1982

The Photograph and Superrealism

Christopher Stokes

Eastern Illinois University

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THE PHOTOGRAPH AND SUPERREALISM

(TITLE)

BY

CHRISTOPHER STOKES

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ART

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1982
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THE PHOTOGRAPH AND SUPERREALISM

By

Christopher Stokes
B.A. in Art, Eastern Illinois University
1979

ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of
Arts in Art at the Graduate School of
Eastern Illinois University

CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1982

ABSTRACT

In 1968 an exhibition entitled "Realism Now" was held
at Vassar College under the direction of Linda Nochlin, a
noted art historian and professor at the school. The
exhibition sought to present a cross-view of recent
American painting in the realistic mode. Included in the
catalog were twenty-five artists including Jack Beal,
Robert Bechtle, Richard Estes, Alex Katz, Alfred Leslie,
Malcom Morely and Philip Pearlstein, as well as many
other artists who, at the time, were relatively unknown.
The exhibition generated a great deal of attention, not
only because of its recognition of contemporary
representational painting as an influential movement, but
also because of its provocative and elusive title.

A year after the Vassar exhibition the Milwaukee Art
Center staged a show involving seventeen of these same
artists and titled it "New Realism." A similar exhibition
was mounted at the Whitney Museum in 1970 entitled "Twenty
Two Realists," and the representational image was back
again to stay.

After these exhibits a variety of terms were coined to
name the many different styles that fell under the umbrella
term of realism. Photo-realism, New Realism, Sharp-focus
Realism and Superrealism suddenly found their way into the

literature of art criticism, and the need to define and study this new trend was quickly made necessary.

Within each designated school of painting there are as many different ideas about art and how it should be approached as their are artists in that school. With the Superrealists it is no exception. I have found the art of Chuck Close, Richard Estes and Audrey Flack to be good examples of the leading trains of thought in Superrealism. Close uses the photograph as a subject while Estes sees the photograph as basically a tool in painting. Flack uses the photograph as a starting point for symbollist work. It is within the ideas of these three different styles that Superrealism derives much of its appeal. It is the common technique which holds us in fascination.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am greatly indebted to the members of my committee, Carl Wilen, Dick Moldroski and Carl Shull for their encouragement and support throughout my entire collegiate career.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

INTRODUCTION

In 1968 an exhibition entitled "Realism Now" was held at Vassar College under the direction of Linda Nochlin, a noted art historian and professor at the school. The exhibition sought to present a cross-view of recent American painting in the realistic mode. Included in the catalog were twenty-five artists including Jack Beal, Robert Bechtle, Richard Estes, Alex Katz, Alfred Leslie, Malcom Morely and Philip Pearlstein, as well as many other artists who, at the time, were relatively unknown. The exhibition generated a great deal of attention, not only because of its recognition of contemporary representational painting as an influential movement, but also because of its provocative and elusive title.

The term "realism" has always been a controversial one in the field of art. The question of what is real in art has never been given a definitive answer. Realism in painting is somewhat relative to the artist's own definition. Some nonrepresentational painters consider themselves realists for they make no attempt to hide the fact of their medium. Their subject is paint and color and therefore they are most "real" in its' interpretation. However, the word realism in painting is generally meant as an objective, representational image on a two

dimensional surface. Specifically, Realism, as a style in painting (defined by Nochlin three years later in her book Realism) is "the truthful, objective and impartial representation of the real world, based on meticulous observation of contemporary life."[1]

A year after the Vassar exhibition the Milwaukee Art Center staged a show involving seventeen of these same artists and titled it "New Realism." A similar exhibition was mounted at the Whitney Museum in 1970 entitled "Twenty-Two Realists," and the representational image was back again to stay.

After these exhibits a variety of terms were coined to name the many different styles that fell under the umbrella term of realism. Photo-realism, New Realism, Sharp-focus Realism and Superrealism suddenly found their way into the literature of art criticism, and the need to define and study this new trend was quickly made necessary.

There is a significant difference between an artist who paints from objects before him and one who utilizes photographic images of his subjects. The former must interpret his subject. His studying of the objects over a period of time long enough to complete the painting cannot help but be reflected in the manner in which he portrays them. An attempt by him to record a momentary instant

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[1]Linda Nochlin, Realism (New York: Penguin Books Inc., 1971), p. 13.

will always appear timeless because the artist cannot escape his own point of view of the subject. He knows the before and after.[2] The photograph can capture an instant in time, and because it is a product of a machine it has no point of view about the subject it records. The painter who works from the photograph is able to capture the momentary, the aspects of life which we all encounter yet rarely see. The two artists may each work from the same representational image, yet the point of view of each is different. One interprets and the other records.

An objective, neutral view of the realistic world is a valid one for the photo-realists who delight in the pure joy of looking. An object looked upon requires no prior judgement or symbols attached to it, but may stand as a testimonial to its' own formal, tactile and sensorial qualities. This point of view is shared with the Abstract Expressionists who manipulated paint in much the same way. Richard Estes believes that realism is "a cold, abstract way of looking at things without any comment or commitment."[3] This same attitude is shared by many of the other photo-realists, all of whom wish to minimize the

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[2]Richard Estes, quoted in Robert Hughes, "The Realist as Corn God," _Time_, (January 31, 1972), 50.

[3]Richard Estes, quoted in William C. Seitz, "The Real and the Artificial: Painting of the New Environment," _Art in America_, (November-December, 1972), 61.

individual artist's point of view to best display the
visual magic of the everyday world.

These new realists were born out of the pre-packaged,
media-oriented culture in which we all live. As mass-
communication becomes a part of life, cultures cease to be
different as distances grow but become more and more
similar as like images invade each of our senses. We read
the same words whether we are in New York or California.
We see the same movies, hear the same music and buy the
same products day to day. There is no escaping the
deindividualization of modern society. An artist may
either attempt to escape the cultural situation entirely by
"seeking a new wilderness," or embracing it as his own and
creating an art which reflects his society.[4] The Pop
artists used the popular images as a means of expressing
their fascination and distain with the disposible society.
A strong element of satire was evident in their work. The
post-Pop realists are themselves children of the
modernistic society. They deliver no judgement on its
present state. Machine-like, they are the aesthetic
answer to the culture which they so faithfully record.

Within each designated school of painting there are as
many different ideas about art and how it should be

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[4]Joshua C. Taylor, America as Art (Washington:
Smithsonian Institution Press, 1976), p. 210.

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NOTES ON THE ORIGINS OF SUPERREALISM

The history of realism in painting is a long one stretching back to the time of the cave paintings in France and Spain. Prehistoric man left us with portraits of bison and other animals, painted in bright colors in the dark recesses of the stone caves. Since that time man has become more and more sophisticated but the desire to record the literal environment has remained.

Methods of relating visual stimulus have changed over the centuries. Accepted symbols have come and gone. Gradually artists acquired the knowledge of perspective and foreshortening. An a system of transcribing the real world onto a two dimensional support, whether canvas or some other type of surface, was eventually evolved.

Man has always sought aid through the assistance of machines designed with the purpose of making things easier for him. This has been no less true in art than in other fields. For the accurate recording of external reality, the invention of the camera obscura was a tremendous help. For the first time artists were able to study the actual transformation of the real visual environment onto a flat, two dimensional plane.

The camera obscura was developed in the early

Renaissance and was quickly found to be useful as an aid
to painting and drawing. This box-like contraption
consisted of a dark chamber with a lens or opening through
which an image could be projected in natural colors onto
an opposite surface. The Dutch painter Jan Vermeer used
it to a great extent as did Leonardo da Vinci, and other
important artists who saw its' value as a painting tool.
Louis Daguerre, a French artist, used it to help him paint
realistic landscapes and do design scenery for the
theatre. It was his investigation into the possibility of
recording a permanent image from the camera obscura which
led to the first daguerreotype, a forerunner of the
photograph, in 1839.

Immediately following the invention of photography an
outcry went up among many artists who saw the camera as a
potential rival and the beginning of the end for painting.
However, other artists saw the camera as a great tool for
studio painting. Some of the leading French artists of
the period following the cameras' invention learned the
process of photography in order to aid their painting and
drawing. Eugene Delacroix, the Romantic painter with the
most famous reputation at the time, took an immediate
interest in photography and used it whenever he could,
regretting that it hadn't come into being in the early
stage of his career. Jean-Dominique Ingres found it to be
a great help in the field of portrait painting. The

realism of Gustave Courbet was greatly influenced by the photograph.

One hundred and forty years after the invention of photography it is evident that painting did not die as a result of it. It can probably be said that photography greatly influenced the direction of painting because the artist, searching for a more personal means of expression in retaliation to the camera, was no longer tied to the strict realistic image. It is interesting to note that Impressionism, the first notable step on the ladder to twentieth century nonrepresentational painting, began at just about the time of the growing popularity of photography.

Alongside these subsequent movements in the major directions of painting in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, traditional representational painting continued. Because of its' universal appeal to the art buying public it never truely went out of fashion. Representational painting has a great ability to convey human emotion, which is what the artist, above all, attempts to do. With the representational image in painting styles may vary from artist to artist. Subject matter, personal technique and point of view will always separate the style of one painter from that of another. Representational painting is less a style than a means of expression. Therefore, there can be no real return to

representational painting for it has never been away from the art scene. A return denotes a particular style. Realism (as defined by Linda Nochlin as a style of the late nineteenth century[5]) can be cited as a distinct style and can, therefore, be returned to. However, the representational image may contain so many different ideas and types that it will always have a certain amount of appeal for artists and the public. This is evident when different styles of representational painting (leading up to Superrealism) are seen coinciding with the movement towards a modern abstract art.

The Realism of Courbet and Edouard Manet proceeded the Impressionists who continued to work with the representational image. Subsequent artists up to and including the Cubists still based their work on the recognizable object. When the Russian artist Wassily Kandinsky began painting his nonrepresentational works he opened up vistas for a new generation of artists. Yet still, the representational image remained on the art scene.

In the period after the First World War Surrealism relied on a new interpretation of reality, a dream-like world where recognizable objects were placed in a non-conventional manner alongside one another. The Social

[5]Linda Nochlin, Realism (New York: Penguin Books Inc., 1971), p. 13.

Realism of the 1930's, with its' basic communicative power to the masses of people, made expression in the world wide depression an important voice. These movements were still going strong when the two primary influences of Superrealism began to be seen in America, Abstract Expressionism and Pop art.

Abstract Expressionism emerged in the post World War Two period as the major new movement in painting. The style was concerned with the breaking down of all barriers which stood between the artist and the raw, emotional power in creativity. These action painters believed that basic human emotion was universal and it was not necessary for it to be triggered by the representational image alone. As music has a language of its' own so must it be possible for painters to have their own creative vocabulary. The artists threw and dripped paint, seeking to present human emotion using color, texture and shape. The shock and suprise of seeing tremendous canvases bathed in emotive color and form led to quite a successful communication between artist and viewer. Powerful artists such as Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollack and Franz Kline led a new happening which bypassed the intellectual side of painting and went straight to the heart. Never had painting been so honest, so personal, and so inherantly appealing to other artists for this movement made the material, the lifeblood of the painter, its' one and only

subject.

Abstract Expressionism was the dominant style in painting at the end of the 1950's. Its' reactionary beginning had evolved into a critically accepted statement. As more and more artists joined the ranks, the style became a universal symbol for the individual creative soul. But when individuality floods the market a simularity of souls waters down the effect intended. By the early 1960's it was getting very hard to do something new in the style. Pop art was an immediate reaction to this.

When Pop art first hit the galleries people thought the artists were kidding, and they were right. The ironic irreverance which sparked the artists ultimately watered them down when they began to take themselves and their art too seriously. Originally the movement was in sharp retaliation against the manner of Abstract Expressionism. They thought it ironic that the artists most able to interpret society were becoming lost in an individual world of paint and private emotion. The everyday world was rapidly changing. Never before had such a pre-packaged, advertisement, photographic, mass-media environment been so apparent. Pop art commented on this man-made environment of chrome and cardboard. It poked fun at it and also at the state of an art which practised individual expression at the price of neglecting the mundane and overly packaged world. Pop art, which brought

back to the fore the carefully painted representational image, was destined to be called reactionary after more than a decade and a half or the wildness of Expressionism. This irony lasted until the Pop statement was made clear. After everyone got the message the art of Pop became as cumbersome and as mundane as the objects it originally satirized.

Superrealism developed directly from Pop art. The critical success of Pop made it very simple for people to accept the realistic mode of the new style. Yet most critics likened it too much to Pop. It is true that many of the original Superrealists painted Pop art at one time but the style drew upon a variety of different sources. It was certainly not a later stage of Pop but a unique style which had its' roots in a number of movements including Abstract Expressionism and nineteenth century Realism.

When Malcom Morely, in the middle of the Pop art movement, began painting facsimilies of luxury liners from post cards, he produced the first photo-realist images. Like Pop art, the subject matter was mundane and trite, a nickle post card, cheaply produced for mass distribution. But the manner in which Morely presented this subject separated it from Pop. Pop made you think of the subject. The painting was a means of clarifying that subject for presentation to the viewer. But Morely really had no

Malcom Morely
<u>S.S. Rotterdam</u>

1966
60 X 84"
liquitex on canvas

interest in his subject. His paintings were not of luxury liners, but of and about photographs of these images. Morely was interested soley in producing a two-dimensional painting of an already existing two-dimensional photograph. The subject matter was unimportant. Although his paintings may seem directly involved with the ideas inherant in traditional realism, his work brought up a number of interesting new ideas. His paintings of post cards echoed a vision of reality shared by all of us in a world dominated with the printed and recorded message. We are so accustomed to seeing photographically that we rarely question whether or not the camera can really give us a true image of reality.

People who have never been to Paris, France may, none-the-less, have a visual image of the city reinforced by any number of photographic or cinematic scenes. Motion pictures are taken to be true images of the world and therefore influence our way of comprehending it. Movie stars who we have never seen and will likely never see in person are as familiar to us as members of our own family. But do these images have anything to do with reality? If Times Square in New York City is real, can a photograph of Times Square be as real, or is it merely an interpretation (given a mechanical and objective one) of reality? When Malcom Morely painted his picture post cards (and he left white borders around them to further emphasize the

photographic element) he was painting from a once removed image, thereby giving us a twice removed "reality."

Like Abstract Expressionism this new realism is concerned with the process of looking, of enjoying a painted surface irregardless of its' subject. Superrealists find their subject matter in many different areas. Some paint reflections, others the urban environment. Painters like Chuck Close and Ralph Goings begin to bring the human element into their work. The common bond between them all is their willingness to see in everyday objects the prospect of art. Their paintings open up new vistas for us to see richness and variety in all that surrounds us. To see beauty in every shape, every color and texture, is what Superrealism is about. Like the Expressionists before them they delight in the purely visual world, the world where no rules govern what is or is not art.

Complete objectivity towards subject matter is what Superrealism attempts to do. To be subjective is to have a point of view about what an artist paints. By eliminating as much of the painters' personal feelings about the subject the subjects' true being becomes the important point. A painting of reflections in an automobile windshield is a record of that particular vision, and not the artists' particular subjective interpretation of it. It is visual stimulation alone, with no personal statement, no artful tricks. It is a

visual record for the purely visual world.

This striving for a completely objective style echoes
the action painters who strove for total subjectivity in
their work. The action painters told no stories in their
paintings. They were guided by their desire to express
themselves in the material they chose to use. They
celebrated paint and color and reveled in the pure joy of
manipulating it. As a purely visual process it was very
exciting. On the opposite spectrum, the Superrealist
tells no stories, yet finds inspiration in the patterns of
an everyday visual world. His desire is also to explore
visual phenomenon. The camera helps him to isolate his
subject. Its' exactness keeps him on target during the
process of painting. So often does a Superrealist talk of
the abstract qualities in his work. Richard Estes defines
realism as "a cold, abstract way of looking at things,
without any comment or commitment."[6] Malcom Morely says
simply, "There is only abstract painting."[7] In all truely
visual works we are seeing something familiar in a new way,
minus our normal attitudes on the seemingly mundaness of
the subject. And we are delighted.

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[6]Richard Estes, quoted in William C. Seitz, "The
Real and the Artificial: Painting of the New Environment,"
Art in America, (November-December, 1972), 61.

[7]Malcom Morely, quoted in John Loring,
"Photographic Illusionist Prints," Arts Magazine,
(February, 1974), 42.

THE PHOTOGRAPH AS SUBJECT: CHUCK CLOSE

The world of Chuck Close is one of gargantuan size.
His paintings often measure up to 7' by 9', but it is not
the size alone which dwarfs us in comparison, but that of
his subject, the human head. We are confronted with his
subject matter in a way which we are unaccustomed to
seeing it. Because of this we begin to see it in an
altogether different way. Learning to look, to see things
in a new way,is what the work of Chuck Close is all about.

Of all the photo-realists, Close is, perhaps, the
most technical in his approach to art and also the most
dependent on the photograph as a source for his painting.
His aim is to reproduce the effects of the photograph
itself, to paint as a camera sees. He imposes incredible
limits and restrictions on his work in order to keep on
target with this initial goal.

As a student at the University of Washington in
Seattle and the graduate school at Yale, Close was well
exposed to the period art of the late 1950's and early
1960's. Close began working photographically in 1967,
right after the advent and acceptance of Pop art. Bored
with abstract art and uninterested in the Pop statement
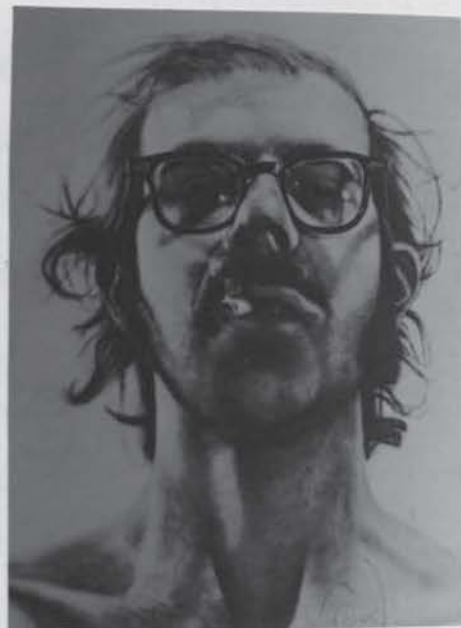he searched for a subject matter and technique which would

present him with particular problems to solve. It was
after leaving school that Close sought a style of painting
which was new and that interested his keenly analytical
mind. He wanted to work as systematically as possible to
find a manner of painting which corresponded with the way
the visual world appeared to people in the modern world.
The one subject which was held in common with everyone was
the mechanical vision of the photograph. What made this
subject unique, and so interesting for Close as an
artist, was how readily people accepted this visual world
of the camera as real.

Close's choice of subject matter within the
photographs he would paint was not an arbitrary one. He
chose to paint the figure because of the demands readily
inherant in it. With other subjects it would be easier to
stray from the literal photographic source--and get away
with it. This is not true with the human portrait. If
something is off, we sense it because we are so familiar
with the subject. Painting the portrait places certain
restrictions on a painter. Within these restrictions, and
because of them, Close has perfected a style and technique
which is uniquely his own.

To begin with, Close selects a person who is unfamiliar
to the general public. Personal friends of the artist are
chosen because his familiarity with the sitter further
emphasizes the need for a distinct likeness. He deliberately

Chuck Close
<u>Self Portrait</u>

1968
90 X 100"
acrylic on canvas

avoids painting celebrities or anyone who may be recognizable to the public for their familiarity would distract from the artists' original intent--to paint the human landscape.

Close paints large in order to camouflage the subject as he paints so that he may remain neutral in its transformation from photograph to canvas. He begins by gridding off an 8" by 10" photograph and then transferring the image to the canvas by means of copying each square separately. With this manner he is assured of the correct proportion and perspective that is his ultimate aim. The enlarged portrait also serves another purpose for the artist. Because of its tremendous size the head can be painted one square at a time, making sure that every detail is accurately recorded. Using this technique it is suprising how abstract his actual painting can be for each square is a distinct composition in and of itself. When confronted with a portrait as large as a Close painting the viewer cannot help but see and react to the various textures and abstract patterns of the face. These are things that the viewer normally does not see in a regular sized portrait. The face becomes almost an abstraction becouse of its' tremendous surface and because of the unique sensation of seeing such a familiar subject blown up to an incredible size.

Close further enhances our reaction to the portrait

by limiting his palette to only black. This is in
reference to the acquired normality of seeing black and
white photographs and interpreting them to be real. When
seen at the size Close paints them, however, they present
a different situation altogether. When seen from a
distance the paintings look like what they are derived
from, black and white photographs (this is especially
true when the artists' work is reproduced in book and
magazine illustrations). Seen up close they present a
unique experience to the viewer, an abstraction within a
photographically "real" painting.

Close sees the camera as an extraordinary instrument
with its' ability to disseminate how things are seen. He
readily states that the camera's vision is not our own
vision but that this is oftentimes masked by its'
application and abundance in the everyday world. The
photograph is a universal visual language. Photographic
images abound the world in ever increasing numbers. This
increased dependency on the visual language has influenced
the way in which we interpret reality. It has also
influenced the way in which we think we see. Close
deliberately distorts his photographic sources,
emphasizing the different ways the camera lens sees in
comparison with the human eye. The camera is capable of
focusing on everything or nothing. It can distort
perspective and flatten or exaggerate form. A Close

Chuck Close
John

1971-72
90 X 100"
acrylic on canvas

painting will capatilize on the camera's strengths and weaknesses as a "seeing" instrument.

Close takes his own photographs using an 8 by 10 camera. Although the lens which would make the fewer distortions and see most like the human eye would be the 160 mm lens, Close chooses to use the 190 mm lens.[8] This results in a comparably distorted view. He uses a very shallow depth of field in order to have parts of the photograph in focus and others in a blur. In all of his photographs he focuses on the eyes of the sitter and on the facial plane these are set on. This sets the tip of the nose in front of the picture plane and the ears and hair on the top of the head in back of it. These are both, subsequently, out of focus. Right away we are made aware of the dissimularities in the way we see and the way the camera lens sees. The human eye compensates and sees everything as a whole unit. The camera can be much more particular. It has no preconceptions about the human head and therefore can see it as just another object, something a human cannot do. With the portrait as subject matter the camera can be much more objective than the human eye. Attempting to duplicate this asset of the camera Close tries to paint each area of the canvas with as few pre-conceptions about the subject as possible. He says,

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[8] William Dyckes, "The Photo as Subject, The Paintings and Drawings of Chuck Close," _Arts Magazine_, (February, 1974), 30.

"looking at the eye is one thing and looking at the cheek another, but I have always tried to have the same attitude towards both of them. But because of the nature of things I had to function differently. The act of making an eyelash with one long stroke is not the same as making a cheek. So as much as I was interested in sameness, there was still a need to function differently depending on what I was doing. But by breaking it down this way I can make the act of painting exactly the same all the way through."[9]
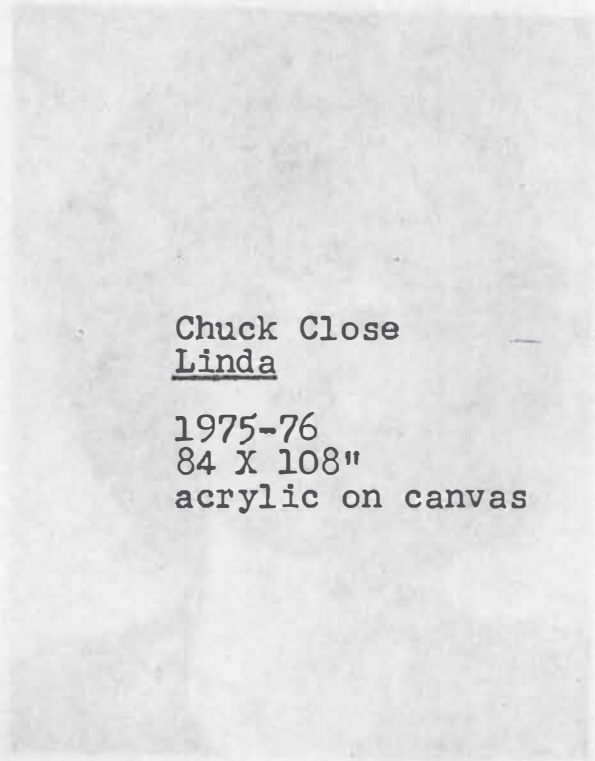
Close works with an airbrush, painting one square at a time. He begins at the top of the canvas and works down from there. At all times he copies literally from the photograph. For him there is no room for subjective interpretation. However, his total objectivity to the photographic source makes his work painting the face so large, a subjective experience because he does not see the face as he paints. He things of texture, of form and of varying shades of light and dark, the primary properties of all painting regardless of style, realistic or abstract in subject matter. In an entire painting Close may use only two tablespoons of black paint. He never uses white paint for its' opacity deadens the black paint. The airbrush enables him to get a much richer gray using the

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[9]Ibid., p. 32.

black paint and the white of the canvas.

Close worked entirely in black and white for a number of years. It was only when the technique became too easy for him that he decided to expand into the use of color. But this entry into the world of color left him with problems that he had deliberately avoided when working with only black and white. With color, choosing and mixing varying shades, the chance of being totally objective is remote. Close wanted to be as objective about color as the camera was. He didn't want to interpret color, but rather to arrive at it in a pre-planned and systematic way. His most obvious potential source was, again, the photograph. He found the answer he was looking for after studying the commercial four color separation process and realizing that he could approach a painting in the same manner. Using his found technique Close was able to come up with a system of achieving local color without the biased, subjective interpretation inherant with other portrait painting styles. Using the three primary colors of red, blue and yellow, each placed in varying degrees against one another Close is able to achieve a remarkable array of colors.

Like the Impressionist painters, Close bounces one color off another and therefore each color is dependent on the one beside or underneath it. Not only does this

Chuck Close
Linda

1975-76
84 X 108"
acrylic on canvas

provide the painting with a vibrant surface but it is
clearly a color system which is unique in that our own
eyes do not as readily pick up on this process in
everyday life. This system of using three colors
independent of each other, which is so much a part of
Close's recent work, can not reproduce well for
illustrations. The sense of experiencing his paintings
firsthand, for they are so much more than "photographic,"
cannot be duplicated. It must be experienced firsthand
from the original.

THE PHOTOGRAPH AS A TOOL: RICHARD ESTES

Richard Estes is one of the pioneers of Superrealism and, perhaps, the most famous of them. Since 1968, after his first show at the Allen Stone Gallery in New York City, he has been both critically and commercially successful. His paintings of New York City Street scenes have a distinct look which is uniquely his own. He has transformed the busy, bustling urban jungle into a skeleton of itself, a ghostly portrait of a man-made environment. Estes' paintings are impressions of a city which people so often look upon but very rarely see.

Urban landscapes are not new to painting. Ever since a system for one-point perspective was developed architecture within the city has been a popular subject. The large urban studies of Guardi and Canaletto during the late Renaissance are forerunners of the work of Estes. In the twentieth century artist such as Edward Hopper, John Marin and Charles Sheeler have all found inspiration in the man-made environment. Estes continues this tradition and has already left behind an important and personal statement.

An Estes painting, unlike many other photo-realist works which strive to de-personalize the artist and subject,

is a unique work of art. Although its' apparent exactness
might seem to betray any attempt at a personal, individual
expression, it is none-the-less a compendium of a feeling
artist at work. The very precise detail and his polishing
of the surface of the painting are but vehicles of his
expression. His unique point of view, the way his eyes
see the external reality is what separates him from other
artists.

The problem with Richard Estes is that, like most
innovative and personal artists, he is very hard to
classify in respect to style. He is not a strict photo-
realist. He works from a variety of different
photographic sources and has no qualms about deleting,
changeing or making additions to a photograph in order to
make a more interesting painting. He uses the camera as
a tool, for his objective is not to recreate the
photograph but, rather, to produce the best possible
painting, the most pleasing work of art.

His views on the photograph and its' relation to
painting separates him from the definite photo-realism of
Ben Schonzeit, Robert Bechtle and Chuck Close. To Estes
the camera is an imperfect instrument. It is imperfect
becouse it does not and can not see like the human eye.
In preparation for a single painting he may take up to
seventy-five photographs of his subject. Each one is
taken from a slightly different angle with a different

lens because, Estes says, "when you look at a scene or an object you tend to scan it. Your eye travels around and over things. As your eyes move the vanishing point moves, so to have one vanishing point or perfect camera perspective is not realistic."[10] Therefore, his camera is always moving, giving him a variety of sources from which to select the images he will need to complete his paintings. He also takes a number of close-up photographs for detail work, oftentimes from a different angle than the one in which he will paint from. This is to insure his own knowledge of the structure of what he paints.

He does most of his initial photography of New York streets on Sunday mornings when the sun is out and cloud formations are interesting. One of the main reasons for choosing Sunday mornings to photograph is that the streets are generally deserted and people and cars do not overwhelm the subject matter that he wishes to record. He works with two cameras, a 35 mm single lens reflex for detail shots and a large 4 by 5 camera with a tripod for general views.[11] He does all of his own black and white and also color developing, making contact sheets of his

[10]Richard Estes, quoted in Phil Patton, "The Brush is Quicker Than the Eye," Horizon, (June, 1978), 66.

[11]Richard Estes, Richard Estes: The Urban Landscape (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1978), p. 31.

film. From these he selects those photographs which he will use in the development of his painting. He will develop 8" by 10" color prints of these and keep them near his easel as he paints. But it is important to note that throughout his painting procedure he is never tied to one photograph and does not feel the need, or even wish, to remain true to what the camera sees. He says, "Even with a 4 by 5 negative, a photograph would be a bit fuzzy blown up to this size (referring to the large canvases he is known for). The paintings are crisp and sharp. I think with painting it's a problem of selection and imitation but it's never a problem of creation. It's wrong to think that anyone ever creates. At best one selects new imagery. I can select what to do, or not to do from what's in a photograph. I can add or subtract from it. Every time I do something it's a choice, but it's not a choice involving something creative or reproductive. It's a selection from the various aspects of reality. So what I'm trying to paint is not something different, but something more like the place I've photographed. Somehow the paint and the intensity of color emphasize the light and do things to build up form that a photograph does not do. In that way painting is superior to the photograph."[12]

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[12]Ibid., p. 27.

His sharp, crisp New York City street scenes have become an Estes trademark. An Estes painting is easily recognizable because of the subject matter and his unique style of presentation. He presents us with a world which we easily recognize at first but which begins to fascinate us because of its' growing unfamiliarity on second look. People will often say that this or that street scene looks "like an Estes." Glass reflections, contrasting sunlight and shadows and post card blue skies are trademarks of his work. His treets are most always deserted, giving the impression of some kind of vast ghosttown from which people have fled. We are unaccustomed to seeing these streets devoid of people. The city is a place where people congregate, a place where people meet people, to shop, to do business. Rarely does one come to admire the urban landscape. One leaves that for the national parks and for the natural out-of-doors. So when we look at an Estes painting something strikes us as being odd. For the first time we are not looking at the human element of the city. We are, in fact, looking at the city itself, something which we are unaccustomed to doing. Stripping away all transitory objects we begin to look at the real environment.

This idea of presenting the urban sprawl as subject matter instead of as supporting environment for human emotion is one which Estes clearly favors. "I'm simply

more interested in the city than in the people," he says.
" A strong figure would be a distraction and make the
painting look like an Edward Hopper--some sort of social
commentary: 'Look at this poor man lost in the big city'.
You have to isolate a subject."[13]

His subject is the city itself and his purpose in
painting it is to be able to see it better. Standing on a
corner at a big city intersection at mid-day and a person
is bombarded with an array of visual, audial and
sensorial stimulus. It is very difficult to concentrate
on just one sensation. The person is constantly open to
everything that happens. An artist can isolate, enlarge
or subtract stimulus to focus in on one subject. Estes'
work is a visual medium and he directs his art with great
finesse. To direct attention away from the human element
Estes takes liberty with reality and eliminates people as
major compositional factors from his paintings. However,
signs of transient human movement are apparent in most of
his work. Moving cars and various figures seen in
reflections throughout the paintings are integral features
of an Estes work. But these are all intended to be
secondary to the emphasis of the urban landscape. His
rationale for de-emphasizing the human element is that a
landscape becomes something else altogether. It "becomes

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[13]Patton, p. 68.

romanticized," says the artist, "a period piece like an Edward Hopper. It changes one's reaction to the painting and destroys the feeling of it to put a figure in because when you add figures then people start relating to the figures and it's an emotional relationship. The painting becomes too literal, whereas without the figure it's more purely a visual experience."[14]

When thinking of Richard Estes one associates him entirely with New York City for that city is the basis for most of his work. However, Estes was originally from Illinois. Born in Kewanee in 1936, he spent most of his early years in Evanston, a city on the north side of Chicago. In 1952 he began attending the Art Institute of Chicago, working in primarily a figurative manner in paint and charcoal. Although his years spent at the Art Institute coincided with the tidewater years of Abstract Expressionism he was little moved by it and the school remained fairly academic in its approach. Estes recalls that "most of the students were doing figure painting and charcoal drawings. There were a few students doing abstract painting on the side, but I think there was only one instructor who allowed his students to experiment with abstraction. Most of the instructors insisted that we do

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[14]Richard Estes, quoted in Harry F. Gaugh, "The Urban Vision of Richard Estes," Art in America, (November-December, 1978), 136.

fairly academic projects."[15]

The work Estes produced as a student and his early work subsequent to graduating have a very different feel to them than the exactness of his present work. They are both expressionistic and truthful and provide a unique personal insight into the subjects studied. One painting, done in 1965 and untitled, is of an elderly couple sitting in an automat sipping coffee and apparently discussing the events of the day. The broad brushwork and delightful use of paint along with the muted color scheme of browns, greens and yellows reminds one of the paintings of Jack Levine. Another unfinished study done in 1966 of passengers on a subway car is handled very loosely with a number of thin, transparent washes. (Both of these works are presented in a catalog published in conjunction with an exhibition entitled Richard Estes: The Urban Landscape at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Massachusetts).

After graduating in 1956 Estes lived in both Chicago and New York for a period and finally moved to New York City permanently where he presently makes his home. He worked for magazine publishers and ad agencies doing mostly technical work, pasteups, color overlays, lettering and other similar tasks. In the mid 1960's he managed to

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[15]Richard Estes, Richard Estes: The Urban Landscape (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1978), p. 17.

Richard Estes
Untitled, Automat

1965
48 X 60"
oil on masonite

Richard Estes
Subway Passengers

1966
36 X 48"
tempera on masonite

save enough money to take some time off to concentrate
fully on painting and it is within this time that he
produced the paintings for his first solo exhibition at
the Allen Stone Gallery in the spring of 1968.

Similar to his different approach to photography in
his work, Estes technique of painting is quite different
from other more hard-lined photo-realists. The image that
he envisions for his canvas originates in his mind. He
uses photographs to disseminate his ideas more clearly,
but they are always, first and last, a tool. His overall
concern is not to reproduce a photograph, not to record
the vision and intricacies of the camera's eye, but to
paint his own, personal interpretation of the subject.

He begins quite rapidly on a large canvas (an average
size is 48" by 60"), laying in all major areas with a thin
wash. It is important for him to keep all areas within
the painting moving along at the same speed. He cannot
complete whole sections at a time like most photo-realists,
but must work in grogressions from loose to tight over the
entire surface of the painting. This underpainting is
done in acrylic because it dries much quicker and is
easier to work with when large corrections need to be
made. The entire underpainting, which is very close in
appearance to the final work, is usually finished in one
week. Estes will then spend anywhere from two months to a
year finishing the painting in oil. The oil paint allows

Richard Estes
Central Savings

1975
36 X 48"
oil on canvas

him to achieve a much more subtle variation in color and is easier to blend together than acrylics.

Much has been made of the seemingly cold and calculated exactness of Richard Estes's work. It is true that a certain amount of planning and patience is necessary in the technique which he has tried to perfect. But the critics who find fault in this impersonalization of the artist do not disturb him. "I think the popular concept of the artist," Estes says, "is a person who has this great passion and enthusiasm and super emotion. He just throws himself into this great masterpiece and collapses from exhaustion when it's finished. It's really not that way at all. Usually it's a pretty calculated, sustained, and slow process by which you develop something. The effect can be one of spontaneity but that's part of the artistry. An actor can do a play on Broadway for three years. Every night he's expressing the same emotion in exactly the same way. He has developed a technique to convey those feelings so that he can get the ideas across. Or a musician may not want to play that damn music at all, but he has a booking and has to do it. I think the real test is to plan something and be able to carry it out to the very end. Not that you're always enthusiastic; It's just that you have to get this thing out. It's not done with ones emotions: It's done with

Richard Estes
Downtown

1978
48 X 60"
oil on canvas

the head."[16]

One problem that an Estes painting presents is that it does not reproduce for publication honestly. When photographed it reverts back to its' original source, which is the look of a photograph. Actually, the surface of an Estes painting is quite lively and, if one can go to a comparative extreme, impressionistic in its' look. Paint is applied liberally at times and most details are anything but coldly recorded. Varying brushstrokes full of lively color make for very realistic looking background solutions. The airbrush effect so common with photo-realism is not evident in an Estes painting. Instead, the artist does not wish to hide the fact that it is paint which he is manipulating and it is a painting, a work of art, which is his final result.

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[16]Ibid., p. 42.

THE PHOTOGRAPH AS METAPHOR: AUDREY FLACK

Audrey Flack was one of the first of the photo-realists to use the photograph itself as the subject of her work. As early as 1963 she began painting directly from photo-journalists prints found in magazines and newspapers. However, she was unlike later photo-realists who disavowed any personal relationship with the subject matter of the photograph.   Indeed, the subject painted was as important as the realist technique which she used.   Instead of being interested merely in visual images, her paintings, through their subject matter, often provoked strong reactions from her audience.

Flack became a painter while attending Cooper Union in New York City and Yale in the late 1940's and early 1950's.   Originally she experimented with Abstract Expressionism, but always retained an interest in Realist works.   Her abstract paintings dealt with recognizable subjects utilizing a colorful palette with loose brushwork.   Admiring Jackson Pollock greatly, she attempted to find a way in which the emotive power of color could be used within a realistic technique and subject.

Her work has never fit easily into any category.

Unlike other photo-realists, she places importance on the symbolic aspects of her subjects. She may depict a photograph as literally as Chuck Close or Malcom Morely but within her work lies a deeper meaning stemming from the symbolism of the subject matter. "I have been called a Realist," she says. "If the definition of a Realist is one who faithfully mirrors reality, I am not a Realist. I have also been called a photo-realist. If that definition is of one who simply copies the photograph, I am not a photo-realist. I prefer the term Superrealist. I will often exaggerate reality, bringing it into sharp focus at some points and blurring it at others."[17]

Like other artists of her generation she is particularly aware of the role photography has played in the education of an artist. Through black and white photographs and also color reproductions we learn of the work of other artists. We cannot help but be influenced by the reproductions, regardless of whether or not they are faithful to the originals. Flack recalls, "I had the experience of seeing full-color reproductions in art books and then seeing the original paintings, which paled in comparison to the reproductions."[18]

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[17]Audrey Flack, Audrey Flack on Painting (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1981), p. 28.

[18]Ibid., p. 29.

What appealed to her in the color reproductions was
the intensity of color, especially that seen in slides
illuminated by light. It was an unrealistic color, yet it
was natural for one accustomed to seeing the art of the
world through a slide projector. The light projects the
color and is, in fact, color illuminated. This fascinated
her and she set about to find a way in which to capture
this glowing effect of illuminated color in paint on
canvas.

Working with an airbrush with both acrylic and oil
together on the same canvas, she experimented greatly
with the effects of light and color. She found that
colors mixed under one lighted condition and which matched
the projected slide colors proved to differ when seen
under different light conditions. Realizing how greatly
light affected color she began premixing colors which she
would then study in an attempt to discover how it would
work under most conditions. Some colors always appeared
dark, others light, regardless of the lighting. Value
decisions became very important and she found herself
"thinking in terms of light rather than color."[19] If she
desired a dark her choice of color was sometimes
secondary to the fact that she needed most a particular
value.

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[19]Ibid., p. 50.

Flack works with an airbrush in order to accentuate the color of the painting. The paint applies to the canvas in a manner different from that which is applied by brush. Flack says that "spraying produces small beads of color and the density of the application affects the intensity of the color."[20] The light reflects differently between the two techniques and allows the effects of the airbrush a more luminous quality. "Compare the brilliance of a slide with the opacity of a photograph. The photograph is dull in comparison. I wanted to make a painting as luminous as a color slide. I had to deal with light in order to accomplish that."[21]

Flack's work has evolved substantially since she first began working from photographs in the early 1960's. In the beginning she was concerned with the immediate recognition of the photograph as subject. Her work was plainly derived from the camera. Only her loose handling of the brush revealed any personal involvement. Gradually she became more and more scientific about the effects of color and light in photography and their possible transference into the field of painting. She began to take her own slides of colorful still life subjects and then worked with the intention of retaining as much of

[20] Ibid., p. 46.

[21] Ibid., p. 46.

Audrey Flack
Kennedy Motorcade, Nov. 22, 1963

1964
38 X 42 "
oil on canvas

the ordinary and loveliness of the sides in the painting.
Not even for a time was Blanch pushed on old patterns
or of color. Her still life depicted a bunch of
objects with a rich assortment of different surfaces.

After ...
the photographs ...
curiosity ...
technique which she has perfected and improved in ... and
has altered the subject matter to themes more suitable in
order to achieve a message through her printing. She has
always stated her allegiance to painting which places an
importance in recognizable subjects. Blanch has stated
that painting which is easily recognized and understood
has a great place in helping people to better understand
the world around them. "Art is for people, I mean, if an
... for people who is in fact ... and that is what is
important about Expressionism."

Aside from the surprising visual quality of these
paintings, Palmantier renton of 1956-59 convey the artist's

Jules Blanch, Essays in Discipline Visual
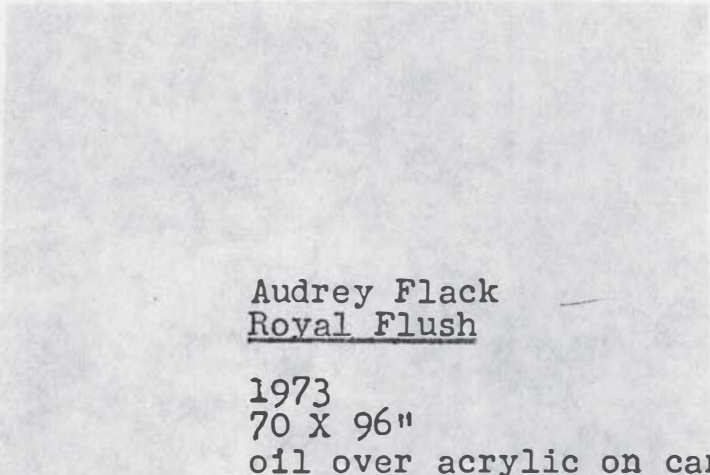Expressionist Painting and Graphics (New York: William
Sloane and Company, 1959), 2.

the brilliancy and exactness of the slide in the painting.
Her work for a time was almost garrish in its intensive
use of color. Her still lifes depicted a variety of
objects with a vast assortment of different surfaces,
soft and hard, reflective and painted. The blurriness
and out of focus areas of her canvases were clearly signs
of her close affiliation with the camera. Her paintings
were not visual still lifes seen by the human eye but
subjects recorded by the camera's lens.

After 1972 Flack became weary of merely repeating
the photographic image and embarked in a direction which
currently holds her attention. Staying with the airbrush
technique which she has perfected and become known for, she
has altered her subject matter to become more symbolic in
order to deliver a message through her painting. She has
always avowed her allegience to painting which places an
importance in recognizable subjects. Flack has stated
that painting which is easily recognized and understood
has a great place in helping people to better understand
the world around them. "Art is for people, I mean, if art
isn't for people who is it for? And that is what is
important about Superrealism."[22]

Aside from the striking visual quality of these
paintings, her vanitas series of 1976-78 convey the artist's

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[22]Audrey Flack, quoted in Christine Lindey,
Superrealist Painting and Sculpture (New York: William
Morrow and Company, Inc., 1980), p. 48.

Audrey Flack
Royal Flush

1973
70 X 96"
oil over acrylic on canvas

thoughts on a number of moral issues. In these works she deals with the issues of time, beauty and death using universal symbols of each. The symbolism is a further extension of her art. The technique glorifies the skilled artist in her but her paintings hold a deeper concern for touching her audience through the power of her subject matter.

Flack was important in the development of the style of Superrealism. Her technique inspired many others to explore the visual imagery found in the world. Her work is continually evolving, moving from one visual idea to another. She is always aware of her audience and the position she holds as spokesman to it. She accepts heartily the qualities of art which enable it to be a voice of the people. Her work is not merely a visual record but an emotional record as well. "Art reflects," she says, "documents, comments upon, or commemorates the time in which we live. People are hard-pressed now. We live in a society which is decaying and polluting itself. We face universal destruction, emotionally and physically. It seems to me that at this time of betrayal and hopes, a victory for art matters desperately."[23]

Audrey Flack, the artist, is very much a part of her work. She does not attempt to escape when painting.

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[23]Flack, p. 31.

Instead, her work is a voice crying out from within.

A FEW NOTES ON PHOTOGRAPHY

"It is reality itself, a reality captured by a kind
of extraordinary camera with a lens of superior
conciousness and clairvoyance, where, perhaps, one regrets
a little, as always, that the personality of the artist
remains hidden, as if indifferent, instead of taking part
in the scene and introducing us into it violently by the
vehemence of a few sympathetic chords. It would be
pictorial perfection if there were a bit less holding back
and exactness, and a bit more inner warmth and self
surrender."[24] (The French critic Leonce Benedite, c.
1900, on a painting by Meissonier and cited by Carl
Baldwin).

There is an ever popular question that is constantly
being asked of Superrealists by the general public: "Why
not just take a photograph of it?" This question is as
unanswerable as the one most often heard by abstract
painters, "Don't you think my five-year old child could do
that?" Both inquiries are unjustifiable to the creative
artist.

To begin with, a painting is not a photograph. Even

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[24]Quoted in Francois Mathey, American Realism (New
York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1978),
p. 165.

a painting obviously derived and meant to look like one
(for example Chuck Close's Linda) is a separate entity, a
work of art by a living artist. We confront paintings
differently than we do photographs. Just as our reactions
to birds are different than our reactions to airplanes,
even though both of them fly. There is no need to compare
them. Comparisons only get in the way of seeing what is
there to be seen.

A photographer and a painter are essentially
different types of artists. They each work in a separate
medium and their art, their purpose, are two distinct
entities. Only the motivation, to interpret life within
and around the self, is universal. The means are
different. A photographer continually looks for visual
information to interpret. He chooses his subject and the
camera lens becomes his eyes. His artistry comes through
his personal point of view, his private interpretation of
a world held in common with all people. We see his subject,
his work, as literally as he sees it. The art is his point
of view and not the tangible photograph (which can be
reproduced any number of times). He shares with us a part
of reality we all can see but never quite do. He reveals
to us our weaknesses in seeing.

The painter presents a much more personal view. A
finished painting is a unique item for it is the actual
work of art, unlike the photographic print. The painter is

an individual with a history of different experiences. He
can never attain absolute objectivity because he is subject
to attitudes about everything he paints. Every object he
sees is filtered through a subjective mind and he cannot
help but paint from his own personal point of view. For
this reason every artist is different. Every artist,
working in whatever medium, finding whatever style most
suited for his own art of personal expression, is
ultimately his own self. The camera has no point of view
about its subject. The artist can never escape it.

As a source for artistic expression in painting,
photography opens up an entire world. Because the language
of the camera is its' own and very unique, using it as
inspiration for painting is no different than selecting
subject matter from another area. The painter can be
interested in the effects of photography yet still wish to
express his own ideas about the camera world in paint.

As a tool in painting, the camera records reality with
its' own visual intricacies, thereby allowing the artist to
explore different ways of seeing. Chuck Close explains,
"The eye is flexible, but the camera is a one-eye view of
the world, and I think we know what a blur looks like only
because of photography. It really nailed down blur. It's
this elusive thing, and the camera gives you information
that was too difficult to deal with otherwise."[25]

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[25]Chuck Close, quoted in "The Photo-Realists: Twelve
Interviews", Art in America, (November-December, 1972), 76.

What we take for granted and what we rarely see in photography, and all that we consider real because of our misconceptions about the camera never lying, is brought out to bear in painting. In painting we are forced to see as the artist sees. We look that much more keenly because of the fact that it was created not by a machine, but by a living artist.

Representational painting, especially if it is figurative, is greatly changed when the source of inspiration is a photograph. If one transcribes literally from the source a different effect will be had than if a painter works directly from the subject itself. If working in front of the actual object, the artist cannot escape his own point of view. He is capable of knowing everything about his subject from all views besides the one he has chosen to record. The painter wo works from a photograph cannot know of his subject anything but what the camera tells him. He must rely on a visual symbol (the photograph) and not the actual object in reality.

Richard Estes makes an interesting point on the timelessness of a photograph because of the separation of its' image from the actual subject. He says, "Taking the photograph is as important as painting the picture. The same spot is always changing on the street. But the difference between art and life is that art is constant. There's no time limit on a nice still photo. It has no

beginning or end--it just exists."[26] The art of painting precludes total objectivity. A painter can never cease to be an artist because he works from photographs. His personal expression of the self will come through regardless. To paint is always to be an artist.

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[26]Richard Estes, quoted in Robert Hughes, "The Realist as Corn God", Time, (January 31, 1972), 50.

THOUGHTS ON MY OWN WORK

Although I may utilize a variety of photographic
sources in a painting, I do not consider myself to be a
photo-realist. My aim is not to reproduce a photograph in
paint on canvas. The subjectivity inherant in all artists
comes through quite strongly in my work. I cannot help
but be moved by what I paint, to form an opinion about
the subject, to nurture a point of view. Within each
photographic source, I make conscious and unconcious
additions and deletions.

I began working from photographs after completing a
series of still lifes, all of which were done from life.
Thes early paintings were painted in a tromp leoul style
recalling the work of the nineteenth century American
painter William Harnett. The influence of Pop art also was
apparent with the use of mass-media articles, magazines,
advertisements, record jackets and other such items.
Everything was painted literally to as fine a degree as I
possibly could.

From there I began using photographs as a source in
an attempt to further explore the visual world around me.
My subject matter is not restricted to any particular thing.
I look, like most artists do, for exciting visual events,

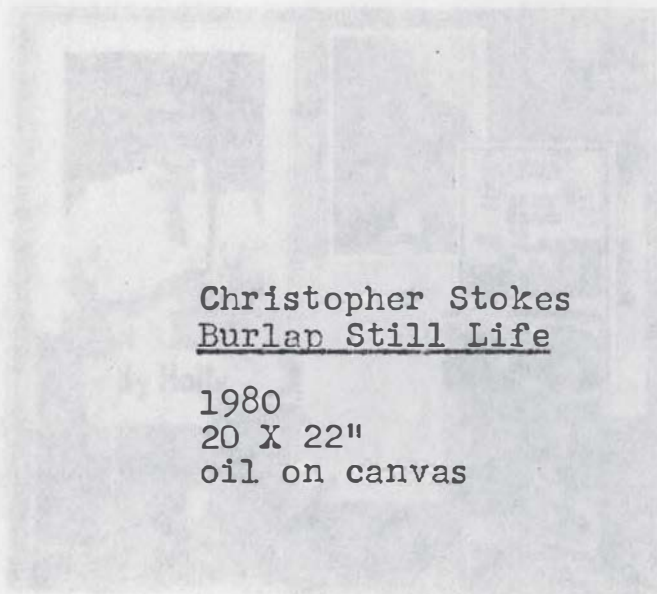Christopher Stokes
<u>Second Floor Studio</u>

1979
36 X 42"
oil on canvas

the sunlight streaming into a room, the reflection of one object on another, the hap-hazard arrangement of leaves in a forest. Photographs allow me to ponder the subject matter, to study it and learn all that I can while painting it. I'm always suprised at the amount of visual information I miss when I experience it first hand. A photographic record helps me to better understand what I look at and never really see.

I work only from photographs which I have taken, and these photographs serve as tools for the transferring of a visual memory onto a painted canvas. The idea for a painting is developed before I take photgraphs of its' subject. When in front of the subject I may take many photographs of it in order to record it from all angles. I may have an original idea for the subject which will ultimately change once I see the view from the camera lens. When I look through the camera I am very aware of composition and rarely point and shoot merely for a record. For each subject, each painting, I compose any number of different photographs. One could say I use the camera in the same way another artist might utilize a pencil and sketchbook. The idea is to do as much visual thinking and composing beforehand so that all of these problems are solved before going to the canvas.

There is a problem in classifying my work strictly as Superrealism because of the fact that I alter the
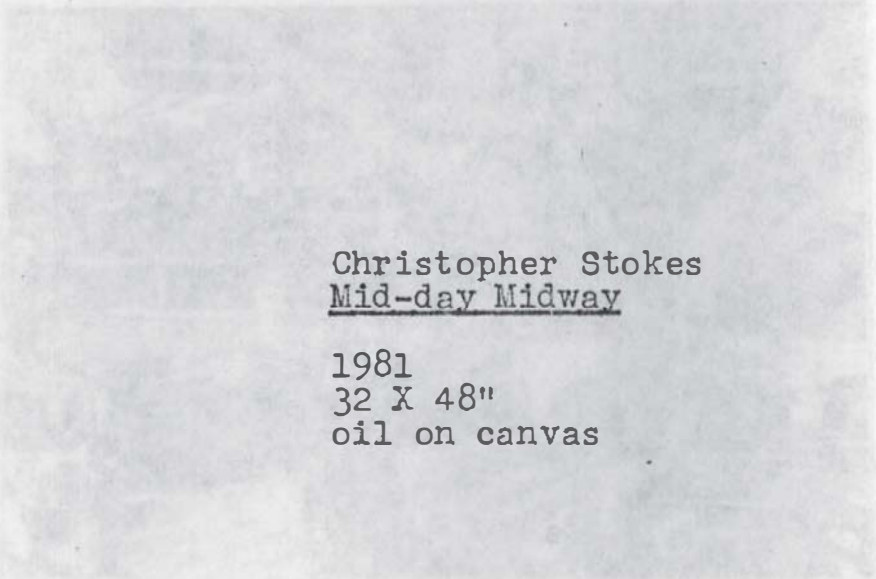
Christopher Stokes
Burlap Still Life

1980
20 X 22"
oil on canvas

appearance of most everything I paint. I simplify objects
to a more basic form and am not concerned with recording
every detail of individual objects. I perfect images,
making them often appear to be what in reality they are not,
idealized images of themselves. An object may become no
longer that particular object but, rather, the universal
symbol of all such objects.

I am very interested in the effects of light on the
color and form of my subjects. Oftentimes a subject will
take on a particular mood depending upon the light
reflected by it. Colors dull or intensify as the light
source shifts so that there is really no such thing as local
color. Grass only appears to be green because it is the
color most reflected during the day. But it appears to
be a dark gray at night and under specific lighting
conditions the color can range anywhere from blue to orange
to green again. The colors in my paintings are the results
of the light which reflects within and around the subject.

In "Mid-day Midway", I have attempted to capture the
effect of looking at the overwhelming barrage of color in a
carnival. The scene is one at noontime when the sun is
directly overhead. Sharp, distinct shadows compliment the
objects which cast them and everything is lit brightly from
above. When standing in direct sunlight one cannot see
everything in sharp focus. The eyes squint, naturally
blurring details and making the scene appear to be more a

Christopher Stokes
<u>Mid-day Midway</u>

1981
32 X 48"
oil on canvas

series of shapes, each with its' own value, its' own hue.
I wanted to capture the effect of sunlight streaming
down upon everything. The entire middle section of the
painting is left light because of the reflective quality
of the concrete ground. Because of the glaring effect
this makes upon the eyes of the viewer all detail is
washed out. It is comparable to trying to see an object
clearly when beside it is an unshaded light bulb. The
intense light calls too much attention to itself and does
not permit the eyes to focus directly on the object.
Because of the direct sunlight, I have emphasized forms
and color to a much higher degree. In this painting I
was not concerned with detail. Rather, I attempted to
paint the scene the way a person would actually see the
scene at that particular moment. It is a visual event
and not a detailed record of a specific environment.

I am more interested in painting the way my eyes see
a specific situation than in recording exact documents of
different environments and subjects. Information can be
read wrong at times, shapes may be misinterpreted, but as
long as I paint what I see, and not what I think I see or
what I've been told is there, then I will be on target
visually when the painting is completed.

Painting is a personal venture. Complete objectivity
to a subject is impossible. When a painter attempts to
record just what he sees, and not to interpret subjectively
or to moralize about his subject, he is still painting

what he sees, and not necessarily what another person might see. An artist cannot escape his own point of view. Even an objective photo-realist must use his own subjective eyes to record his personal vision of the subject. The camera can isolate a subject, even alter its appearance with a variety of lenses, but ultimately it is the human eye which selects the necessary material needed to create a work of art.

Every painting is a visual record of my life. My work is very important to me because I am better able to understand my subject through the intense involvement that comes with painting it. I do not wish, as some photo-realists do, to remain neutral as an artist. My work is a personal record of the way I see the world. Through painting I am able to communicate visually what is impossible any other way.

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