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Edited by Connell Vaughan and Iris Vidmar

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Experiencing the Extraordinary of the Ordinary.
Robert Bechtle and Photorealism

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ABSTRACT. Through these pages, I attempt to move away from the art-centred theory, exploring the aesthetic character of everyday as it is shown in Bechtle's photorealistic paintings. Firstly, I begin considering the question of what Photorealism depicts, in other words, its everyday contents. Secondly, I deal with the question of how Robert Bechtle's images give heightened significance to the ordinary. This paper is accomplished by a final reflection on the continuity between art and life.

1. Introduction

Everyday aesthetics is a new branch of research which tries to transcend the narrow art-oriented approach, widening the focus of the aesthetics to include objects and activities that had been traditionally neglected. Challenges to the traditional scope, aestheticians of the everyday recognize the continuity between fine arts and experiences from other domains of life and claim the aesthetic character of our everyday life.

This sub-discipline presents new avenues of inquiry and has become a common concern for scholars across the world due to the profound worldwide changes in contemporary culture and art. In the 40th anniversary

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of the Finnish Society of Aesthetics Conference, Richard Shusterman provided the distinction between two different ways of understanding the theory of everyday aesthetics. The first one emphasizes the ordinariness of the everyday, the prevailing aesthetic sensibility that permeates everyday objects and activities; while the second one highlights the particular aesthetic character in which ordinary can be transfigured into an aesthetic experience. (Shusterman, 2010, p. 110)

One of the main precursors of this second approach is the American philosopher Thomas Leddy. According to him, the ordinariness is important but rather “the way in which the ordinary can be made extraordinary”. (Leddy, 2012, p. 45) That is, his conception focuses on the everyday experiences which are more intense and extraordinary, the ones that John Dewey called “an experience”. (Dewey, 1987, 42) What is more, this view does not only take into account how ordinary things can become extraordinary but also the ways in which artists have contributed to the understanding and experiencing everyday aesthetic phenomena.

Leddy criticizes how several colleagues in everyday aesthetics, like Allen Carlson and Yuriko Saito, have underestimated the dynamic relationship between the aesthetics of art and the aesthetics of everyday. (Leddy, 2012, p. 121) In contrast, he remarks that the artists are best able to see the extraordinary in the ordinary. That is, they can take the things of everyday life and transfigure them through art-making. Thus, Leddy presents everyday aesthetics in dialogue with art and defends that art aesthetics is incomplete without understanding its grounding in the everyday.

Following Leddy's view of everyday aesthetics, the aim of this paper is to analyse the relationship between art and life in Robert Bechtle's works. Bechtle is an American painter from the Bay Area of San Francisco and one of the most prominent photorealist who has shown the extraordinary of his ordinary life. He uses photographs of familiar subjects and places to create their paintings of everyday scenes. That is, working in a photorealist style, Bechtle focuses our attention on the marvellous aspects of his life.

Through these pages, firstly, I would like to consider the question of what Photorealism paints, that is, its everyday contents. Secondly, I analyse how Photorealism depicts, in other words, the particular style through which Robert Bechtle's images give heightened significance to the ordinary. Finally, I conclude with a reflection on the continuity between everyday aesthetics and art aesthetics.

2. The Extraordinary of the “Ordinary Fare”

Robert Bechtle is a California artist, who was born in California, is based in California and takes California as subject matter. However, Bechtle's subjects are not the Hollywood movie stars, famous places or awe-inspiring landscapes, but the mundane things of his ordinary life. He began to feel a genuine interest in “ordinary fare” after his trip to Europe in 1961. During one year he travelled through Europe, visiting museums and the main cities of the old continent. This experience had a deep impact on his career for many reasons. Firstly, while he was in Europe he felt the chance to do some works with no one to look at it, and started to become fairly objective in

simply recording things that he saw, things that he called “postcards”. (Karlstron, 1978-1980) Secondly, he became more aware of the appearances of California; due to the distance, the artist discovered the possibilities and the light for the painting. Thirdly, he visited some Pop Art collections which really impressed the author, as Richard Hamilton’s works or Larry Rivers’ paintings of cigarette packages and French money. Therefore, this trip was an opportunity to develop a particular attitude and look at his surroundings:

You can take a photograph of something but you never possess it because it’s too fast its spontaneous – you’ve got a souvenir of it, so what, you haven’t made any connection with it. If you sit and look at it for a couple of hours, I suppose just meditating on it, you certainly soak the thing in. But there’s something that’s very intense about the experience of sitting down and having to look at it in the way that you do in order to make a drawing, or to make a painting of it in the sense of what visually goes on. By the time you’ve done that for a couple of hours you feel that you’re really understood what you were looking at and also that you’re left a little of yourself there. (Karlstron, 1978-1980)

When he came back to California, his eyes opened to a certain extent of seeing his own environment in a different way. This event marks the transition to realistic style works whose focus was the quotidian; images that are about where and how the artist and his family have lived. That is, his paintings have been characterized by the light and architecture of the Bay Area, taken his neighbourhoods, family, and friends as primary subjects. For

over forty years, the American painter has developed a singular concern about the effects of light and shadows, a suggestive interaction between perspective and surface, creating extraordinary images of ordinary. Thus, Robert Bechtle paints, in his own words, the “essence of American experience”, “the ordinary fare”, showing objects, places or people with a new fresh view.

One of the most reverence objects in his works is the car. From his early works such as *Alameda Camaro* (1967), *61 Impala, from Four Chevies* (1973) *73 Malibu* (1974) or *Alameda Gran Torino* (1974), to his later works, including *Covered Car – Missouri Street* (2002); *20th Street Capri* (2002) or *Potrero Golf Legacy* (2012), this is a recurrent topic in his paintings.

Bechtle started to paint cars as a way to be original, to teach himself to paint in a more profound way than he learned in art school. He attempted to get away from the look of the Bay Area figurative painters and begin to do something different. At the time nobody was painting cars, so this topic was a kind of door of connecting what he was doing to the world that he was familiar with. In an interview in 2012 the artist recognizes that the first car came sort of by accident [*61 Pontiac* (1964)]:

It wasn't an idea that I had, but it happened while I was working on a painting. This was back in 1963, I think, when I was living in Alameda. I had a house, a studio that faced out onto the street of a residential neighborhood. I was doing a painting that was like a composition using part of a window, a mirror that was hanging on the

window molding, and a bit of a framed drawing that was sitting next to that. So it was the rectangle of the window, an oval in the mirror, and a rectangle of a framed picture that had glass on it. It was a dark picture that was in there, so it reflected as well. So, there was a self-portrait that was between the mirror, and you'd see part of it reflected on the picture. And there were curtains on the window, halfway up—café curtains. I was basically just painting it from life, what was there. I didn't like what was happening with the café curtain, so I took it off and painted what was out the window.

What was out the window was a stucco bungalow with a Plymouth sedan sitting there. So, I painted that. A little light bulb went off and I thought, "Gee, that was kind of interesting." [laughs] Then I parked my car in front of the window, and painted it through the window from life, as it were. (Kellaway, 2012)

Therefore, the artist used the cars because they were ordinary objects, "there was nothing glamorous about them and that cars really exist as opposed to what the advertisements showed and our imagination about them." (Kellaway, 2012) He chose cars such as Chevrolets, Chryslers, Buicks or whatever—American cars, generally wagons or family sedans. For instance, *46 Chevy* (1965), featuring Bechtle's brother sitting in the artist's own convertible or *56 Chrysler* (1965) set in front of the artist's mother's Alameda home.

The first contact with Bechtle's paintings can transmit a sense of everyday purposelessness. The artist often speaks of the "dumbness" of his subject matter, because they refuse to dictate a social interpretation.

Nevertheless, this is not to say that the car is without symbolic meaning, particularly for the California middle class. The painter creates works plenty of visual information which shows in an extraordinary manner modest family cars place in the mundane setting, such as *Agua Caliente Nova* (1975).

As Janet Bishop has defended (2005, p. 23), Bechtle's 1972-74 series of single-car compositions represented the culmination of his treatments of a subject that had occupied him for a decade, but at the same time they offered a chance to "get out of his system" subject matter with which he was becoming too closely identified. Bechtle's structural contrivances can be seen in each canvas: for example in the alignment of the car's antenna with the house's drainpipe in *67 Chrysler* (1973); in the series of parallels and perpendiculars that make up the window, awning, railing, and intersection of yard and driveway in *63 Bel Air* (1973), or in the medium-size painting of *Alameda Gran Torino* (1974). These compositions are based on photographs documenting real-life scenes, but they are anything but accidental or serendipitous. Each is the result of deliberate choices made while taking the source photos and transferring the images to canvas.

Although art history has tended to assign Robert Bechtle a specific niche, the painter has in fact explored a variety of subjects beyond his best-known car paintings. The second topic which I would like to consider in this paper is the buildings. From his beginnings, the artist has paid special attention to usual domestic architecture, like *Kona Kai* (1967) or *Date Palms* (1971), in which the author juxtapose automobiles with buildings from his quotidian. The apartment building in *Kona Kai* is essentially a

group of monotonous and conformist blocks, which Bechtle makes no effort to pretty up the structure, but neither does he attack or criticize it outright. *Date Palms* portrays an even more sterile building at the Kaiser medical campus in Oakland.

These images, as many others, come from Bechtle's usual domestic architecture; they are everyday places that he recorded while he was doing everyday tasks (from his commute or from taking his kids to the doctor). In this kind of paintings, we can identify the architectural style of suburban, middle-class and midcentury, such as *California Garden I* (1972) or *California Gardens – Oakland Houses* (1973).

In this point, I would like to think about the possibilities of relationship between Arto Haapala's study of the everyday and Bechtle's paintings. In his well-known study "On the Aesthetics of the Everyday: Familiarity, Strangeness, and the Meaning of Place", Haapala explains that strangeness is the experience we all have in new environments when we experience the surroundings as unfamiliar (for instance Bechtle's experience in Europe). However, as the author explains strangeness cannot be a continual state. In Haapala's words "while we are living in the lifeworld, doing and making things, acting in different ways in different situations, we create ties to our surroundings, and in this way familiarize ourselves with it." (Haapala, 2005, p. 44)

He defends interpretation as a third meaning of the place, the way in which we create a hermeneutic sense of living in an environment and making sense of it by acting there, by creating different kinds of connections. Haapala emphasizes the existential quality of the relation of a

place and a person, defending how the place is an interpretation of an environment by a human existence and I think this is a crucial aspect to understand Bechtle's works.

His paintings are undergoing continuous transformation due to the events that are happening in artist's life. For instance, in the mid to late 1980s we find a notably different way of views in his paintings. The artist's focus on neighborhoods in San Francisco rather than single residences in the East Bay because he moves from the suburbs to the city. Therefore, Bechtle starts to depict new settings of San Francisco's hills and represent the city, without showing picturesque clichés. For example, *20th Street – Early Sunday Morning* shows the view of a street from an adjacent street corner or through the window of another car. Other suggesting examples are *Mariposa I* (1999), *Mariposa II* (2000) or *Near Ocean Avenue* (2002).

For that reason, Bechtle's works cannot be considered in contexts that create strangeness, but in the surroundings he is used to, in his normal routines. His paintings show his ordinary contexts, and make us more aware of the pleasurable aspects of the everyday, focusing in things or moments which have not been objects of aesthetic appreciation in the traditional sense. Obviously, Bechtle's paintings can be criticized because they are not a mirror held up to reality; they are not mere imitation of common places. But this is the most valuable part of his work, his skill to interpret his daily life and displays with aesthetic properties. He does not want to represent the reality, but to show his genuine view of his everyday life.

This led me to the last subject matter I would like to analyze, the everyday scenes which the artist paints. From his beginnings, the painter

shows mundane activities from his daily environments. For instance, *Pink Toothbrush* (1966), which depicts a reflection of the artist's face in a bathroom mirror. However, the human being is not the primary focus of attention, but the place (the bathroom) and the daily routine of brushing his teeth.

One of the paintings which exemplify more clearly Bechtle's interest in quotidian moments is *Roses* (1973). This painting does not privilege figures over a background, but he gives equal attention to all areas of the visual field. Two cars in the driveway, the admiration of roses crumbling in the California heat, Bechtle's mother's ensemble of pearls, polyester dress, and sandals. The painting observes the aridity of suburban life. His work is not ironic like Pop art, but neither is it glorifying the ordinary scene. Other illustrative examples are *Watsonville Olympia* (1977) or *Frisco Nova* (1979) in which a man is watering his garden.

Particularly interesting are the watercolor on papers he made in 1996, through which the artist has explored these daily moments through evocative depiction of people at work. Although Bechtle has made watercolors consistently since the early 1970s, there has been no set pattern to their production. In fact, the watercolors are almost unprecedented in Bechtle's oeuvre in their depiction of people at work. The imprecision is used to different effect here; lacking distinguishable likenesses, the figures perform their bourgeois, paternal chores in front of interchangeable suburban homes as we can see in the series of Sterling Avenue: *Sterling Avenue – Washing the Buick* (1996); *Sterling Avenue – Raking the Grass* (1996); *Watering on Sterling Avenue* (1996).

Inevitably, these images come to our mind Dewey's words about how to understand the aesthetic in its ultimate and approved forms one must begin with it in the raw; in the events and scenes that hold the attentive eye and ear of man, arousing his interest and affording him enjoyment as he looks and listens:

The sources of art in human experience will be learned by him who sees how the tense grace of the ball-player infects the onlooking crowd, who notes the delight of the housewife in tending her plants, and the intent interest of her goodman in tending the patch of green in front of the house; the zest of the spectator in poking the wood burning on the heart and in watching the darting flames and crumbling coals. (Dewey, 1987, 11)

3. Robert Bechtle and Photorealistic Style

The first work Robert Bechtle made after traveling through Europe was *Nancy Reading* (1963), a piece that attempts to paint exactly what he was seeing (a view of his wife, sitting at the table with ordinary kitchen objects). Similarly, one year later, the painter made *Nancy Sitting* (1964), features the same figure and setting by day. However, this painting marks Bechtle's first use of photography as a studio aid.

Despite he had copied the proportion of the table and window onto a pair of canvases and intended to complete the painting from life, it was difficult for the model (his pregnant wife) to pose repeatedly, so he decided

to take a reference picture. (Bishop, 2005, p. 18).

It was with a certain sense of going back to my commercial art training”, he explains, “sort of knowing that the use of photographs was a technique that illustrators used all time for those kinds of situations. And so I didn’t give it a second thought... I just said, ‘Oh yeah, I’ll take a photograph and work with that’. (Bishop and Samis, 2001)

This painting is one of Bechtle’s most significant works because of several reasons. Firstly, as the painter asserts, the use of this method supposes a return to his early years as a graphic design student at the California College of Arts and Crafts. From his beginnings, Bechtle did not distinguish design or crafts in contrast to fine art and did not really share the myth of the ‘star’ artist who only produces masterpieces. In contrast, he was interested in this kind of practices because re-establishes the long-lost contact between living people and art as a living thing.

Secondly, Bechtle turned to realism as a way of discarding the influence of other paintings we can find in his earliest work. The photography provides “a kind of structure or system for the painting which limits the choices of color and placement. It allows me to keep some of the traditional concerns of the painter –drawing, composition, color relationships, from assuming too important a role, for they are not what the painting is about. Most of the choices are made when the photograph is taken”. (Meisel, 2002, p. 17)

Bechtle's artistic career began at the Bay Area Figurative movement and the development of his style was influenced by Richard Diebenkorn, Elmer Bischoff, and other Abstract Expressionist artists. As Jonathan Weinberg has defended, *Nancy Reading* painting is still thematically and compositionally derived from Diebenkorn's paintings of figures juxtaposed with windows that simultaneously create deep space and reassert the picture plane. (Weinberg, 2005, p. 52) The work can be compared with the painting of Richard Diebenkorn *Coffee* (1959).

In this painting, we find a woman sits alone, stirring her coffee as if lost in thought. The carefully balanced structure, the richly coloured shapes and the play of the light on the surface depict a moment when everyday details give rise to extraordinary insights. Similarly, the light in *Nancy Sitting* evokes an ordinary foggy East Bay day. The unspecific figure, the goods on the table create a fascinating effect of a daily scene.

In the interview made by the SFMOMA during the 75th anniversary celebration of the Woody Allen's film *Manhattan*, Robert Bechtle recognizes that he found Diebenkorn both fascinating and intimidating. He explains how the structure and subject matter of Diebenkorn's paintings influenced his own very different work; despite he never actually took a single class from him. (Bechtle, 2010) What is more, Diebenkorn's works were rooted in the outside world; he captured his surroundings on canvas, although he didn't represent them literally.

However, Bechtle turned to realism and used the photography as a way of discarding the influence of other paintings. Despite he had assimilated the expressive movement of Richard Diebenkorn and his circle

of Bay Area painters, in 1963 he attempted to free himself from those influences and began to paint his environments as accurately as possible. In Bechtle's words:

Realism seemed like a way of having no style at all. It was a way of freeing myself from the need to even think about it, to be concerned with what needed to be more basic problem of seeing, and then letting the kind of mark that would be made be based on observation... In a sense, it was choosing Realism as a non-style. (Weinberg, 2004)

Therefore, for Bechtle, the photograph provides "a kind of structure or system for the painting which limits the choices of color and placement." (Meisel, 2002, p. 17) That is, working directly from the real thing, as in *Nancy Reading*, Bechtle effectively produced imitations of other artists' work; it is when he seemed only to imitate a photograph that he succeeded in finding his own voice.

The second work which marks an important point in his career was *56 Cadillac*. In 1966, the artist was struggling with a composition of a black Cadillac parked in a Berkeley driveway. He couldn't get the proportions right, so in desperation, he projected the photography on the canvas to see what corrections could be made. The result had an impact that the painter would have imagined:

There was a Cadillac parked in someone's driveway in Berkeley. I had a black-and-white photograph of it and I also had taken a slide, which

I intended just to use as a color reference... I was drawing it and the car wasn't very close to you – it was up in the driveway and it was quarter view and [there was] heavy-duty foreshortening... I had a terrible time trying to get that just right, and I guess that is the clue: trying to get it just right. So out of desperation I projected the slide onto the canvas, which had all been drawn out freehand from the black-and-white photograph to make corrections, and the corrections worked. And I thought, 'Wow. That was a good thing to do.' But I also felt very guilty. (Weinberg, 2004)

Bechtle felt guilty because he was going against his art-school training (because working from photographs was forbidden by his painting teachers). Nevertheless, projecting the slide directly onto canvas helped him to discover new painterly strategies that would, over time, make him one of the most significant figures associated with the Photorealism. The painter works from photographs, which provide Bechtle with detailed scenes of particular moments. Nonetheless, despite their photographic inspiration, he does not merely represent or copy photos but gives heightened significance to the ordinary.

Jonathan Weinberg has explained this aspect showing how the physical characteristics of paintings differ from those of photographs and highlighting that the artist makes subtle changes and modifications. Take, for example, *61 Pontiac* (1968-69) which looks like an enormous photograph. Nonetheless, a closer examination reveals areas that are composed of paint. "The physicality of paint", asserts Weinberg, "makes the

figures and objects in the picture seem more present than they would in a photograph.” (Weinberg, 2005, p. 53) For that reason, his works cannot be reduced to a mechanical transference onto a canvas; they are original approaches to artist’s everyday life.

Using his brush and his colour palette, Bechtle builds up textures and surfaces which traps an ordinary scene such as *61 Pontiac* (1968-1969) or *Portrero Table* (1994), showing its exceptional qualities. Through this paper, I wish to focus on the creative process of painting. Over his career, Bechtle has completed on average four to five paintings per year. He creates each painting in slow time, making all the necessary changes to achieve what he saw in his daily perceptions.

For most of his career, Bechtle’s paintings have pulled our focus from observable details that make the ordinary things extraordinary. “I’m just painting what is available to me, some of the peculiar things that catch my eye”. However, as Michael Auping explains, what the artist finds peculiar in any given scene is often not readily apparent to others. (Auping, 2005, p. 37). He discovers the inspiration while walking or driving the neighbourhoods near his home in San Francisco. Then, he returns with his camera to take photographic “notation”.

The next stage continues at the studio, when the painter projects the photography onto canvas and outlines the contours of forms with a pencil. After that, Bechtle starts a long process of translating that perception of his peculiar eye. Firstly, the artist works with diluted brown paint to establish the presence of various forms. In its early stages, as Michael Aupig explains, paintings look less like a graphic reality than a light-infused

apparition, as we can see in this photograph of the work *Alameda Intersection* in progress. (Aupig, 2005, p. 38) Next, he adds other colours to obtain the bright intensity which characterizes his works, as we can see in the final result.

Through a hard-won process built up over time, brushstroke by brushstroke, the artist paints different layers which gives the apparent uniformity. Therefore, Bechtle uses photographs for the bones of his compositions, but then he creates paintings which try to show how the artist sees things. In order to achieve this, Bechtle uses brushes of various sizes (from 0.3 centimetres to 3 centimetres) and types (from sable to bristle).

Now, it is important to highlight that the process cannot be reduced to mere technique. In an interview made by the SFMOMA in May 2004, the artist recognises that the intensity of the works come from the level of concentration. He defends that this aspect is one of the crucial distinction between creating a painting and copying a photograph. (Bechtle, 2004) Thus, a technique is indispensable but each act has to be consciously, intentionally performed. Bechtle's discoveries are connected to his awareness of his everyday life. His paintings pull our focus from observable details that we absorb unconsciously in daily perception.

The artist fuses technique with thought and feeling, bringing the extraordinary of the ordinary to the surface, subtly magnified, as we can see in his works such as *Sunset Intersection – 40th and Vicente* (1989) or *Jetta* (2003). According to critics of Photorealism, the painter objectively reports the way the world really looks, stripped of the distortions of symbolisms or emotions, using photographs both to structure the image and to describe.

Nevertheless, as I try to expose, and the own artist defends, he does not merely depict reality: “There were times when I would put a disclaimer: I’m not a photorealist.” (Weinberg, 2011, p. 159) He does not want to represent a photograph, but he plays with the light and colour creating an atmosphere in which ordinary objects or buildings have an intense presence. As Michael Auping asserts “Bechtle’s buildings not only catch light but seem to absorb it, giving them a comparably numinous presence”. (Aupig, 2005, p. 39) In contrast to traditional aesthetics his art does not represent contexts that create strangeness, but instead, he makes us more aware of our daily surroundings and focuses our attention on our normal routines and objects through photorealistic style

4. Conclusion

Contributing to the lively debate about the boundaries of everyday aesthetics, I saw the nature of art is not one of knowing how to separate art objects from non-art objects. Rather, I present the experience of Bechtle’s works in terms of a relationship between artist, art object, audience and the surrounding environments of each. Thus, my findings attempt to establish a dialogue between everyday aesthetics and art aesthetics, analysing the aesthetic character of everyday as it is shown in photorealistic paintings.

This is a difficult task because, as Thomas Albright has asserted, the paintings that Robert Bechtle introduced at the Berkeley Gallery in 1968 were sometimes hard to accept. (Allbright, 1985, p. 209) His works seemed

to be blatant imitations of photographs – some of them as indifferently composed, carelessly cropped, and lacking in focus as an amateur's snapshot. Despite it is undeniably his technique, the projection of slides on the canvases can reduce his paintings to mere mechanical reproductions as a photograph itself. Moreover, his particular style can be criticized for being unreal and not accurate. It is difficult to find empty streets as we can see in Bechtle's paintings.

Besides, many specialists defend the aesthetics of everyday as an independent and separate discipline. They try to overcome the narrowing attention to fine art and liberate aesthetics from an exclusive focus on beauty and other Modern western characteristics. For that reason, they think that this kind of relationship supposes a fail in the research and development of this field. However, as I attempt to expose, this kind of dialogue does not only help us to understand Bechtle's work but also to pay attention to daily objects and phenomena, to those qualities that pervade everyday experiences.

In Leddy's words, Robert Bechtle is a true expert in the aesthetic of everyday life, taking pleasure in being in his surroundings and displaying the hidden extraordinary of the ordinary. (Leddy, 2012, p. 51) His work shows those facets of our everyday life that are so familiar we fail even to see them. Regardless of whether we think that he makes extraordinary his quotidian, as Thomas Leddy defends, or he makes an interpretation of his familiar surroundings, his paintings draw upon an experience of lives that are no notable, glamorous or object than our own. Bechtle is interested in real life, and he restores the continuity between art and life by means of

suggesting images of his daily life.

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