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 Nesbit's empty interiors that looked like black-and-white photo blowups, Audrey Flack's "snappers" 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 futile 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. Pigmentholing 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 John Semmel are three artists whose work can no longer fit comfortably under a purely photorealist rubric. Close (Pasca, 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 transferring 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 not only one painting, Mark dominates the room,