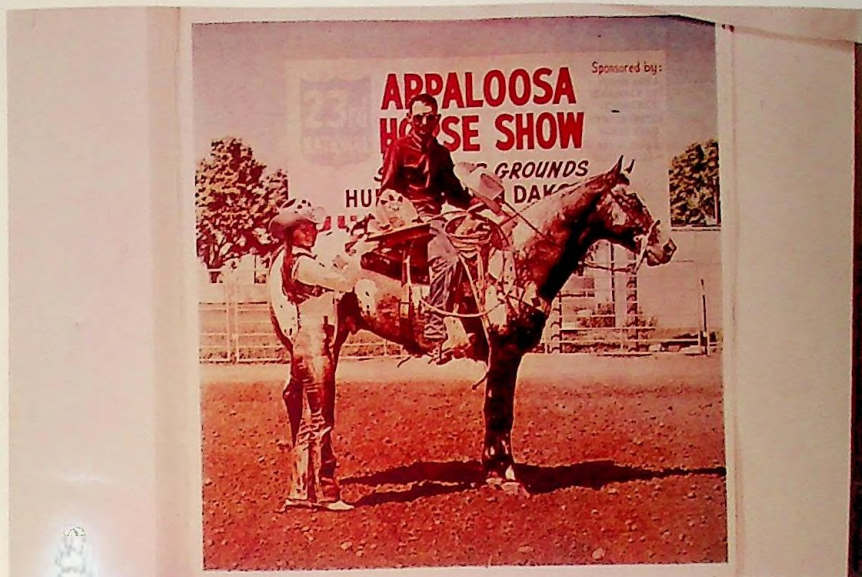
John de ANDREA.



Close.







McLEAN. -

