

# PHOTOREALISM

## 50 Years of Hyperrealistic Painting

Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery November 30, 2013 - March 30, 2014



# INSTALLATION SHOTS



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# PRESS REVIEW - OVERVIEW

## Photorealism

Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery | 30 Nov 2013 – 30 Mar 2014

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Surveying the work of artists who have favoured the hyperrealist style of painting over the past 50 years.



Raphaela Spence, 'Waves, 2010'

Photorealism first emerged in the US in the 1960s through painters such as Charles Bell, Audrey Flack, Don Eddy, Chuck Close and John Salt.

Using photography as source material, the associated artists were concerned with painting astonishingly realistic depictions of everyday objects and scenes representative of American life.

Consumer goods, cars, motorcycles, diners and cityscapes were among popular subject matter, which was painstakingly reproduced to a much larger scale in oil and acrylic.

Intended as a means of objective documentation, photorealists distanced themselves from other more subjective art movements of the time, such as abstract expressionism, Pop Art and minimal art.

In fact, when the movement was first exposed to European audiences in 1972, the radical new ways it suggested artists might relate the world was highly controversial.

In the 1960s and 90s, photorealism experienced a second wave of popularity, but this time taking precedence on an international – rather than solely American – scale.

European artists took a particular interest; Anthony Bonello, Bertrand Meriel, Robert Griswold and Gus Helzlsouer were just some of its most prominent champions, shown here alongside the work of their predecessors from the 60s.

### Don't miss

A third element of the exhibition focuses on how the advent of digital photography has prompted a new generation of artists adopt a photorealist style. Raphaela Spence is one contemporary proponent, capturing cities around the world from a helicopter with a 96-megapixel camera, then transferring images to canvas pixel by pixel.

Peter Maier also aligns himself with the photorealist style. Having worked for several years as a designer in the car industry, his work involves spraying special automobile paint onto high-tech aluminium in as many as twenty five layers. The resulting images take on such a three-dimensional character they are deceptively real in appearance.



Artist John Salt admires a painting at the Photorealism exhibition.

"I'm just as keen on Pop Art and a lot of people on display here came out of abstract expressionism."

"The imagery here relates to life and the artists have a taste for the world around them."

Born in 1937 and a still-youthful 76, what is more important to John than any one piece is the journey he's been on to make each one – from a childhood in war-time Sheldon, Birmingham, to New York and back again.

Now based near Ludlow, Shropshire, John is still pursuing new techniques while forever trying to enjoy the means of getting from A to B.

A retrospective like Photorealism inevitably means John has spent this week looking back in anticipation of the official opening on Friday.

Any pride he takes from what he's achieved will be used as a springboard to move onwards and upwards despite the curse of being too aware of his own limitations.

"When I look at something I did years ago... I think 'not bad,'" he says after a pause.

"I am not displeased, but I know it's not great."

"It's not (Diego) Velázquez."



Ralph Goings' 'America's Favourite' (1989).



Photorealism: 50 Years of Hyperrealistic Painting, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

The first major large-scale retrospective in Europe devoted to Photorealism is currently running at Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery until 30 March. Surveying the genre's development from the 1960s to today, the exhibition moves from the likes of Charles Bell, Audrey Flack, Don Eddy, Chuck Close and John Salt, through a second generation of painters like Gus Helzlsouer to its contemporary digital manifestation.

Beginning with a group of US artists who focused on the realistic depictions of everyday objects and scenes, the early works of Photorealism focus upon the clichés of American life – consumer goods, cars, motorcycles, diners and cityscapes – to painstakingly reproduce the everyday in large-scale oil and acrylic images. A means of documenting the world in a way that starkly opposed the concurrent movements of abstract expressionism, Pop Art and minimal art, Photorealism radically re-imagined ideas of subjectivity, authenticity and means of relating to reality.

A recurrent obsession with transport becomes a constant and the first series of this exhibition reveal a recurring depiction of scenes of trucks, planes, motorcycles and cars in the work of Ron Kiesel, Tom Blackford and Ralph Goings. This idea also resurfaces in Birmingham-born artist John Salt's seminal piece, which drew on his upbringing among the car manufacturing industry.

In the exhibits of the 1980s and 1990s, Photorealism takes a leap as the genre becomes of increasing interest to European artists such as Anthony Bonello, who focuses on the cityscapes of France, Switzerland, Italy and small-town America and Bertrand Meriel, who captured panoramic views of Miami Beach, New York City and other American cities. Robert Griswold's dirty city streets and Gus Helzlsouer's fascination with dilapidated farm equipment, locomotive engines and water pumps also form a key part of this mid-point of the genre's trajectory.

Finally, moving into the age of digital photography, Photorealism steps into a third phase with ambitious projects such as Raphaela Spence's, which capture cities around the world from a helicopter using a 96-megapixel camera before transferring these images pixel by pixel to canvas where they come to life with pin-sharp accuracy. Peter Maier's images of polished car bodies, deceptively real in appearance and the result of spraying 25 layers of special automobile paint onto high-tech aluminium, also showcase the contemporary character of Photorealism, offering a fascinating signpost to where the genre might point next.

Photorealism: 50 Years of Hyperrealistic Painting, 30 November – 30 March, Gus Helzlsouer, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, Chamberlain Square, Birmingham, B3 3DH.

### Credits

1. Don Eddy, 'United (4 Way) (1971)', Acrylic on canvas, 167 x 341cm, F. Javier Elorza, Image © Don Eddy. Photo © 2012 Arts Council of the Netherlands.



# PRESS REVIEW - OVERVIEW

Nov 28, 2013



Alamy/Chapman (2013), Robert Bechtle © Robert Bechtle, artists © individual for reproduction rights, © Giorgio

## First Look: Photorealism

APOLLO STAFF

In this ongoing series, Apollo previews a range of international exhibitions, asking curators to reveal their personal highlights and curatorial impulses. Katie Hall is the exhibitions officer at Birmingham Museums Trust. 'Photorealism: 50 Years of Hyperrealism' will be shown in the Gas Hall, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery

### Can you tell us a bit about the exhibition?

'Photorealism: 50 Years of Hyperrealism' is a retrospective show that includes work from Photorealism's beginnings in the 1960s through to contemporary artists working in the style today. Historically, less attention has been given to Photorealism than other 20th century art movements so this exhibition is a great moment to redress that.

### What makes this a distinctive show?

This international tour is the first major retrospective of Photorealism staged in the UK and the largest and most comprehensive ever shown in Europe. A significant number of the pieces are from private collections so this is a rare opportunity to see many of the works.

### How did you come to work on this exhibition?

We've been interested in holding a Photorealism exhibition for some time, particularly as we have work in our collection by Birmingham-born artist John Salt who was one of the pioneering Photorealists. This exhibition enables us to show his work alongside that of his contemporaries and

examine the movement more widely.

### What is likely to be the highlight of the exhibition?

It's very difficult to choose a single highlight as the paintings are so varied and individually stunning. Personally I love the works that evoke classic American culture such as John Baeder's images of diners, Davis Cone's paintings of Art Deco movie theatres and Robert Bechtle's observations of Californian suburbia.

### And what's been the most exciting personal discovery for you?

I've been working with two of the UK based artists, Ben Johnson and John Salt. They're both doing some talks for us during the exhibition and Ben Johnson has been able to send us images of him working in the studio which are a fascinating insight into the painstaking process of creating a work.

### What's the greatest challenge you've faced in preparing this exhibition?

We're lucky to have a very large exhibition space that can accommodate interests of the artists across the three generations of Photorealists, including small town America and the suburbs, automobiles, people and cityscapes.

### Which other works you would have liked to have included?

The exhibition includes all the key Photorealist artists and we're delighted to be able to show such a comprehensive set of loans. We would have liked to include Tom Blackwell's Triumph Trumpet (1977) as it's a painting of the iconic Birmingham-made motorcycle, but unfortunately it was sold by the owners prior to the exhibition.

'Photorealism: 50 Years of Hyperrealism' is at the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery from 30 November 2013-30 March 2014.

Owned by the BMAG itself, White Chevy – Red Trailer (1975) is a larger, composite picture – airbrushed acrylic on canvas.



John Salt's White Chevy – Red Trailer (1975)

John explains how some techniques rely on appropriate brush skills, while effects are achieved with stencils and spray guns.

"My first one cost just a few dollars," he grins.

As we study the works of his contemporaries, looking at everything from light and shade, others on a mixture of striking colours or the death of

often associated with camera lenses.

Virtually all of the exhibits seem to use white as a means of conveying hyperreality and silver reflectors are another key to capturing motoring modernity.

John's parents encouraged their only son to study art, even if his interest in creating abstracted collages meant his vision was unfamiliar.

"I don't know what I thought looking back at it!" he says.

Although his father, also called John, ran a car repair bodyshop, he used to love painting the surrounds using paint left to him by his own stepfather, a sign writer who would also paint stripes on cars.

His mother Amy was a housewife while John studied at Sivermere Road Secondary Modern School (now Mapledene Primary School).

He then had "four to five years" at Birmingham College of Art in Margaret Street before spending two years at London's Slade School of Fine Art, which he "didn't like very much".

Securing a graduate fellowship in Baltimore in 1967, he began to paint dream and its associated landscapes and manufactured goods.

He was ready to return to Birmingham after a year, when the

"We came back to Birmingham to sell the house we'd got and he says.

"We lived there for eight years over a nine-year period, returning

Soon after moving to New York City in 1969, John became fascinated

dumped under the approach to the Brooklyn Bridge. His photographs were snapshots of adolescence.

He took his place amongst American Photorealists, featuring in group shows with others including Chuck Close, Richard Estes, Robert Bechtle and Ralph Goings.

By the mid-70s, he was interested in showing cars left to fend for themselves as elements of a marginalised lifestyle in a world of shacks and trailer homes.

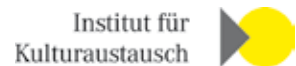
Today, daughter Katy is a scene painter in theatres – currently working on a Welsh pantomime in Mold, Clwyd – while son Thomas is a photographer based in Germany.



Peter Maier's Gator Champ (2007)

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IKA would like to point out that this project is still in the planning phase. As we do not have all loans confirmed yet there might change some of the previous pictured works. Furthermore, IKA, due to different loan agreements might be obliged to substitute single art works before the start of a venue. In this case the selection of the new works will be realised in accordance with the presenting museum.



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