Alternate Realities

Photorealistic painters transcend photographic images to create personal visions.

By Bobbie Leigh

In the early 1880s, the great American painter and sculptor Thomas Eakins had a brief romance with photography—but it was a secret love affair. He never divulged that he projected slides on the wall or on canvas. However, a century later, Kathleen Foster, curator of American Art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, discovered a group of photographs that Eakins used to compose some paintings. Then, in 2001, museum conservators used microscopes and infra-red studies to reveal the marks of Eakins' tracings under the layers of paint.

Why did Eakins keep his use of photography secret? The prevailing notion at the time was as Gustave Courbet asserted:

"Modern artists must rely on direct experience...they must be realists." Times have changed. Contemporary painters have no inhibitions about using photographs as memory aids or even as prime sources of information for their work. Few critics today would suggest that the use of photography diminishes the value of an artist's work, although as painter Rod Penner emphasizes, the term "Photorealism" still has negative connotations for some. "I would much rather be called a Hyperrealist," he says, referring to the European term for photo-based work.

Artists have employed optical devices, such as mirrors, lenses and the camera obscura (Latin for "dark room") throughout history. Even though black-and-white photography was invented around 1839 and color in 1861, it was not until the late 1960s and early 70s that a group of artists—Richard Estes, Chuck Close, Audrey Flack, Ralph Goings, Malcolm Morley and Gerhard Richter, to name a few—began openly working from photographs. About this time the term "Photorealism," coined by collector and dealer Louis K. Meisel, entered the U.S. art world.
lexicon. Meisel's definition refers strictly to a modernist movement that originated in the 1970s in which artists use cameras to gather information and create works that are startlingly reminiscent of photographs. "Hyperrealism" and "New Realism," are broader terms used interchangeably with Photorealism.

The exhibition "Hyper réalismes USA 1965-75," showcases some of America's best Photorealist artists. On view from June 27 to October 5 at the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Strasbourg, France, the exhibition features about 70 paintings and sculptures by the likes of Close, Estes, Flack, Robert Cottingham, Don Eddy and Ben Schonzeit. Curator Jean-Claude Lebensztejn prefers to use "Hyper réalismes" to describe the show because the term includes contemporary artists who have broadened their realism beyond the "snapshot" flavor favored by the Photorealist of the 1970s.

"It's hard to have a catch-all label [for the genre]," says Nancy Hoffman, a New York City gallery owner. "What many of these artists have in common is that they use the camera as a valid source for painting. These artists are not going to turn into abstract painters. They need to make a certain kind of statement in a realist or representational vein."

The widely acknowledged Photorealist master is Estes, who pioneered urban Photorealism, focusing on streetscapes and subway trains featuring highly detailed reflections in window glass. He also displayed an unexpected touch of whimsy in his signatures hidden in a store sign or advertising poster. Allan Stone of the Allan Stone Gallery in New York City gave Estes his first show in the late 1960s and has remained a lifelong friend. "Estes takes a number of photographs at different times of the day and then creates a composition freehand," Stone explains. "The final work has little to do with the photograph since he takes a lot of liberties with foreshortening. It's tremendously complicated as he shows everything in sharp focus, delineating details that would have been lost in a photograph."

Like Estes, Eddy, whose current subjects are derived from nature, also paints from multiple photographs. When he projects a color slide of one of his photos onto a canvas, only some of the details will be in focus, but Eddy strives for what he calls "universal focus" in his finished work, sharpening any out-of-focus areas in the photos. "My painting involves an under-
Cottingham’s work goes through many transformations. An image will progress from the photograph to graphite drawings on vellum, studies in watercolor and gouache, then finally the painting’s maquette. Working from a drawing, which is transferred to the canvas by a combination of plotting points or grids and projection, he eliminates perspective as much as possible. He’s aiming, he says, for an “in-your-face, frontal image” where the focus is on the formal qualities of the painting and the play of light.

“What I love about Photorealism is that it’s more real than real,” says Rod Penner, whose work is photo-based but whose subject matter is not nostalgia or memorabilia. There’s no social commentary in his streetscapes of small Texas towns. “I am interested in the look of things,” acknowledges Penner, who takes hundreds of photos before finding one suitable for a painting. “After I choose a slide, I have an 11-inch by 14-inch superglue print made up that I project onto a canvas or an illustration board,” he says, describing a process that begins with drawing freehand, moving from left to right and completing a small section of canvas each day. “I’m after this quality of being there, a moment that is completely frozen with all the variety of textures: the rust on telephone poles, the way the sun hits the grass. I love painting telephone wires—they are so interesting to paint.”

At age 24, Raphaella Spence represents a new generation of high-tech Photorealist painters. She begins by using a large-format 4-inch by 5-inch camera with a digital back connected by a wire to a portable computer. Then she creates a high-resolution digital file that she modifies on the computer until she has the image she desires. “This computer-based process gives me the possibility to retouch and correct the image from adjusting the color and contrast to the luminosity,” Spence says. After several stages of experimentation with digital prints, she makes one the same size as the painting she plans to begin, prints a photograph and tapes it to the wall. And just like any Realist painter working with models, she studies her photo, picks up her brush and paints on the canvas.

Whatever the label, contemporary painters, like their predecessor Eakins, are preoccupied with images in the mind’s eye rather than those captured on film. Photographs reduce artists’ subjects to two dimensions. What the artists in turn paint transforms that reality. When it works, as in all great art, the genius is in the painting.