The Richter Resolution

Photo finish: Calling for a four-year moratorium on a fashionable, far too overworked trend

By Jerry Saltz Tuesday, Mar 2 2004

In defense of the staggeringly radical act of really looking, the wildness of the imagination, and the limitlessness of pictorial invention, I propose a 48-month moratorium on the reproduction of photographs via overhead, opaque, or slide projectors in paintings (this means tracing too). Call this the Richter Resolution, the Polke Principle, or the Tuymans Rule.Whatever you call it, it means that photographs, film stills, snapshots, or whatever may be used as starting points, references, or inspiration, but for the next four years let’s pretend there’s a ban against the use of mechanical devices to replicate these images in paintings.

This is not a geezer rant about loss of skills, bad drawing, laziness, or cheating. I’m not trying to put the genie back in the bottle. Like brushes and rulers, projectors are tools. This is about how these tools are used, which lately has become unadventurous. I address this mainly to students and do so provisionally, not prescriptively or prohibitively. Basically, this is a celebration of artists who find original ways to use these devices and an indictment of those who have turned this type of depiction into a tedious tic.

By now, almost everyone would agree that the traditional Warhol-Richter-Walter Benjamin defense of the use of photography in painting, the "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" argument, and the chatter about "interrogating representation" or "investigating the problem of the photograph," isn’t just dated, it’s schtick. We all know that photography is a remarkable and remarkably complex way of seeing and picturing the world; that the space between the photograph, the photographer, and the thing photographed is incredibly rich; that the graphic

Don’t try this at home: Gerhard Richter’s S. With Châr (detail, 1995)
field of the photograph is often scintillatingly alive, specific, and very post-Renaissance; and that reproducing photographs in paintings once represented a significant repudiation of dearly held beliefs. There's always a buzz about seeing images of images, or in the case of Pop art, icons of icons. But there hasn't been a "problem of the photograph" for more than a decade, only a problem with the people who think there is. The camera, which was supposed to supplant painting, didn't. Instead, painting—even the sponge and always elastic—absorbed it and discovered new realms to explore.

These days, much photo-based painting looks the same (ditto digitally based abstraction, but we'll deal with that another time): a newspaper photo, picture of an urban or suburban setting, an airport or a hotel; a celebrity, fashion model, or porn star; a stadium, pavilion, or modernist interior; a still from a film; a yearbook pic; shots of young people doing anything; or any advertisement. These images are typically rendered in kaleidoscopic color, blurred pigments, or washy black and white. Regardless of who makes these monotonous knockoffs, the results are the same: variations on Richter, Warhol, Tuymans, Polke, Celmis, Fischl, Rauschenberg, Peyton, Doig, Close, Robert Longo, Lisa Ruyter, or any original photorealistic. Unlike their lemming-like imitators, all these artists have employed photographs in original ways.

Like all media, painting has certain weapons of mass destruction at its disposal. Fervent fans of painting (like me) think these WMDs are the reasons painting has been around for so long and why it's so bottomless. They include drawing, color, surface, touch, working from the imagination or observation, and the mystical ability to embed thought in viscous substance. This alchemical artillery is typically restricted or curtailed altogether in work that simply reproduces a photograph by mechanical means. The results are what I often think of as fake art and easy solutions.

Often, faint pencil marks are visible where the artist has carefully followed projected outlines (see especially nostrils, mouths, and hands). This isn't drawing, or even an idea of it. It's mindless copying. Yet even this nondrawing would be fine if it were purposeful. Usually, it's not. These painters are just trying to get the photo right, like diligent grade-schoolers. There's little ad-libbing, invention, exploration, or discovery, just standard twists, shifts, and blurs. There's no exultation in looking or seeing or space. Yet painting is so powerful that it can run effectively with almost all of its cylinders rendered ineffective. That's why some of this art passes as something rather than nothing—although all of it will look dated in no time.

The point is, cameras see things in a very particular, very identifiable way—with a single "eye," usually a 50-millimeter one. Our eye's lens is variable (to focus near and far) and is approximately 8mm. The perception of space varies from person to person and depends on experience and emotional and refractive state. Nearsighted people tend to be center-oriented while ignoring the periphery. Others have difficulty focusing on details, but notice everything around them. The eye is round; the film plane is flat. Camera lenses correct for chromatic and spherical abnormalities; we don't. Eyes scan; cameras crop. Either way, the instant I see a painting with an image that has been reproduced by rote, I know it: Much of the life of the painting drains away, and I die a little. All I am saying is give the alchemy of painting a chance.

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