POST-PHOTOREALISM

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Is it a painting or a photograph? I remember with a certain fondness the shock of photorealism in the late '60s: Malcolm Morley's calendar ocean liners, Lowell Nesbitt's empty interiors that looked like black-and-white photo blowups, Audrey Flack's "snapshots" and then her airbrushed still-life extravaganzas, Richard Estes' cityscapes, Chuck Close's giant faces.

I can't say that after more than a decade all this work has become universally accepted. What art ever is? Doctrinaire modernists abhor any kind of figurative art; pro-realists often insist on the superiority of painting from real life. In art, people often confuse taste with moral judgment. I am not convinced that painting from photographs is immoral. In fact, painting from photographs has been a common but furtive practice since the invention of photography. Photorealism, however, openly acknowledges the photo source, sometimes to the point of celebration, and often makes photography itself an important aspect of its content.

Amazingly enough, photorealism still elicits in some quarters the rage of the high and mighty against the lowly and illicit. Even more than "normal" realist art, photorealism is thought to appeal to the vulgar and uninformed, the unconverted. What nonsense.

In the meantime, photorealism has been changing. Artists such as John Baeder (diners) and Idelle Weber (garbage), have retained the expected photorealist supression of paint handling, but use it to explore more personal and more social subject matter. Audrey Flack has pushed the sign and symbol content of her still-life paintings toward a direct investigation of contemporary allegory while juggling very non-photographic forms of illusionism. Malcolm Morley, *the* photorealist pioneer, has been a total expressionist for some time.

Three solo exhibitions this month display some further variations and suggest that it may be time to consider the possibilities of what might be called post-photorealism.

Keeping in mind that taxonomy is not destiny, new and clearly tentative classifications can be useful, heuristic and illuminating. Pigeonholing is not the goal; description is. Art is never neat. Just when you think you know what a particular style really is, just when description is most in danger of becoming proscription, you begin to notice that what you are attempting to describe has been changing all along, no longer fits, has escaped again.

Chuck Close, Don Eddy and Joan Semmel are three artists whose work can no longer fit comfortably under a purely photorealist rubric. Close (Pace, 32 E. 57 St., through Nov. 24), some may argue, never really belonged there anyway because of his obvious concern with the grid system of transfering a photo image to canvas or paper; the square-by-square enlargement of the source. Hasn't he always been a conceptual painter?

I would answer that there has always been a conceptual or systemic basis to his work, but it is only in the prints and drawings that this aspect has been emphasized, exposing codes and process, testing degrees of readability and image recognition.

In Close's current exhibit, there is only one painting. *Mark* dominates the room. In full photo-color, it is nine feet high, and as usual one can get lost in the nuances of surfaces and foci. A gigantic face is difficult to avoid. But I was more engaged by the works on paper. They are all faces, recycled, as it were, from older paintings. Phil, Nat, Leslie, Susan, and now Mark are beginning to look like old friends. The grids are exposed and the images are mosaic-like. In some variations, Phil looks positively romantic with breeze-whipped rather than merely disheveled hair.

The biggest jolt occurs when you come upon the fingerprint works. Using his fingers and a stamp-pad, Close has filled in his ubiquitous grid with just enough marks to get those deadpan faces across. One work seems to leave the grid behind. The photo look is gone.

Don Eddy (Nancy Hoffman, 429 W. Broadway, through Dec. 6) has pushed his subject matter and his technique to another kind of extreme that also strains against the photorealism category. Close is doing more with less; Eddy is doing more with more. There is so much information in Eddy's paintings of glass cases full of glassware and silverware, so many reflections and transparencies, that the boundaries of the various objects almost disappear. These acrylic paintings and drawings are modest in scale but packed with a brittle shimmer that is both icy and luxurious, exploding a strictly photo look. They are in the same family as previous Eddys but are even more complex. Also, he is now employing the black edges of the glass shelves as clear-cut elements of the compositions. For me, the diagonals and the zigzags do not work; they push the overall effect towards chaos. But when the shelf edges are deployed horizontally, I am thoroughly pleased. The complexity needs reprise, needs contrast, needs a reminder of the literal surface.

Joan Semmel, (Lerner-Heller, 956 Madison Av. through Nov. 28) is even more obviously post-photorealist. She achieved recognition as a photorealist somewhat later than Close or Eddy and had what amounted to a separate career as an abstract expressionist when she was living in Spain some years ago. Her new paintings — the boldest and most adventurous I have seen in a long time — acknowledge and attempt to assimilate that abstract expressionist background.

The first Semmel paintings I was aware of were photo-derived erotic nudes, male and female together on a heroic scale, utilizing hot, uniform and non-descriptive colors, almost as if each of the lovers had bathed in vats of dye. Then she focused on her own body, photographing herself without a mirror, to create dramatic perspectives and a landscape-like depiction of the female form. The colors became descriptive. Flesh-colored flesh anchored the emotions in the visible, and in true photorealist fashion the paint handling was virtually invisible.

What Semmel has done now may sound impossible. She has mixed the painterly and non-painterly, the expressionist and the photographic. These contrasts give her new paintings great impact. The cool views of her own body, realistically portrayed, are juxtaposed with painterly, passionate versions of the same poses to form resonant double images. Although the images are not superimposed, there is that effect. It is as if the theoretically separate modes of perception of the right side and the left side of the brain are made visible in a blaze of color. Without denying the rational measurements of the eye, emotion and memory take visible form. I am most impressed.

I suspect we will see further efforts to build on and transcend the photorealist mode, by artists already classified as photorealists — early, middle and late — and by a host of younger artists who take photorealist principles as given, as a springboard to yet unknown forms of expression.