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Art & ANTIQUES

FOR COLLECTORS OF THE FINE AND DECORATIVE ARTS



HUBERT ROBERT | ZAO WOU-KI | JAMES HAVARD | ROBERT COTTINGHAM

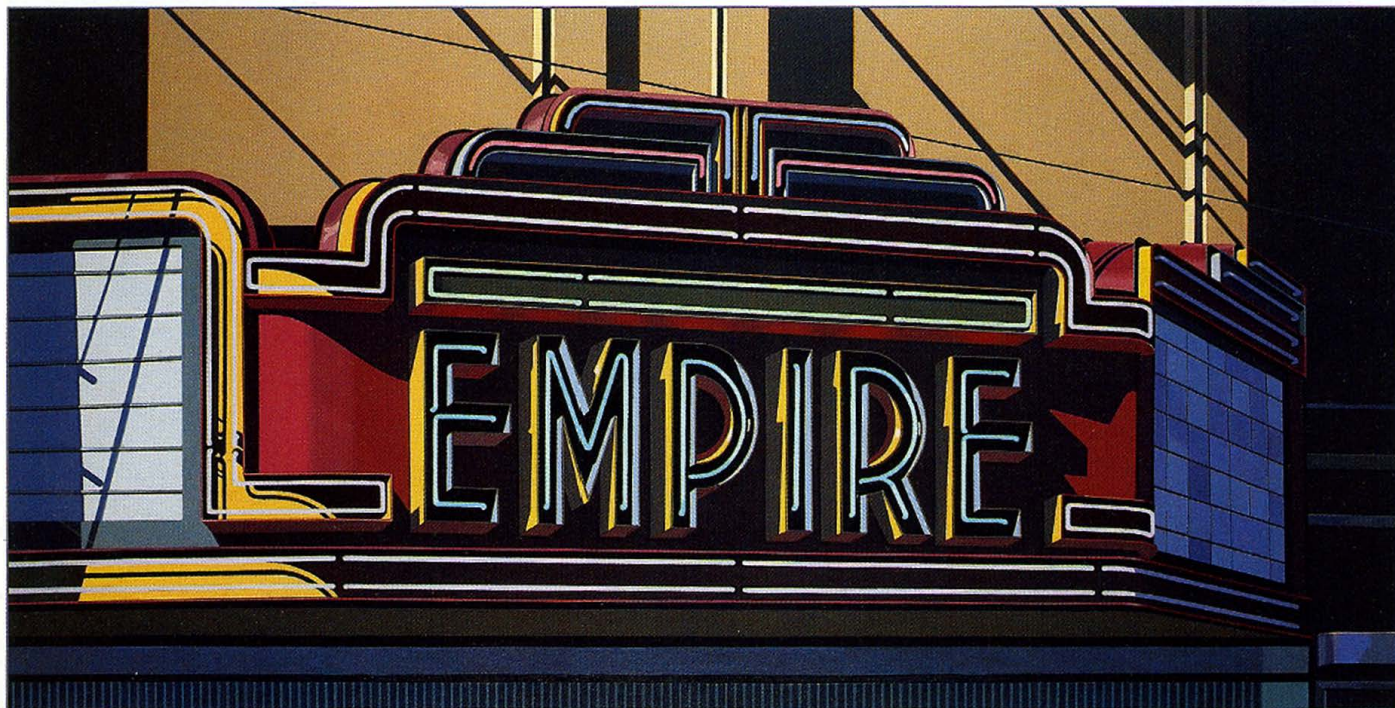
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TOM WESSELMANN

Signs of the Times

A NEW SHOW PUTS DECADES OF ROBERT COTTINGHAM'S METICULOUSLY REALIST AND DECIDEDLY AMERICAN PAINTINGS ON VIEW. BY SARAH E. FENSOM



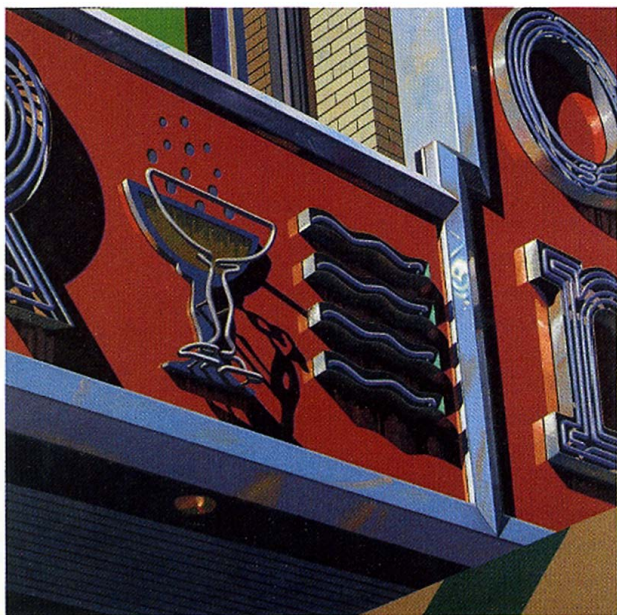
From top: Robert Cottingham, *Empire IV*, 2012, oil on canvas, 48 x 96 inches; *Champagne*, 1992, oil on canvas, 62 x 62 inches.

TO SAY THAT Robert Cottingham's painting practice began as a hobby gives the wrong sort of impression. However, it was after the close of his workday as an art director at an advertising firm that Cottingham initially painted. He had graduated from Pratt Institute in 1963, having studied advertising and graphic design, and was working in New York at the firm of Young and Rubicam. In 1964, the artist was transferred to Los Angeles. Within four years, he had given up the advertising racket and was painting full-time.

One look at Cottingham's work—which has been called “Photorealist,” though the artist insists otherwise (he’s a

realist painter dealing with the vernacular scene, like Stuart Davis, Edward Hopper, or Charles Demuth)—and it seems inseparable from his advertising career. Like Andy Warhol and James Rosenquist, who also came from an advertising background, Cottingham seems entrenched in methods of communication. This is expressed not simply by his work's bold palette or sense of Americana, but because of its ability to convey powerful sentiments with a single word, letter, or symbol. Typeface, too, seems of paramount importance in the artist's work, with the font in which words are written (or in this case painted) communicating just as much as the words themselves.

But in truth, Cottingham's work takes on a different sort of advertising than what was typical of Pop Art. Rather than appropriating ad copy or images of mass-market products for sale, much of Cottingham's paintings focus on the street-level advertising of American businesses: signage. The dazzling marquee of a movie theater, the





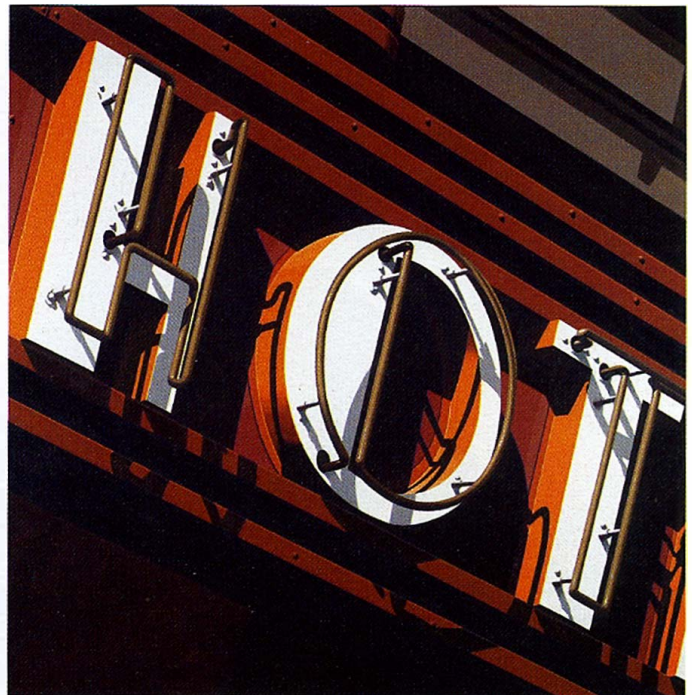
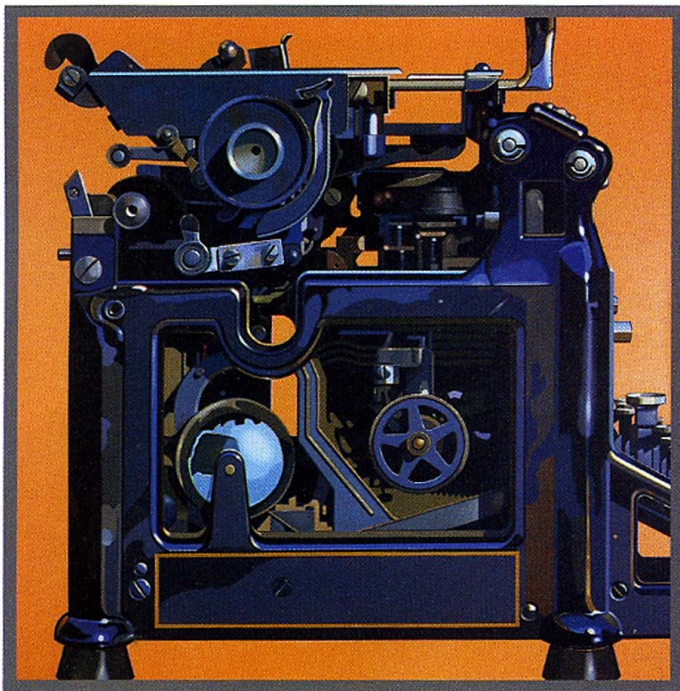
painted insignia of a railroad boxcar, and the inviting neon signs of diners and bars all find a place in Cottingham's work. Cottingham rendered his imagery with uncanny precision but often cropped the name on a sign to form new words (such as *A.R.T.*, 1992) or captured a marquee from an unexpected vantage point. Though he began using photographs as initial references in the late '60s, he wasn't beholden to the original image and would change the words to accommodate his desired meaning. If signs were meant to easily communicate familiar messages, Cottingham's canvases were an opportunity to see the familiar from a different, sometimes disorienting, perspective.

"Robert Cottingham: Master Realist" opens at The Butler Institute of American Art in Youngstown, Ohio, on September 18

(it runs through November 20). Along with an expansive look at work from a decades-long career (Cottingham is still painting today at the age of 80), the show will also put a slice of American visual culture on view.

Jane Eckert, the owner of Eckert Fine Art Gallery + Consulting in Kent, Conn., and the curator of "Master Realist," says, "To me he is an all-American painter. Signage was such a big part of our country before television and the media." In the '70s, Eckert recounts, Cottingham won a grant that afforded him the opportunity to travel from the East Coast to the West by bus. "There were so many old theaters and stores, which he'd photograph as he went across the country," says Eckert. "To this day he paints from those photos." Much of Cottingham's subject matter—the signs

Bus II, 1965, oil on canvas,
39 x 52 inches.



Clockwise from top left: *Underwood (Side View)*, 2004, oil on canvas, 84 x 82 ½ inches; *Hot*, 1992, oil on canvas, 60 x 60 inches; *House on St. Andrews*, 1969, oil on canvas, 36 x 62 ½ inches.

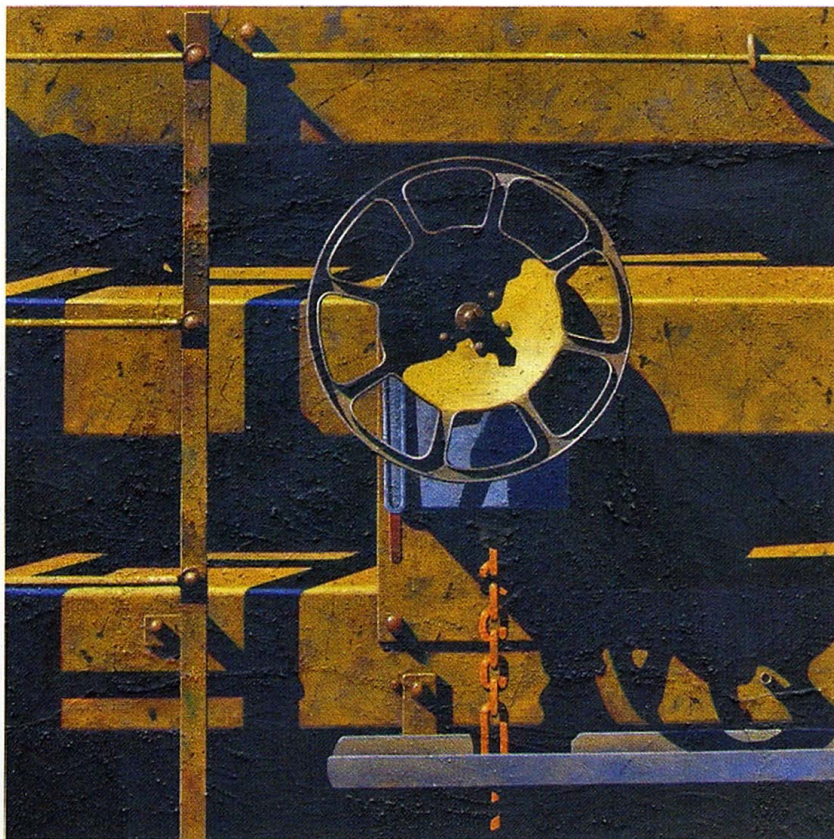
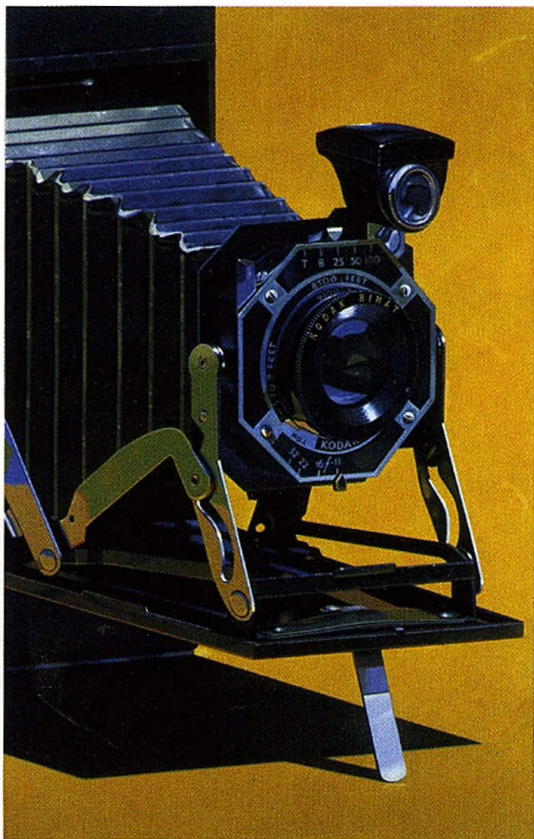
and businesses in these photographs—has since been torn down. “He was on the cusp of capturing this part of Americana, especially in the Midwest,” says Eckert.

With *Empire*, one of Cottingham’s most famous images (one example will be in “Master Realist”), the artist’s paintings

serve as an inadvertent means of historical preservation. In the late ’90s, Cottingham was in Alabama for a show of his work at the Montgomery Museum of Art. The director of the museum suggested that the artist go see an old theater downtown, which was built in 1914. When Cotting-



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST; SEVEN BRIDGES FOUNDATION OF GREENWICH, CT; COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



ham went to look at the Empire Theater it had already closed, but he learned that in 1955 Rosa Parks was actually stopped in front of it when police were called to arrest her. Today, though the Empire has been torn down, the Rosa Parks Library and Museum stands in its place. Cottingham photographed the theater, and in 2008, when he was commissioned by Lincoln Center in New York to develop an image for the anniversary of their film festival, those photographs served as his model. For the next couple of years, Cottingham rendered images of the Empire Theater marquee in oil, watercolor, gouache, and graphite.

“Master Realist” will also illuminate the artist’s process, which involves several steps. Eckert says, “Most Photorealists just took a photo and worked directly from that, but Robert starts with a drawing and captures the shading—where lights and darks are—then he plays around with cropping it. He gets close.” After the drawing and deciding on composition, Cottingham does a gouache or watercolor rendering, bringing color into the image. Only after these steps

does he move on to oil. “I find his paintings are not as cold as Photorealist paintings,” says Eckert, “they are very tight, but there’s always a little bit of a softer feel to them. It’s the process that makes that happen.”

The show won’t just stop at signage.

Other fascinations of the artist will be on display: a series of Arts & Crafts houses in Pasadena, Calif., Remington typewriters, Brownie cameras, and watercolors of colored perfume bottles he made early in his career. But regardless of subject matter, Cottingham’s work, as will be on view at “Master Realist,” never strays from the bold, realist presentation of the image that makes it recognizable. “He’s a graphic designer,” says Eckert, “that’s the thread that runs through it all.”

Clockwise from top left: *Bimat*, 1998, oil on canvas, 87 x 54 inches; *#21 For Jeanne*, 1990, acrylic and sand/linen, 54 ½ x 54 ½ x 2 ¼ inches; *Loans*, 2014, oil on canvas, 60 x 60 inches.

