

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

November 30, 2006

Painting photography

Filed under: [painting](#) — alecsothblog @ 5:11 am



Robert Bechtle (via [KQED](#))

Christian Patterson has an [excellent post](#) on the photorealist painter Robert Bechtle including this quote by Bechtle:

You can take photographs of something but you never possess it because it's too fast...there's something very intense about the experience of sitting down and having to look at it in the way that you do in order to make a drawing of it, or to make a painting of it.

Along with making me wish I were a painter, this quote got me to thinking (yet again) about the relationship between photography and painting. (Watch an excellent video on Bechtle and his mix of photographic and painterly techniques [here](#)).

Apparently a lot of people are thinking about the same thing. In the current issue of [ArtReview](#), Martin Herbert has an essay called *Spot the Difference, Are Contemporary Painting And Photography Simply Two Sides Of The Same Coin?* The essay includes this quote from [Luc Tuymans](#):

After seeing a film I try to figure out which single image is the one with which I can remember all of the moving images of the movie. Painting does the opposite; a good painting to me denounces its own size so that you are unable to remember it correctly. Thus it generates other images.



Himmler, 1997/98 by Luc Tuymans

Herbert questions whether or not this dialogue between painting and photography is good for either. "For now the liaison seems symbiotic," he writes, before questioning "whether painting and photography will, in the near future, have anything constructive left to say to each other."

One painter who has addressed this issue with humor is Alexi Worth:



Lenscap, 2006 by Alexi Worth

On [ArtCritical](#), David Cohen writes of Worth:

As a critic and scholar, Mr. Worth has long been fascinated by the impact of photography on painting...A large black circle dominates "Lenscap" revealing a kind of amor vacui; pinching finger tips confirm it to be the object of the title. In the right corner, deliciously rhyming with the cap and fingers, is a detail of Titian's Adam and Eve from the Prado, the matriach's finger's surrounding the forbidden fruit. It is an elaborate allegory of painting's fall from grace with the advent of photography, but its also a cutely observed contemporary museum moment. Part of his endeavor, as a practionner, seems to be to discover subjects that only painting can reach — photorealistically probing areas that, actually, can only be painted.

19 Comments

1. Thanks...

bigger version of the Bechtle movie:

[http://kqed02.streamguys.us/anon.kqed/spark/305 Robert Bechtle.mov](http://kqed02.streamguys.us/anon.kqed/spark/305_Robert_Bechtle.mov)

Comment by [Gary](#) — November 30, 2006 @ [7:45 am](#)

2. This symbiotic nature of painting and photography is interesting considering how many thought the advent of photography would be the demise of paint a hundred years ago. But it's a relationship that can be used to the benefit of either medium. As a photographer, in the past whenever I seem to have hit a "creative dry spell" I would pick up some paints and do some landscapes or still lifes...studying the relationship of color and light and form seems to help me regain my photographic eye. On the flip side, my brother is a very accomplished painter, who also does commercial work, and many of his paintings are made from photographs.

Comment by [Chantal Stone](#) — November 30, 2006 @ [8:42 am](#)

3. I am currently reading Gerhard Richter's "The Daily Practice of Painting" – and it is astonishing to me how closely his theories of painting are aligned with that of photography. It is almost as if he is talking about Szarkowski's "the thing itself".

Comment by [Dylan](#) — November 30, 2006 @ [10:04 am](#)

4. [...] I'm really enjoying reading Alec Soth's blog and his latest entry Painting photography has a great video link of a Robert Bechtle movie which shows him creating a painting from a photograph. The video was from a Christian Patterson post which led Soth to comment and me to post here and who knows where it'll all end up (with our comments trackrecord it might just die here) [...]

Pingback by [Artists Unite Issue » post to post](#) — November 30, 2006 @ [1:43 pm](#)

5. There is a great video about David Hockney called David Hockney Photographer where he talks a lot about the lack of the sense of time in a photo and how this led him to the collage photos. I think in a lot of ways it's true, I always feel there is something missing in a straight photo something that I see in a painting. Maybe it's because of my MFA in painting. I think my background in painting has shaped my photos more than any of my photo training has.

Comment by [Doug McGoldrick](#) — November 30, 2006 @ [2:25 pm](#)

6. David Hockney's book 'The Secret Knowledge' is an absolutely fascinating history of the relationship between artists and the lens, cameras, and camera obscuras over the last few hundred years.

Was Vermeer the world's greatest photographer?

Comment by [Guy Batey](#) — November 30, 2006 @ [4:07 pm](#)

7. Photo vs painting is a hot topic today – MAO has an interview with painter Chris Dorland too:

http://modernartobsession.blogspot.com/modern_art_obsession/2006/11/catching_up_wit.html

Comment by [Alia](#) — November 30, 2006 @ [4:09 pm](#)

8. Luc Tuymans' quote reminded me of another post you made recently.

<http://alecsoth.com/blog/2006/10/23/jesper-just-bas-jan-ader/>

That one about the Danish filmmaker. I can remember the image and the concept. But I think I've been in your smoky loft too long Alec

Thanks again.

Comment by [Sean Cayton](#) — December 1, 2006 @ [12:39 am](#)

9. guybatey, It's possible Johannes Vermeer did use a camera obscura or other optical lens device. If he did use one, he most likely did not paint the exact image he saw through the lens. Instead, he would have slightly—or possibly largely—altered the lens image to create a beautiful painting. This is a stretch, but it would not be unlike what many do with airbrush or Photoshop techniques.

His accurate use of light and shadow could have also been the work of a genius without the aid of an optical lens image. Unfortunately, we have no actual proof of either side.

As a photographer, I'd like to think he did use some sort of optical lens device. It would equate his canvas to the photographer's print, where both use an optical lens to view a scene.

Comment by [Ryan](#) — December 1, 2006 @ [12:54 am](#)

10. Thanks for posting the film on Robert Bechtle. My ignorance is exposed as I have now discovered "Bay Area Figurative" style.

I was interested in Bechtle's attempt to rid himself of "style" or it would see disassociate himself with a style. Frederico Fellini said, "Art is all about craftsmanship. Others can interpret craftsmanship as style if they wish. Style is what unites memory or recollection, ideology, sentiment, nostalgia, presentiment, to the way we express all that. It's not what we say but how we say it that matters." In that sense his obvious craftsmanship has delivered him a style.

When Bechtle says, "You can take photographs of something but you never possess it because it's too fast...there's something very intense about the experience of sitting down and having to look at it in the way that you do in order to make a drawing of it, or to make a painting of it." I sort of identify with that. I tend to do nearly all my looking after the fact on the computer screen. I feel my job is to deepen the mystery not endorse the accepted veracity of the "documented" image. I think that is where the digital tools allow us more freedom to explore without "painting".

Shoot fast, render slow.

Alec, in Firefox I got an error subscribing to the feed. The link feed: <http://alecsoth.com/blog/feed/> should be <http://alecsoth.com/blog/feed/> it seems.

Comment by [Ron Diorio](#) — December 1, 2006 @ [4:53 am](#)

11. I think, good example of the relationship between painting and photography is work of painter Eric Fischl.

Comment by [Igor](#) — December 1, 2006 @ [8:37 am](#)

12. Alec – thanks for this. I did a riff post on you and Christian's piece.
<http://highlowbetween.blogspot.com/2006/11/painting-and-lens.html>

enjoy Kentucky

Comment by [HighLow Between](#) — December 1, 2006 @ [1:54 pm](#)

13. I have to echo Dylan's comments above that Gerhard Richter's book: The Daily Practice of Painting, is a recommended reading. The book has many interesting parallels for an artist concerned with making a meaningful image – whether by photograph or painting or something that blurs the lines in-between.

I like the suggestion that the real valuable dialogue between photography and painting comes mostly from the conventional understanding and acceptance of each medium by the audience – for example – if you accept that a photograph is a representative document of something – and a painting is constructed to be something.

Richter has little inexpensive book published by D.A.P. called Gerhard Richter – Sils that is a provocative example exploring a combination of painting and photography. Somehow rather than blurring and confusing like contemporary trickster painters or photographers – Richter actually seems to sharpen the distinction between both mediums by partially painting over photographs creating a pretty rich reading of the in-between in my view.

In good work – in either medium – or the mush in-between – hopefully something else entirely is perceived. It's the something else perceived that I value.

Comment by [Matt Niebuhr](#) — December 3, 2006 @ [1:51 am](#)

14. Great reading, thanks. I was immediately prompted to paint on a photograph with the results here.
<http://artgrows.com/index.php?showimage=346>

Comment by [Stephen Beveridge](#) — December 3, 2006 @ [5:13 pm](#)

15. an artist that lives here in Seattle that has reminded me of Robert Bechtle's methods and vision is one Rachel Maxi. She employs the same technique and has done this for many many years. Just another you may want to add to the list of photographers who paint and you can see both the end result here...

<http://www.rachelmaxi.com/html/>

and her beginning points here...

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/81713166@N00/>

Nicely done on the Bechtle post Alec!

Comment by [harold hollingsworth](#) — December 4, 2006 @ [6:30 am](#)

16. Everyone has such a strong relationship with photography these days (at least in most parts of the world)- it is fully integrated into life. People remember their pasts through photography, shop through photography, date through photography, etc. So I think it is not the same thing – painting and photography are not a two way street of influence. Painting is a small part of a few people's lives and a large part of only a tiny group of people's lives. However, making a handmade object is always valid, interesting, and magical – it can't be replaced by a machine. But I think the influence of photography on painting today is unavoidable – it would be like avoiding the influence of life on your work.

Comment by [long island city painter](#) — December 9, 2006 @ [6:14 pm](#)

17. Surfing on the net I found this interesting Blog and discovered this photography painting style. It looks great! I have a Blog (recently opened) about photos and emotions in which I show also some of my paintings that come from photos I take . I think I'll soon try this style new to me!
Thanks

<http://www.lucianobove.blogspot.com/>

Comment by [Luciano](#) — January 28, 2007 @ [5:26 pm](#)

18. How can we improve copyright infringement for photos on the Internet

Comment by [Tim R](#) — February 25, 2007 @ [2:57 pm](#)

19. Serbia vacations: Visit TripAdvisor, your source for the web's best reviews and travel articles about tourism and vacation packages in Serbia, Europe.

Fishing areas give the basis for [Serbia tourism](#)

Comment by [serbiatourism](#) — November 15, 2007 @ [10:44 am](#)