



Painting

John Salt obituary

British pioneer of photorealist painting in the US in the 1960s and 70s

Simon Chapman

Wed 5 Jan 2022 12.44 EST

John Salt, who has died aged 84, was a pioneer of photorealist painting, a genre that emerged in late 1960s America, in part, like its predecessor pop art, as a response to abstract expressionism. The paintings were of photographs of random subjects, enlarged and rendered in such detail that they themselves could be mistaken for photographs.

John was British but, while living in the US, and painting photographs of cars and trailer homes, he became identified with the American photorealist movement. Like other artists around the same time, John chose the photograph as his subject matter because there was no preconceived idea of how it should be represented. When looking at one of John's paintings it is not his picture of a car, but his picture of a photograph of a car, that we see. The more photograph-like the painting, the more essential it is to

view the painting itself, rather than a reproduction, in order to assess, for instance, scale, colour and texture.

Within three years of having arrived in the US John joined [Ivan Karp](#) at his newly opened OK Harris gallery in New York in 1970, and with Karp's encouragement John's career took off. For the next 25 years, he showed regularly in New York and across the US and Europe. John was among the photorealists included in the 1972 Documenta 5 exhibition in Germany, where the curator [Harald Szeemann](#) introduced photorealism to Europe.



📷 Red Mailbox 2 by John Salt, painted in casein on linen, 2015. Photograph: Louis K Meisel Gallery

Photorealism conveyed the everyday and derived from its source material a sense of the chance configuration of captured moments. It was dismissed by US critics as shallow, in that beyond the technical prowess required to produce a painting identical to a photograph, there remained little of interest - and limited imagination and a minimal knowledge of art was needed to appreciate it.

In the UK, photorealism was similarly received by the art establishment. Apart from a 1973 group show at the Serpentine Gallery in London, curated by the critic and writer Lawrence Alloway, there were few exhibitions of photorealist work until 1975, when John had his first major UK solo show in his hometown of [Birmingham](#), at the Ikon Gallery, where I was then the director.

Soon afterwards, John and his family returned to the UK to live in rural Shropshire. Despite the physical distance he continued to paint predominantly American imagery.

John was born in Birmingham, the only child of Amy (nee Evans) and Cyril Salt, who ran a garage. He studied at Birmingham School of Art (1952-57) at the same time as Peter Phillips and John Walker, under Gilbert Mason and [Kate Fryer](#), and when strong drawing and technical skills were prerequisites for a career as an artist. He went on to the Slade School of Art in London (1958-60), under William Coldstream.

His work then was abstract and frequently in collage, with influences from Francis Bacon, Prunella Clough and Alan Davie. He was drawn to work by Jim Dine, James Rosenquist and Robert Rauschenberg and out of this interest arose an ambition to see the US.

Shortly after he married Jean Arnold, a science teacher, in 1967, the couple decided to spend a couple of years in the US. John was offered a scholarship for the master's programme at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, which also included a paid teaching post. The head of its graduate school was the abstract expressionist painter [Grace Hartigan](#), who became John's mentor and, together with the figurative artist Alex Katz, she was largely responsible for encouraging him to remain in the US.

It was at this time that John's new work, using images from car sales brochures and later 35mm colour transparencies, emerged. Using handcut lace-like paper stencils and a spray gun, he produced paintings of wrecked and abandoned cars and trailer homes. John's work became recognised as among the most sensitively produced of that first wave of this new school.

In 2014 OK Harris closed and John joined the Louis K Meisel gallery in New York. His work was included in *Picturing America: Photorealism in the 1970s*, at the Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin in 2009, and [Photorealism: 50 years of Hyperrealistic Painting](#), which travelled to several European cities, including Birmingham, in 2013.

He continued painting until 2018 when failing health - including dementia and parkinsonism - began to take its toll.

He leaves a body of work that, according to Linda Chase, author of *John Salt: The Complete Works 1969-2006* (2007), "transmogrifies the ugly into the beautiful, the discarded into the treasured, and gives us new eyes with which to view and appreciate our world. These paintings impress with their mastery and verisimilitude but continue to engage with their mystery."

John is survived by Jean and their daughter, Katy, son, Thomas, and four grandchildren.

John Salt, artist, born 2 August 1937; died 13 December 2021

Single

Monthly

Annual

\$7 per month

\$15 per month

Other

Continue →

Remind me in February

