

Photorealism | Professional Development for Educators



Charles Bell (American, 1935 – 1995), *Cat's Eye and the Best of 'Em*, 1993, oil on canvas, The Sydney and Walda Besthoff Collection.

What is Photorealism?

Reflective surfaces of chrome and glass; nostalgic views of diners and theaters; cityscapes of streets and storefronts; still lifes of flowers and produce; and detailed portraits are some of the many subjects of the artists known as Photorealists. Beginning in the late 1960s, this genre's first practitioners were primarily Americans who depicted the complexities and banalities of mid-century American life. In subsequent decades the artists and the subject matter have become more global.

The term "Photorealism," was coined by gallerist Louis Meisel in 1969. "Photo" indicating that photography is the visual source material, and "realism" to indicate that the finished works are precise and representational. Photographs – whether informal snapshots, composite images, or high-resolution digital renderings—are transferred to the painting surface through a variety of methods. Projection, a grid system, and recently, computer-generated models are tools that artists use to transfer the image. Compositions are painstakingly executed with brushes (or airguns) and paint. Completed works have highly finished surfaces, extreme detail, visual distortion and often an altered sense of scale that produces a new visual reality, related and yet distinct from the photographic sources. Photorealism poses questions about representation, asking how the world we see is different from a photograph and how technology informs painting.

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Who are the Photorealists?

First generation artists | Chuck Close, Charles Bell, Richard Estes, Robert Bechtle, Audrey Flack, Don Eddy, Richard McLean, Ralph Goings, and sculptor John DeAndrea

Second generation | Ben Johnson, Don Jacot, Robert Cottingham, Davis Cone, Bernardo Torrens

Third generation | Tjalf Sparnaay, Raphaella Spence, Hyung Jin Park, Anthony Brunelli

How do they do it?

1. Use technology to capture an image – traditional photograph(s), computer, hi-resolution images
2. Transfer selected images to canvas using techniques such as the grid, projection, stencils or 3-dimensional models
3. Precisely reproduce the scene with technical mastery of medium – oil paint, acrylic, automotive paint, printmaking, sculpture.

Themes of Photorealists

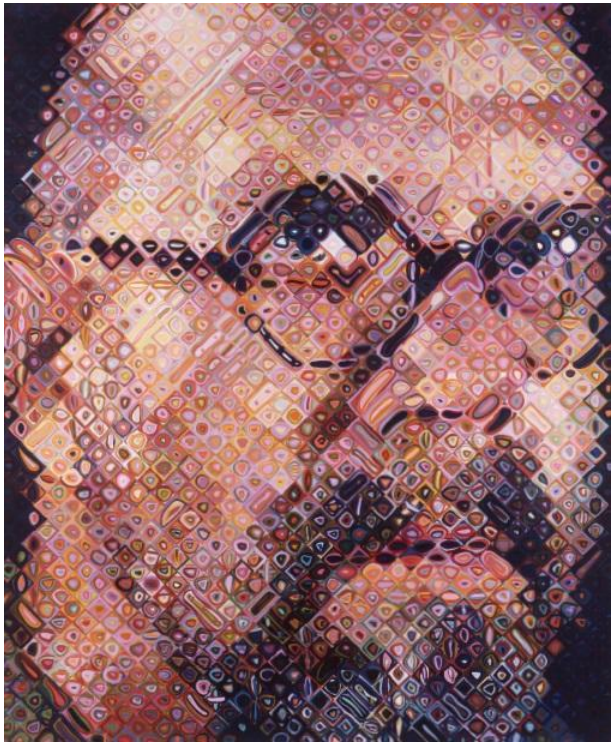
- Landscapes and Cityscapes
- The Figure
- Transportation – cars, motorcycles, trains
- Diners and Theaters
- Storefronts
- Horses
- Toys
- Interior spaces
- Still Lives
- Nostalgia
- Photographic practices



Richard Estes (American, born 1932), *Citarella Fish Company*, 1991, oil on canvas, The Sydney and Walda Besthoff Collection.

A renowned member of the early Photorealist movement, **Richard Estes** paints clearly structured urban landscapes based upon his own composite photographs. Numerous photographs combined to form a single composition allow for an impossible level of detail and a wider angle than can be captured in a single photograph or would be visible to the naked eye. Estes's cityscapes are unusually sparsely populated, an effect he attains by photographing his native Manhattan early on Sunday mornings. The consistently sharp focus throughout his paintings creates a cold and polished finish; close examination reveals the artist's fine brushwork.

Estes explores the interplay of transparency and reflection in many of his works, which typically feature vistas down long boulevards. The layered reflections of architecture, shop windows and the objects behind the glass require the viewer to consciously dissect his paintings. *Citarella Fish Company* takes as its subject the storefront of a well-known New York City gourmet market.



Chuck Close (American, born 1940), *Self Portrait*, 2000, screenprint, The Sydney and Walda Besthoff Collection.

The human figure has been an important subject for certain photorealists. In the late 1960s **Chuck Close** began his well-known series of “heads,” or portraits of faces, including his own and those of his friends. Close superimposed a grid system onto his photographs, using this as the basis for his enlarged portraits. Over the decades he has worked in a variety of media, including airbrushed paint, aquatint, watercolor, and later, jacquard tapestry.

The screenprint *Self Portrait* (2000) is an example of Chuck Close’s signature style. He uses the squares of the grid that he superimposes on the surface to create blocks of bright pigment that are built up in layers. His adept use of color creates form and results in a realistic portrayal of the subject, although he arrives at realism through an abstract process. The mosaic like arrangement of color squares is sometimes referred to as the Chuck Close Mosaic.



Davis Cone (American, born 1950), *Happy Hour*, 1984, acrylic on canvas, The Sydney and Walda Besthoff Collection.

In the 1970s, Photorealism was regarded internationally as a quintessentially American genre. It captured the types of scenes associated with the suburbs, roadsides, and great outdoor expanses found in the United States. Artist Robert Bechtle depicted the tract housing and cars seen in his Bay Area neighborhood, John Baeder focused on American diners, and **Davis Cone** devoted his practice to movie theaters. These artists viewed this practice as a way of preserving aspects of American life that they perceived as disappearing.

The Happy Hour Theater, at Magazine and St. Andrews Streets in New Orleans operated from 1910-1983. The traditional movie house, often with an Art Deco facade, or as seen here, a large marquee—are Cone's favored subjects. In this work, the artist's signature appears as an emblem on the fender of the blue pickup truck in the foreground.



John Baeder (American, born 1938), *John's Diner*, 2007, oil on canvas, The Sydney and Walda Besthoff Collection.

Throughout his career, **John Baeder** has created portraits of the American diners that were once common to every American city. These typically prefabricated buildings on the highways and byways of the United States, represent a association with the past that Baeder confirms. “I want to preserve diners. I love them, and I express this passion the best way I know, by painting them.” The “Lease” sign in the building nearby alludes to the fading vitality of this commercial area. Indeed, beginning in the 1970s, American diners began to lose popularity, replaced by fast-food chains.

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Tom Blackwell (American, born 1938), *Bond's Corner Spring*, 1975, The Sydney and Walda Besthoff Collection.

Both Photorealism and Pop Art emerged out of the 1960s and shared a common interest in depicting objects and scenes found in everyday life. Whereas Pop artists such as Andy Warhol approached elements of pop culture like Campbell's soup cans and movie stars as icons of advertising and celebrity status, Photorealism instead focused on the visual and formal aspects of American commercial objects. Reflective shop windows, storefront displays of items for purchase, attractive business signs, and the glistening, chrome surfaces of cars, trains, and motorcycles were popular subjects for depicting rich colors, and a layering of images as seen through mirrored surfaces or glass. Often these paintings are derived from not one, but a number of photographs.

Tom Blackwell initially worked as an abstract painter, but in the 1970s he began to paint realistic likenesses of motorcycles from magazines. He soon began taking his own photographs, visiting car and motorcycle shows and capturing the chrome reflecting the surroundings. Blackwell treats close ups of vehicles in a manner similar to abstraction, enlarging the photographs and working in sections. The artist claims that painting in a photorealist style is humbling and requires patient observation.



Ben Schonzeit (American, born 1942), *Honey Tangerines*, 1974, acrylic on canvas, The Sydney and Walda Besthoff Collection.

An early practitioner of Photorealism, by the late 1970s **Ben Schonzeit** had tired of the airbrush, and over the course of the next 20 years worked in a number of styles. His return to Photorealism in recent years occurred because he came across a photograph “that could not be painted in any other way...” According to Schonzeit, “The photograph is my subject—not oranges or apples, but the photographs themselves...” *Honey Tangerines* exemplifies Schonzeit’s claim. Here the tangerines in the center of the photographed pile are in sharp focus, whereas the fruit in the left hand corner appears to be out of focus. Schonzeit has reproduced the photograph rather than a bushel of tangerines.



Ben Johnson (British, born 1946), *Connecting Space*, 2010, acrylic on linen, The Sydney and Walda Besthoff Collection.

Employing clean lines and a relatively minimalist aesthetic, **Ben Johnson** is deeply interested in architectural spaces. He has painted reflective windows, corridors, doorways, railings, tiled pools, and long vistas in Renaissance to postmodern buildings since the 1970s. When asked about his artistic process, the artist said that he considers “his camera as a sketch book.” Until ten years ago Johnson created drawings for his paintings with ink on paper; now he uses a computer. Using masking tape, or in recent years, vinyl stencils, he sections off parts of the work to be painted using either a spray gun or a sponge. Any one section of the painting may have between ten to several hundred stencils, precisely arrayed, with the color applied sequentially to each area.

Johnson captures spaces that are empty of a human presence. In the 1990s, he explored museum spaces and the display of art. The uninhabited spaces, however, cause the viewer to question the scale of the building, implying vast spaces.

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Charles Bell photographed old tin toys, pinball machines and other playthings, dramatically enlarging them before projecting them onto canvas, using oils to capture the bright colors, reflective surfaces and construction details of his subjects. The radical magnification of these lighthearted objects can be unexpectedly unsettling.

Bell often works in series and the Besthoff Collection includes works from three different subjects – marbles, pinball machines, and small toys. The artist considers painting these objects as a means of deeply exploring them. “Choosing subjects is definitely an emotional process rather than an intellectual exercise...By radically changing the size of everyday objects we can get into them and more easily explore their surfaces and construction – their reality.” *Cat’s Eye and the Best of ‘Em* (illustrated page 1) can be considered a formal study in color, reflection, line and shape, yet there is also an element of nostalgia that informs the selection of subject matter.

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