

KENNETH BAKER Galleries

"North Beach" (2007), an acrylic on panel by Gus Heinze. [Scott Richards Contemporary Art]



Scott Richards Contemporary Art

What was photorealism? We still await the museum survey of **photorealism** that will plot its position in modern art history. Meanwhile, "**Photorealism: A Closer Look**" at Scott Richards provides a teasing glimpse of the complexities such a survey might involve.

The term "**photorealism**" implies paintings derived in color and composition from projected photographs or paintings that study photographic information as a subject.

But even the small selection of work at Richards shows the limits of these implications.

Bertrand Meniel's "*Pont Neuf*" (2007) displays a fanatical devotion to detail that vies with photography for accuracy. It asks whether we trust more the artist's nervous system or mechanical means of reproducing appearances. The view it describes includes, like a muttered punch line, a tourist in the foreground with a camera.

For his 5-by-4-foot "*The Starting Line*" (1999), on the other hand, **Cesar Santander** used the camera to magnify information, setting us nose to nose with an array of Disney-inspired mouse and duck toys, apparently on a shiny table top.

The picture revels in its own compositional complexity and in the seeming irony of making something unique and valuable from a cluster of cheesy toys. Santander has built in a further irony by showing us the word "Japan" stamped on one of the toys. No matter their lowbrow origins, metal toys made in Japan have become precious rarities in recent years.

Some photorealist pieces, such as **Tom Blackwell's** "*Red Lightning*" (2002) delight in the process of translation by which optical phenomena pass through the camera's and into painting's descriptive rhetoric.

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While **John Baeder**, **Robert Gniewek** and **James Gucwa** seem to practice **photorealism** as an extension of the early 20th century American Scene aesthetic. **Gus Heinze's** "*North Beach*" (2007) shares several of these qualities. He also shows that the camera serves painters as a memory aid and a device whose nature is to cut cross sections of the everyday, permitting artists to test and retest its worthiness for immersion in the long currents of pictorial tradition.

Photorealism: A Closer Look: Paintings and watercolors. Through May 31. Scott Richards Contemporary Art, 251 Post St., San Francisco. (415) 788-5588, www.srcart.com.