

PhotoRealism 1960s-70s

With the USA becoming more and more the forefront of contemporary art, (remember **Pop Art** beginning in Britain but flourishing in the USA?), the shape of painting changed for ever, often literally.

We have now moved out of the rectangular 'landscape' or 'portrait' format, (with **Jackson Pollock's** almost infinite 'action paintings' and **Ellsworth Kelly's** experiment with canvas shapes). Indeed we have moved into relief or 2 and a half dimensions with '*readymades*' like **Robert Rauschenberg's** '*Bed*' and "*Canyon*" and **Tom Wesselman's** *Still lives*.

Indeed, **Rauschenberg** made a leap first, (and failed, ultimately), by the **Dadaists** and Marcel **Duchamp** in the early 20th century. That leap suggested that:

Artist = Artwork

He began saying that, as an artist all his actions were art, by definition. Such was the argument behind "*Erased De Kooning*" remember? **Rauschenberg** most famously took this even further with "*This is a portrait of...if I say so*". It seemed to present the argument that even the artists' thoughts or words should be considered art. We have seen how **Andy Warhol** and his **Pop Art** colleagues exploited this idea to become the celebrity artists we recognise today, (a move not unlike the idea of 'celebrity chefs we have today, if you think of it?). Art was being led in an intellectual direction. It was becoming more about the concept, (hence '**conceptual art**'), and less about what it physically looked like. Galleries played host to "happenings", (beloved by **Yoko Ono**, wife of Beatle **John Lennon**) and "performances".

Such brazen moves prompted quite a reaction, as you would imagine. Accusations of charlatanism and '*emperor's new clothes*' abounded. Other artists launched their own reactions, one of the most interesting being that of the **Photorealists**. Drastic times called for drastic measures and small numbers of painters ran right back to practising the skills of the artist in the most traditional of ways.

References were made to earlier **American Realists** like **Winslow Homer**, **Grant Wood**, **Andrew Wyeth**. The isolation of **Edward Hopper's** lone figures and desolation of **Charles Sheeler** and **Charles Demuth's** industrial landscapes was revisited. This time the new realists embraced the sharpness of contemporary photography, and used it to update their countrymen's *social commentary*. They added into the mix, their own interpretation of the consumerist America that had made **Andy Warhol** and **Roy Lichtenstein** so famous. Remember, The Pop artists had taken the everyday consumer object such as beer bottles or soap powder boxes and made us think of the artistic input in them?

The photorealists took photos of the most mundane looking aspects of American life and presented them for the scrutiny of the gallery viewer. The freedom to use actual photographs, projecting them onto large canvases and 'copying' the outlines can be said to have been won by the likes of **Warhol** using *Photoscreenprinting* or **Wesselman** using actual household objects, but the word copying is misleading. Anyone who has ever used a tracing as the starting point of an artwork knows it is merely the start of the process. The ability required to produce such accuracy in paint is huge. Initially, the resulting paintings look startlingly 'real'. Surely this is the artist using his skills in the most impressive and accessible way possible?

Looking a wee bit deeper though, we begin to see that these artists have achieved something even more remarkable than that.

Painters like **Richard Estes** manage to go beyond the reality that a camera can create. A photograph, like a 'live' viewers glance, must settle on an area of focus, leaving other areas less crisp, less defined. Distance will obscure detail, ariel perspective dull colours and tones and blur edges.

Not so these images. Equal weight and definition is given to everything captured within the canvas. Bizzarely, what initially strikes the viewer as the most perfect version of reality imaginable becomes a very uncomfortable image. There is no real foreground, middle ground or background. Depth is not really represented. With no actual depth to rely on, the idea that forms are shown realistically becomes harder to justify. Everything is brought to the front, to the surface of the painting.

We have seen this before with **Mark Rothko's** soft-edged abstractions. In these the surface paint deepened to draw us in and suggest depth and warmth. Here, the effect is the opposite. Initially we see layers, depth – reality! But with time and contemplation everything swims up to the surface and causes confusion. Reflections in windows refuse to recede, jostling with the interiors within for your attention.

Just when we think we have re-entered our 'comfort zone' with these photorealist images, the challenges of the conceptual and intellectual exercises offered by 60s and 70s contemporaries suddenly don't seem so different after all.

Richard Estes (USA)
Rappaport's Pharmacy, 1976

David Hockney (England)
Peter in the Pool, 1968

Chuck Close (USA)
Self Portrait, 1968

Audrey Flack (USA)
Paint Tubes, 1973

Duane Hanson (USA)
American Tourists, 1974

Franz Gertsch (Germany)
Greta, 1975

Ron Mueck