

Special issue: Urban sights: visual culture and urban history

San Francisco views: Robert Bechtle and the reformulation of urban vision

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ABSTRACT: When Photorealism arrived on the art scene in the 1960s, it received considerable media attention for its striking illusionism and unparalleled commitment to fusing painting and photography. But many judged the style to be merely retrograde realism disguised by the use of contemporary source photographs or, more harshly, as an unthinking reproduction of capitalist culture – i.e. a kind of toothless Pop art slickly rendered for the masses. Though the style now constitutes a familiar part of the contemporary art world, few have sought to understand or mitigate several decades of critical antipathy and neglect. This essay examines painter Robert Bechtle's work, contra the historic assumption of Photorealism's social irrelevance. Bechtle's images of San Francisco, defined by architecture and automobiles ubiquitous in post-1945 Californian neighbourhoods, present the city without overt commentary. Yet, through this seemingly ordinary iconography, the artist upends deep-rooted urban visual paradigms, linking the traditionally vaunted city centre to its apparently subsidiary suburbs. Bechtle offers the viewer not iconic landmarks or arresting vistas, but rather a way to comprehend how everyday life in the city is informed by significant configurations of residential architecture, under-remarked geographic particularities and historical development that blurs the distinction between centre and periphery. These representational strategies are central to understanding the ways in which the Bay Area – and indeed much of post-war America – is experienced as built environment and social space.

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