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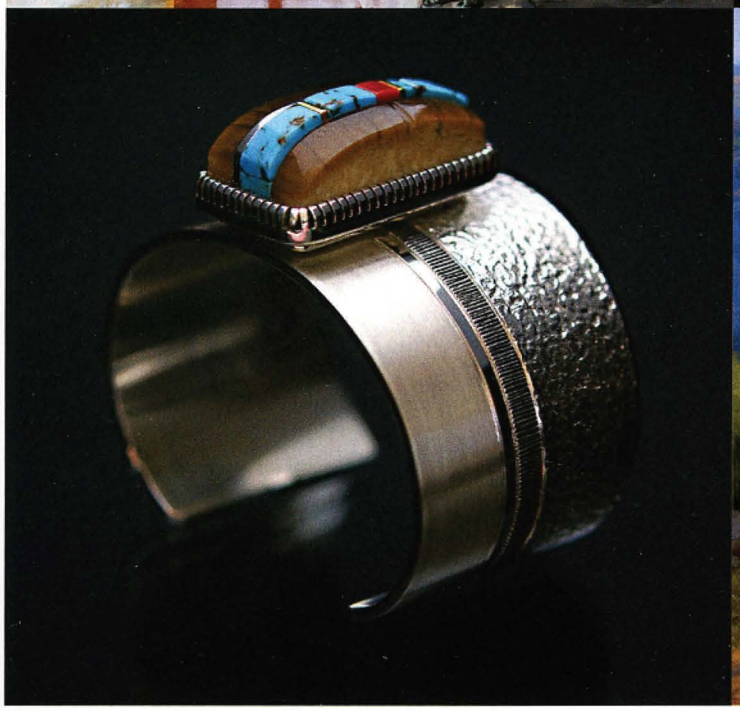
Art & ANTIQUES

FOR COLLECTORS OF THE FINE AND DECORATIVE ARTS



PHOTOREALISM | JUANITA GUCCIONE | ART NOUVEAU CERAMICS | PAUL GAUGUIN

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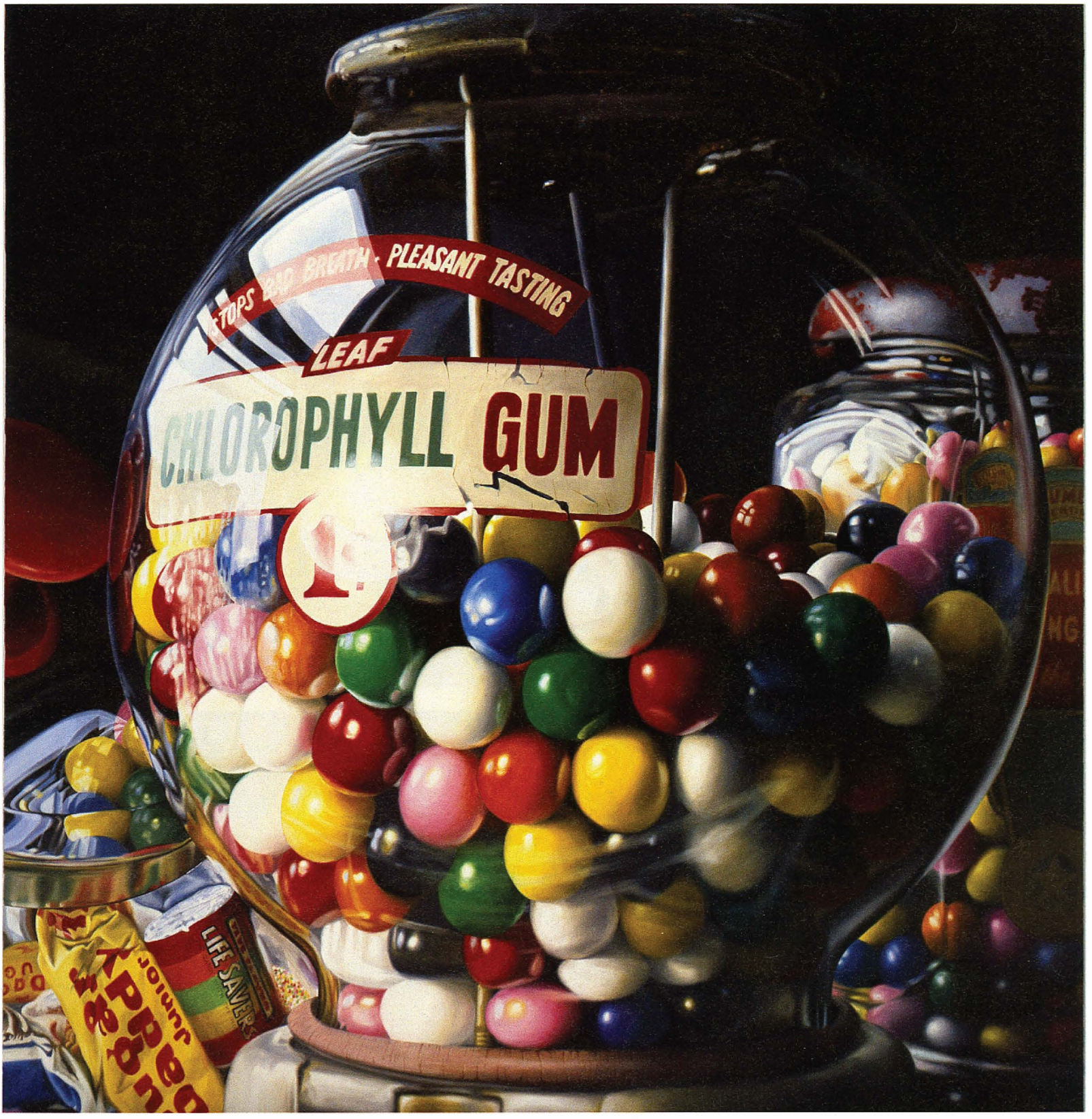
The Art World of Santa Fe

Upon Reflection

There's a lot more to Photorealism than meets the eye.

By Chris Shields

It seems counterintuitive that paintings that offer a directly representational approach to their subjects should cause such critical confusion. A review of a 1992 Photorealism show at the Whitney Museum, "Six Takes on Photo-Realism," by critic Vivien Raynor in *The New York Times* pointed out the fact that it took a figure of multidisciplinary adventurousness the likes of Roland Barthes, by way of critic Thomas Albright, to provide an adequate critical frame through which to analyze the movement and its dually obvious and elusive nature. Barthes' writing on the New French Literature (more commonly known as the *nouveau roman*), a movement which also sought to reproduce the surface of things without prejudice or authorial emphasis, is invoked in an attempt to critically engage with seemingly objective Photorealist images. Due to their human parentage, Photorealism's meticulous reproduction of empirical reality can't help but capture feelings and ideas and—like the mysterious, interior mazes of the *nouveau roman*'s greatest theorist and author, Alain



Robbe-Grillet—be haunted by the ghosts of the human machines that translate and create them.

The title of the new exhibition "From Lens to Eye to Hand: Photorealism 1969 to Today" at the Parrish Art Museum in Water Mill, N.Y. (August 6, 2017–January 21, 2018), puts into words the chain of perceptions and actions that led to the creation of the dazzling works on display. Like the works themselves, the title alludes to the human artist (a nameless collection of perspectives and affects) at the center of it all whose vision and labor permeates them, enveloping the images in an invisible presence, hovering always just out of sight. Photorealism is, in this sense, a re-humanizing of photography's seemingly objective, direct apprehension of reality, a human naming of the new world of machine-made images and reality through the artist's labor of reproducing it.

The Parrish's latest show brings a new dimension to Photorealism, an arguably critically under-interpreted and underappreciated subset of postmodern painting of the 1960s which grew out of Pop Art's engagement with popular culture as subject matter and process art's focus on materiality and

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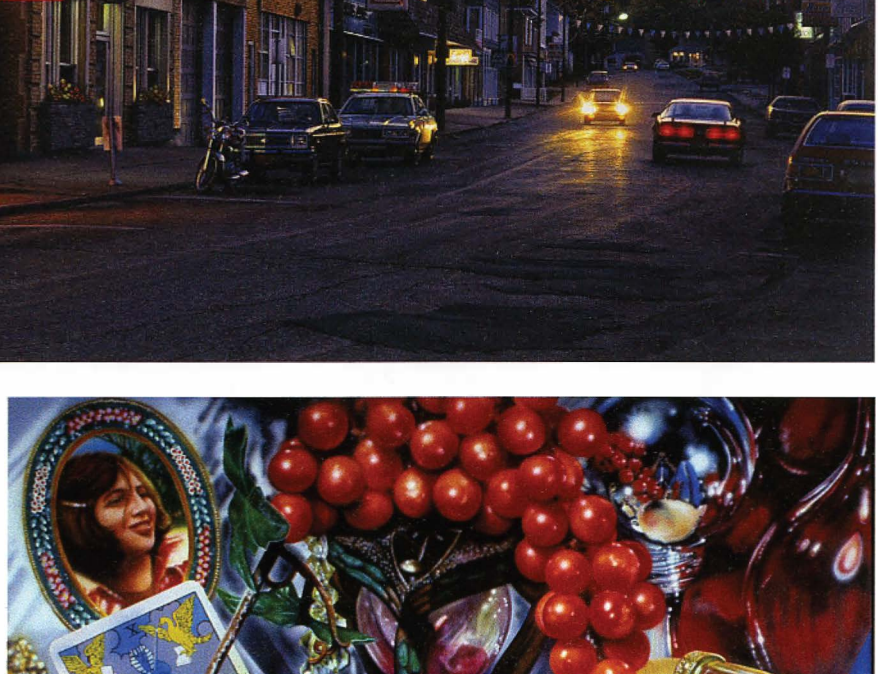

Previous spread, from left: John Salt, *Albuquerque Wreck Yard (Sandia Auto Electric)*, 1972, oil on canvas, 48 x 72 in.; Charles Bell, *Gum Ball No. 10: "Sugar Daddy,"* 1975, oil on canvas, 66 x 66 in. This page, from top: Davis Cone, *State-Autumn Evening*, 2002, acrylic on canvas, 26.5 x 46.5 in.; Audrey Flack, *Wheel of Fortune*, 1977-1978, acrylic and oil on canvas, 96 x 96 in.

privileging of "how it's made." The show features 73 works by some of the movement's best-known figures, including Chuck Close, Richard Estes, Ralph Goings, and Audrey Flack, representing the genre's usual slant toward large-scale representations of gleaming metal and glass. The show originated, however, not in these big, glossy, oil-on-canvas paintings but in the over 30 works on paper which are also on view.

Curator Terrie Sultan explains how a chance encounter with a wall filled with watercolor works by Photorealists inspired the show: "The Parrish collection has many realist paintings, modernist still lifes, and landscapes. One thing missing from that conversation, however, is Photorealism. While visiting Louis Meisel, the dealer who invented the term Photorealism and a longtime friend of the museum, I came across a whole wall of watercolors by Photorealists, and most of these had never been seen before." These works from Meisel's collection provided an

opportunity for Sultan to place Photorealism in its unique place in the history of painting, at the crossroads of representation and the avant-garde, while also displaying works on paper that transpose the technical, conceptual, and philosophical approach of the movement into a different set of materials.

Sultan says, "I wanted to be able to show these works in the context of the Photorealist paintings people know." By exhibiting works such as Goings' 1981 watercolor on paper *Still Life with Check*, which provides what seems to be a more intimate detail of the artist's larger diner vistas in another more delicate and luminous set of materials, and Close's 1973 graphite and watercolor on paper *Nat-Horizontal/Vertical/Diagonal*, a watercolor iteration of the artist's head-on neo-pointillist portraits, the fluidity of the movement's approach becomes apparent. Photorealism emerges as more than a one-trick pony tethered to a particular scale and a particular set of materials.

The intimacy of the small-scale watercolors adds another dimension to the picture of Photorealism. Seeing works from the movement on this scale—an experience quite different from the impressive technical spectacle of larger works—brings the human element into focus. The immediacy of these works, in

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Ralph Goings, *Miss Albany Diner*, 1993, oil on canvas, 48 x 72 in.

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contrast to the time-consuming, heavily process-based nature of the large-scale oil on canvas works, also helps dispel the idea of there being a manufactured, "paint-by-number" method behind Photorealist paintings. "People really misunderstood what these artists were doing, the paint-by-numbers criticism being a major factor in the often dismissive attitude toward them," says Sultan, "but that's not what was it was; it's not that easy."

Many of the large works were made from traced projections of photographs on canvas, but not all. "Several of them worked in the old-fashioned way, by making a grid on the canvas, the way Chuck Close did," Sultan says, going on to explain how Close would come into his studio every morning and paint the squares of the grid he had laid out, remarking, with a small laugh, how this approach helped to prove the old adage, "90 percent of success is showing up." This seemingly demystifying approach to painting does involve taking a step away from the notion of the tortured soul splattering itself all over the canvas in a moment of "pure" inspiration, without planning and discipline. But that does not mean that the individual technique of a particular artist is not part of the nature of the work. A work by Close and a work by Estes differ not only in composition and content (two factors that provide part of Photorealism's modernist genealogy) but also in brushwork. For all its seeming negation of painting, Photorealism is very much about painting, only under a new paradigm.

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From top: Richard Estes, *Hotel Empire*, 1987, oil on canvas, 37.5 x 87 in.; Tom Blackwell, *Little Roy's Gold Wing*, 1977, oil on canvas, 66.625 x 83.75 in.

MEISEL FAMILY COLLECTIONS, NEW YORK. © RICHARD ESTES; SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM, NEW YORK, PURCHASED WITH THE AID OF FUNDS FROM THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS, IN WASHINGTON, D.C., A FEDERAL AGENCY, MATCHING FUNDS CONTRIBUTED BY MR. AND MRS. BARRIE M. DAMSON, 1978, 78.2410. © TOM BLACKWELL.

The place of paint in Photorealism becomes even more apparent when looking at the watercolors. The opportunities afforded by these works on paper held an appeal for the artists, aside from any question of scale. "Almost all of them said one of the reasons they were attracted to the medium of watercolor was its luminosity," says Sultan. This concern with watercolor's particular character evinces something that might not be apparent at first glance in the highly finished oils of the Photorealists—that paint and its materiality is of paramount importance. The rendering of reflections on metal, glass, and chrome that oil paint facilitates with its own reflective quality, is a major characteristic of Photorealism.

In Goings' 1993 oil on canvas *Miss Albany Diner,* the viewer's eye moves from one representation of reflected light to another. From the plastic surface of the diner's counter to the glass dome that houses a bundt cake to the curved panels of the ceiling reflecting a Pepsi logo, each encounter between light and surface has its own character, which Goings recreates by utilizing oil paint's own sheen. *Wheel of Fortune,* a 1977–78 oil on canvas work by Flack, also provides a collection of reflections that cause the viewer's eyes to dance. The occult-tinged still life, which recalls some of the tongue-in-cheek dabbling in fatalism, fortune-telling, and the trappings of the supernatural in both the *nouveau roman* and French New Wave cinema—most notably in Agnès Varda's film *Cléo From 5 to 7*—contains not one but two mirrors. One reflects a partial view of the objects on

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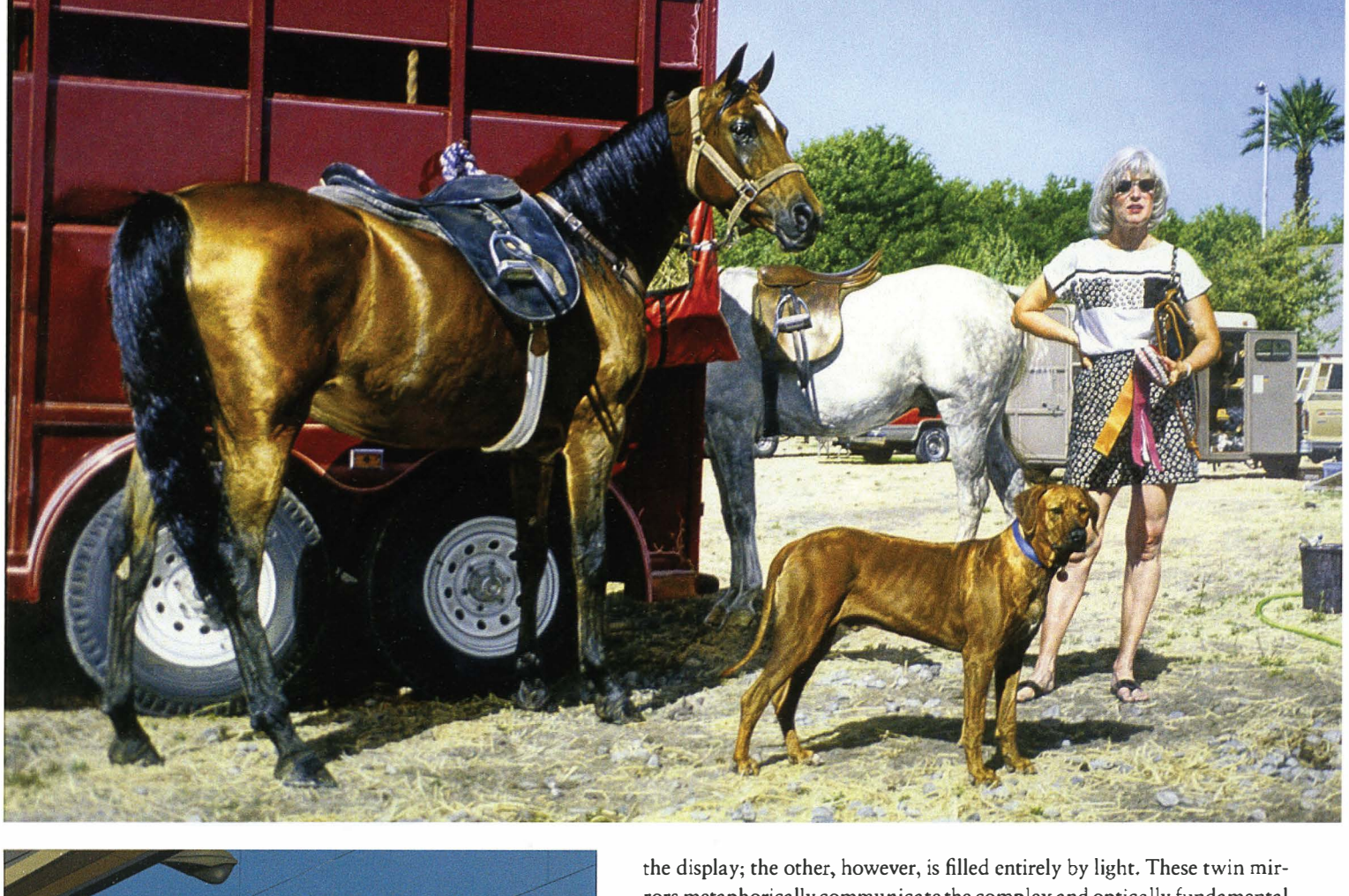

the display; the other, however, is filled entirely by light. These twin mirrors metaphorically communicate the complex and optically fundamental nature of the relationship between light, vision, and the creation of images that Photorealism takes as its very foundation and focus.

In Estes' 1987 oil on canvas *Hotel Empire,* the use of light and reflection, rather than filling the the entire canvas with points of interest and bravura technical application as in *Miss Albany Diner,* places reflection quite literally to the side. On the leftmost edge of the painting, the entire scene is reflected in a pane of glass, which is by far the most exciting and intriguing place for the eye to land. The placing of the reflective surface at the side of the composition rather than in the center, as in the direct compositions of many Photorealist works, has a poetic aspect. The world goes on, people cross the street, cars sit parked along the sidewalk, and the blue sky is tranquilly dotted with white, cotton-ball clouds, but for the artist, the perpetual outsider in often self-imposed, yet necessary, exile, the scene exists as pure light, a reflection of the world.

Light is the tool of both painters and photographers, and Photorealism addresses this affinity through its choice of subjects. However, as the title of the show makes clear, the lens and the machinery of photography are also of great significance. Digital photography is pushing Photorealism into even more mind-bending territory through its ability to capture images

with hereto unparalleled speed, immediacy, and ease. As Photorealist painters create works painted from digital photographs, the complex and illuminating relationship between the technology of art and its human element, their disjunction and symbiosis, becomes even more apparent and fascinating.

The idea of a human being using digital machines to capture images unique to the optical and processing capabilities of the technology leads us to ask where the boundary between the human and the machine is at this point in time and where it will be in the future. The digital camera unlike the analog cameras of the previous era, which merely took impressions, is both an eye and a mind, not only collecting but translating. The artist, in this sense, becomes a type of cyborg, seeing through a privileged technological eye which captures visual information and light, translates it into digital information, and then reassembles it into an image once again, a series of pixels that strangely echo Chuck Close's grids.

The Photorealists have implicitly been in dialogue with this human–machine conundrum since the inception of their heavily process-based, photography-inspired, and contingent movement began. Digital photography, however, takes this ontological artistic puzzle even farther, bringing us one step closer to asking, in the words of the counterculture science fiction visionary Phillip K. Dick, "Do androids dream of electric sheep?" In our case, though, the question becomes, "Will artists paint what only machines can see?"

Opposite page, from top: Richard McLean, *Western Tableau with Rhodesian Ridgeback (Trails West)*, 1993, oil on linen, 48 x 70 in.; Robert Cottingham, *Radios*, 1977, oil on linen, 78 x 78 in. ; This page: Robert Bechtle, *'73 Malibu*, 1974, oil on canvas, 48 x 69 in.