

GLADSTONE

Lloyd Wise, "Robert Bechtle," *Artforum*, March 1, 2014

ARTFORUM

Robert Bechtle

GLADSTONE GALLERY

By now, the once-provocative innovations of Photorealism are so embedded in contemporary art that they barely register at all. Take a photographic image, paint it faithfully from a projected slide: This method is ubiquitous, deployed in a wide range of ways to a variety of effects. So it is surprising to be reminded just how offensive this practice once was. Promulgated by OK Harris gallery in the late 1960s, Photorealism, for artists such as Richard Estes, Ralph Goings, or John Baeder, was a logical extension of Pop art. But, at that moment of high Minimalism and Conceptualism, its emphasis on representation felt cloying and docile—far too commercial, and far too easy. No doubt recent years have looked on this movement more kindly. A major survey of such work, "*Hyperréalismes USA, 1965–75*," took place at the Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain in Strasbourg, France, in 2003, and the 2008 Whitney Biennial prominently featured the work of Robert Bechtle, one of Photorealism's longest-practicing figures and the subject of this exhibition at Gladstone.

The show focused on works on paper made between 2007 and 2013. There were eight watercolors and eight drawings (all but one in charcoal) and one large oil painting. All of the images displayed a clear midday light, and nearly all of them featured a car or cars parked on the suburban-looking streets, mostly around the artist's home in the Potrero Hill neighborhood of San Francisco, but also in the nearby town of Alameda, California, and near the artist's summer home in Westport Point, Massachusetts. But while the subject matter was monotonous, the compositions were not: *Six Cars on 20th Street*, 2007, portrays the



Robert Bechtle, *Bob's Sebring*, 2011, oil on linen, 41 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 59 $\frac{1}{2}$ ".

titular scene from what looks like the middle of the road; *Down Arkansas Street*, 2009, pictures a pickup truck and half of an otherwise cropped-out sedan from the top of a hill; several of the drawings show cars from a perspective directly across the street. What is remarkable about these images is that absolutely nothing stands out. The photographs upon which they are based appear to have been carefully selected for their extreme ordinariness: They are like glimpses out the car window, or out one's front door. These are the visual margins of life.

Encountering such images of normalcy in an art context invariably raises the question of critique, yet we look, fruitlessly, for any indictment of suburban conformity, any acid bite of irony. Dan Graham's *Homes for America* this is not. Bechtle's works evince an unflagging empathy, which comes across simply by virtue of their limpid verisimilitude, their attention to the overlooked. They recall a sensibility embodied in the recent films of Alexander Payne, a director who lavishes loving attention on the unglamorous pockets of American middle-class existence, employing oblique, unpicturesque shots of side streets and strip-mall parking lots as poignant backdrops for complicated tales of human striving and sadness.

In Bechtle's images, there is no drama, no narrative, yet a feeling of melancholy pervades the work. The paintings' detail reveals myriad textures; these nuances serve, seemingly, as an allegory for depth and complexity within the superficially banal. In the single oil painting, a self-portrait (*Bob's Sebring*, 2011), the artist portrays himself beside a parked midrange Chrysler convertible in a nondescript suburban driveway, glowering restlessly and looking positively Walter White-like with his beard and bald head. His baggy khakis, tucked-in T-shirt, and hunched pose and the garage's 1970s-brown wood siding contrast with the car itself, which, with its aqueous, reflective curves and leather interior, comes off as a glittering, aspirational toy. I can think of no image that more crisply illustrates the discomfort felt when the optimistic promise of American consumerism fails to thrive in our schlubby, unexceptional lives; this is the fantasy of 1960s suburbia deflated by a clear-eyed realism that feels perfectly keyed to our recessionary age.

—Lloyd Wise