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Who is Imitating Whom?

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WHO IS IMITATING WHOM?

Photography and Photo-Realism in Art

2005–2006

19th Annual Sheldon Statewide Exhibition
Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery

University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Who is Imitating Whom?

Photography and Photo-Realism in Art



Laurie Brown, *Red-Trimmea Snake Plant*, 1984, cibachrome print
UNL-E. M. Hall Collection

Photographers create images that look like paintings, and painters make paintings that look like photographs. Who is imitating whom and why?

Long before photography was invented painters who could depict realistic imagery were held in high esteem. When photography was first invented, its ability to capture reality was also greatly admired. Over time, however, its status declined and eventually it was viewed as merely a mechanical tool with little artistic value.

Henry Peach Robinson (1830-1901) popularized the emulation of painting and encouraged artificiality in photography. It was believed that if a photograph were made to look like a painting it would be more acceptable as a fine art form. This approach called pictorialism increased the popularity of photography and Robinson's followers continued to create sentiment and mood in their work.

Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946) further elevated the status of photography when he established *Camera Notes* and the Photo-Secession group. Slowly, museums began collecting and exhibiting photography, as did collectors. Some photographs that were being exhibited were mistaken for paintings, which was considered a compliment to those who saw themselves as pictorialists, but for those who had adopted a pure method of photography it was an insult.

With the invention of photography painters were freed from the need to capture reality resulting in the exploration of abstraction in art. The Abstract Expressionist movement evolved and flourished. The tables began to turn in the 1960s when the Pop Art movement challenged its predecessor by creating recognizable images that made a more direct comment about American popular culture. Pop artists such as Andy Warhol and Ed Ruscha began to incorporate photography into their art. The Photo-Realist movement directly followed in



Imogen Cunningham, *Rubber Plant*, about 1929, silver print
UNL-F. M. Hall Collection



Henry Holmes Smith, *Untitled (Abstraction)*, 1946,
three-color wash off relief print on black and white
UNL-F. M. Hall Collection

the footsteps of Pop Art and took its reliance on and reference to the photograph one step further. Emerging in the 1970s, these artists main objective is to create images of everyday objects that are “photo-real” in their appearance. This exhibition explores why photographers create art that takes on the qualities of painting and why painters go through the painstaking process of creating a painting that looks more like photography than the photograph itself.

Imogen Cunningham began her career as a pictorial photographer using the misty woods around her Seattle home to create moody imagery. However, in 1925 she abandoned this approach to launch her plant series. In *Rubber Plant* she photographed close-up and under intense lighting. The image is cropped and surface quality is accentuated. About her new style she declared that photography “is a way of extreme exactitude...honest, straightforward and free of compromise when it is used purely.”¹

Greater visibility and status gave artists such as Cunningham permission to stretch the capabilities of photography and challenge the norms. Henry Holmes Smith was also a trailblazer in modern photography. Beginning in the 1940s Smith made strides in promoting photography as a form of visual communication. Smith is best known for experimenting with corn syrup and capturing its reaction to light. These qualities are exemplified

in *Untitled (Abstraction)*, an intense composition of color and shape that takes on the appearance of an abstract painting and begs the question, “How did he do it?”

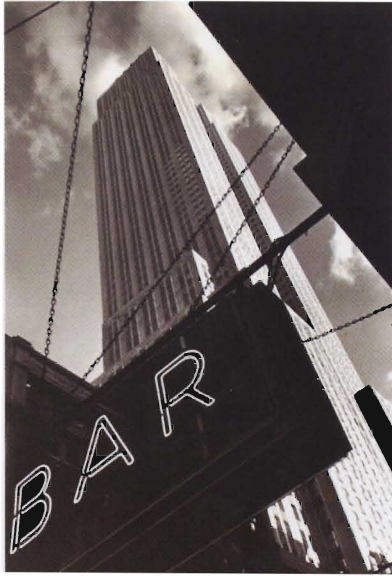
Other artists such as Lawrie Brown and Robert Heinecken followed Smith’s manipulative approach. Rather than utilizing the point-and-shoot method, their focus is in the creative process. Brown, for example, is interested in the psychological effects of altering natural color. She chooses subject matter such as household plants that people associate with natural beauty and then inserts bright, off-putting panels of color over the surface. This accentuates the spatial and color relationships and de-emphasizes the original image of the plant. In *L is for Lemon Slices-4* Heinecken does away with the camera altogether. Using a light sensitive paper he hand-colors his work, using chalk.

While these photographers were focused on manipulation to the point of abstraction, others chose to reflect upon a place and time. More interested in everyday subjects their images appear at first glance straightforward and untouched. Yet, the trained eye finds unique angles and approaches to viewing the world. James Alinder, for example, used a 140-degree panoramic camera in his photograph, *Mount Rushmore*. The viewer’s attention is drawn toward the center of the photo, but it quickly becomes apparent that the edges

fall away from the foreground on both sides. The swing lens on his camera moves across the film plane during exposure creating the panoramic effect that he desires. *Mount Rushmore* was taken during an 18,000-mile trip across the southern, eastern and western parts of the country in Alinder’s endeavor to photograph the modern American environment of the early 1970s.

Dave Read and Garry Winogrand might best be described as street photographers because they capture excerpts from everyday life. They work fast and at times barely look into their viewfinders. They try to be as spontaneous as possible in capturing the shot.

Anton Baumann’s photograph *Bar* accentuates the verticality of the modern skyscraper. Hard-edged lines are emphasized to create a geometric, crisp photograph of the urban landscape. This architectural interest is also present in *Curley’s Diner* by Tom Baril who captures a time and place as well as a medley of light and dark contrasts. Also interested in reflection and light is Murray Alcosser who portrays it in a color print titled *Stick of Gum*. Viewers are quickly drawn in by the sheen of the foil and the precision and sharpness of the photograph. Gone are the elements of the pictorial photograph described earlier. As a matter of fact, these images could be considered just the opposite. Furthermore, by including words in the images and by utilizing popular culture products



Anton F. Baumann, *bar*, not dated, silver print
UNL—Gift of the Lincoln Camera Club



Murray Alcosser, *Stick of Gum*, 1974, type C color print
NAA—Funding by National Endowment for the Arts

such as chewing gum, these photographs take on the feel of Pop Art.

Photo-Realism succeeded Pop Art by utilizing the photograph for copying, enlarging and transferring the photographic image from a slide to a canvas surface. One of the characteristics of photorealism is to exaggerate reality. It involves close attention to detail, bringing into sharp focus highlighted elements and blurring out other details. The results of such realistic images are that they are often mistaken for photographs. A complete turnaround has occurred from the time viewers saw artists wanting to create photographs that look like paintings to artists who aspire to create a painting that looks like a photograph. And yet one might consider that these paintings are “more real than real.”²

Photo-Realist imagery lures the viewer in by its recognizable and therefore inviting qualities. However, upon closer inspection, one discovers a technique that is used to solve a problem that has long vexed photographers: in a photograph, the space is flattened between objects in the foreground and in the background. By combining several photographs with different depths of field, Photo-Realists can create an image where this conflict is resolved. It could be argued that this “super real” image is so altered and exaggerated that it is too real. What at first appears representational is actually abstract in

nature where “fact and illusion are activated equally.”³

Artist Audrey Flack painted with the Abstract Expressionists in the 1950s. Today, she considers works such as *Banana Split* as “highly abstract and formalist.”⁴ They are also symbolic. Her food imagery is depicted in a very sensuous fashion but at the same time one in which it becomes an allegory for greed. Flack can spend months setting up a still-life composition to be photographed, which is then projected onto a canvas, taped off and air-brush painted.

Like Flack, Don Eddy makes appearances more seductive and stimulating than they really are. His images are fragmented and distorted to the point of absurdity. In his attempts to escape the banality of the modern world he transforms objects into sacred icons. According to Donald Kuspit, Eddy “... creates a higher meaning where there is none, overcoming the unconscious feeling of meaninglessness that haunts modern secular society.”⁵

Chuck Close has been associated with both Pop Art and Photo-Realism yet his method and technique do not follow the norms of these movements. Each small grid that Close produces is a little abstract painting of circles, squiggles or squares of color. When placed together, these grids form a face. His current style might be considered



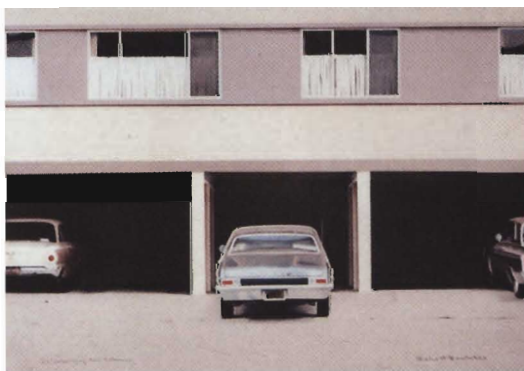
Audrey L. Flack, *Banana Split*, about 1979, lithograph, screenprint, embossing
UNL-F. M. Hall Collection



Richard Estes, *Flughafen*, 1981, silkscreen
UNL-F. M. Hall Collection



Richard McLean, *Untitled*, 1968, offset lithograph
UNL–F. M. Hall Collection



Robert Bechtle, '68 Nova, 1972, five-color lithograph
UNL–Thomas P. Coleman Memorial

a mix of abstract and representational. *Phil* is a lithograph but is based on a grid system, similar to that used in his paintings.

Although many try to relate Photo-Realism to advertising and illustrations, Robert Cottingham and Richard Estes are the only two major Photo-Realist artists who are involved in commercial art. Influenced by Pop artists such as Robert Indiana who incorporate words in their art, Cottingham grew interested in street signs and advertisements when he moved to Los Angeles. After an extremely complex series of steps beginning with films and photographs of city scenes, Cottingham creates works that are not photo-real in appearance but nearly abstract in the patterns, lines and shapes. Estes is also interested in the abstract. He does not project slides or grid-off photographs but redraws and moves things around so that his final piece no longer resembles a photograph. About his art Estes states, “the abstract quality of reality is far more exciting than most of the abstract painting that I see.”⁶

While Estes avoids the figure because of its emotional associations, Richard McLean’s approach is to focus on one very symbolic subject, the horse. Since 1973 he has been taking his own photographs. Because the camera cannot take both close-up and far away, McLean like other Photo-Real artists will combine

numerous photographs to create an image where background, mid-ground and foreground are all in focus.

About his work, Photo-Realist Robert Bechtle states: “Pop Art led to an awareness of commercial art techniques...which is where the license for use of photographs and projections came for me.”⁷ In the 1960s Bechtle started to focus on cars as subject matter. He considered it a still-life object that was “fresh.”⁸ Bechtle attempts to maintain a neutral point of view. Objects are placed in middle ground. There is no extreme focus and he uses an even light and drab colors. Observation and objectivity are Bechtle’s goals. He minimizes artfulness to encourage the viewers to respond directly to the object or subject matter. Bechtle states: “Even if the finished painting reminds us of a photograph, that is close enough. Since we tend to believe in the veracity of the camera. ...most of the choices are made when the photograph is taken. I am interested in their ordinariness-their invisibility through familiarity...”⁹ While early photographers wanted to create photographs that would be considered art, painters like Bechtle want to paint in a way that has no style, to paint things the way they look, in his words to create, “sort of non-art.”¹⁰

With Bechtle we see an attitude whereby it doesn’t matter whether the viewer sees the work as a photograph or a painting. Who is imitating

whom is no longer the issue. That the viewer recognizes the subject, gets absorbed in the familiar and is interested in the work of art is good enough for him.

Sharon L. Kennedy-Gustafson
Sheldon Statewide Coordinator

Endnotes

¹ Anita V. Mozley, Contemporary Photographers, eds. George Walsh, Colin Naylor, Michael Held (New York: St. Martins Press, nd), p.173.

² Audrey Flack On Painting ed. Margaret L. Kaplan (New York, Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1981), p.29.

³ *ibid*

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ Donald Kuspit, Don Eddy The Art of Paradox (New York; Hudson Hills Press, 2002), p.18.

⁶ John Arthur, Richard Estes: The Urban Landscape (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts and New York Graphic Society, 1978), p.40.

⁷ Louis Meisel, Photorealism (New York, Abradale Press, Harry N. Abrams, 1989) p.25.

⁸ San Francisco Chronicle, Datebook-Section E, Feb. 10, 2005, p.E-7.

⁹ Meisel, p.27.

¹⁰ San Francisco Chronicle, p.E-7.

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Murray Alcosser
Stick of Gum, 1974
type C color print, 19 ³/₈ x 13”
NAA—Funding from the National
Endowment for the Arts



James Alinder
*Mt. Rushmore, Black Hills, South
Dakota*, 1971
silver print, 8 ³/₁₆ x 17 ⁷/₈”
UNL—F. M. Hall Collection



John Baeder
American Grill, 1975
two-color lithograph
12 ⁹/₁₆ x 17 ¹⁵/₁₆”
UNL—Thomas P. Coleman Memorial



Tom Baril
Curley's Diner, 1982
silver print, 15 ³/₈ x 19 ¹/₂”
UNL—Gift of the artist



Anton F. Baumann
Bar, not dated
silver print, 8 ¹³/₁₆ x 6”
UNL—Gift of the Lincoln Camera Club



Robert Bechtle
'68 Nova, 1972
five-color lithograph, 24 x 33 ⁷/₈”
UNL—Thomas P. Coleman Memorial



Lawrie Brown
Red-Trimmed Snake Plant, 1984
cibachrome print, 15 ¹/₈ x 19 ¹/₈”
UNL—F. M. Hall Collection



Jim Butkus
Untitled (Color Bars), not dated
ektacolor print, 16 x 20”
UNL—F. M. Hall Collection



Chuck Close
Phil (from the MOMA Rubberstamp
portfolio)
lithograph, 7 ¹/₈ x 5 ⁵/₈”
UNL—F. M. Hall Collection



Robert Cottingham
Candy, 1984
pochoir, 20 ¹/₂ x 20 ⁵/₈”
UNL—James E. M. and Helen Thomson
Acquisition Trust



Imogen Cunningham
Rubber Plant, about 1929
 silver print, 13 ³/₁₆ x 10 ¹/₈"
 UNL–F. M. Hall Collection



Don Eddy
715 Lexington, 1974
 acrylic on canvas, 40 x 48"
 NAA–Thomas C. Woods Memorial



Richard Estes
Flughafen, 1981
 silkscreen, 14 x 20"
 UNL–F. M. Hall Collection



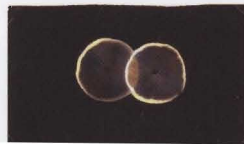
Audrey L. Flack
Banana Split, about 1979
 lithograph, screenprint, embossin,
 18 ¹/₈ x 24 ³/₁₆"
 UNL–F. M. Hall Collection



Ralph Goings
Pie Case, 1975
 oil on canvas, 24 x 34 ¹/₈"
 NAA–Nelle Cochrane Woods Memorial



Robert Heinecken
L is for Lemon Slices - 4, 1971
 photogram with chalk hand-coloring,
 4 ¹³/₁₆ x 7 ⁷/₈"
 NAA funding from the National Endowment
 for the Arts



Richard McLean
Untitled, 1968
 offset lithograph, 19 ¹³/₁₆ x 24 ¹/₈"
 UNL–F. M. Hall Collection



Peter David Tyler Monson
Coke Bottles, not dated
 gelatin silver print, 8 ¹/₁₆ x 10 ³/₈"
 UNL–Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Norman A. Geske



Richard Newman
Echos of Affection, 1994
 stoneware clay, iron oxide pigment,
 alkyd resin, 9 x 8 x 3 ¹/₂"
 UNL–Mercedes A. Augustine Acquisition
 Trust



Dave Read
Charleston, S.C., 1985
 silver print, 11 x 13 ¹⁵/₁₆"
 UNL–Gift of the artist



Neal Slavin
*New York City Fire Department,
 Engine Company*
 type C color print
 10 ¹/₂ x 13 ¹¹/₁₆"
 NAA–Funding from the National
 Endowment for the Arts



Henry Holmes Smith
Untitled (Abstraction), 1946
three-color wash off relief print on
black and white, 9 1/8 x 5 3/4"
UNL-F. M. Hall Collection



Larry Stark
Interstate Highway 91, Connecticut,
1969
photo silkscreen, 14 3/4 x 19 1/4"
UNL-F. M. Hall Collection



James Torlakson
Trailer #92, 1975
watercolor on Arches paper
18 3/4 x 26 3/8"
UNL-Gift of Jacques Koek, Chicago, IL



Garry Winogrand
Paris, 1967
silver print, 9 x 13 1/2"
UNL-F. M. Hall Collection



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| <input type="checkbox"/> \$45 Senior/Dual | |

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Who is Imitating Whom? Photography and Photo-Realism in Art

Exhibition Schedule

June 14-August 14, 2005 – Lincoln-Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery

August 22-September 16, 2005 – Chadron State College

October 12-November 13, 2005 – North Platte, McKinley Center
Local Sponsors: NebraskaLand National Bank, TierOne, North Platte Telegraph, Ross Perry Motors, Art Study League

November 15-December 15, 2005 – TBA

January 6-February 5, 2006 – York, Cornerstone Bank
Local Sponsors: Cornerstone Bank

February 7-March 5, 2006 – McCook, High Plains Museum
Local Sponsors: McCook Arts Council

March 7-April 9, 2006 – Grand Island, Stuhr Museum
Local Sponsors: Home Federal Bank, Grand Island Public Schools, Moonshell Arts and Humanities Council

April 11-May 14, 2006 – Columbus Art Gallery
Local Sponsors: Robert C. and Linda Labenz, Columbus Bank and Trust Company

May 16-June 18, 2006 – Nebraska City, Morton-James Public Library

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