

MODERN ART NOTES

In Prototypes, Lewis Baltz Takes on Painting

by Tyler Green

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As I noted in part one, Lewis Baltz made his Prototypes series in the late 1960s and early 1970s, just after the most wildly experimental, avant-garde period in American art. In the 25 years before Prototypes, abstract expressionism had been born and had spawned grandchildren. Pop art, minimalism and plenty of other -isms then rose in response. Just about when Baltz began Prototypes as an undergraduate at the San Francisco Art Institute in 1967, American artists were beginning to overtly examine and synthesize the recent past in their own work.



For the most part, this was a new thing for the American-led avant garde. The abstract expressionists and their peers most often worked to avoid reference and instead to expunge the past from their work: Jackson Pollock worked to free his canvases from Picasso. Motherwell pushed out Matisse. Seemingly everyone embraced and then sought to diminish references to biomorphic surrealism. (The exception came along in Robert Rauschenberg, who made references to art history and new art in his work, most especially the recent art of Jasper Johns.)



But roughly concurrent to when Baltz began Prototypes, that began to change and American artists again became willing to talk to each other in their work. In 1965, when Baltz was a freshman, Roy Lichtenstein began his series of 'Brushstroke' paintings that both lampooned and distilled abex. In 1971, when Baltz was earning his MFA at Claremont Graduate School, Rauschenberg launched his underrated 'cardboards' series, in which he deconstructed the art of his peers and then used almost nothing but cardboard boxes to 're-make' it. (The period

of self-examination devolved from synthesization to direct appropriation, as in Sherrie Levine's "After Walker Evans" pictures.) [Image: Lichtenstein, Red and White Brushstrokes, 1965.]

Meanwhile, photography was working its way out of the street-photography mode popularized by Lee Friedlander, Diane Arbus, Robert Frank, et al and was becoming a more conceptually-driven medium. Baltz was on the vanguard of that transformation. With Prototypes, his first major series (there's Frank's influence), Baltz ambitiously chose to tackle the two biggest subjects around: 20th-century painting and the rich American tradition of landscape art. To do so, Baltz photographed the buildings and landscapes that were a part of his California environment, an interest that Baltz would develop for the next 20 years, in serieses such as Park City, Candlestick Point, and The New Industrial Parks Around Irvine, Calif.

In Prototypes, Baltz doesn't examine landscape as thoroughly as the ensuing serieses. He was still building toward that. In the meantime, Baltz had something to say about painting before he completely gave himself over to joining Robert Adams, Joe Deal, Hank Wessel and other photographers in re-defining the American landscape. Baltz took a clever route to considering 20th-century painting: Look around at buildings and billboards and other man-built structures. Find painters, paintings and -isms in them. Click.

Take Sausalito (1968, top right). It's a picture of a windowpane, behind which is a set of blinds, both of which are framed by window casing. It's also a reference to the dominant theme of 20thC painting: The push toward the picture plane, the drive to eliminate perspective and to flatten pictorial space. Baltz all but eliminates perspective in his picture. The blinds push up against the glass picture plane. I mean the pane in his picture, not the glass between the National Gallery visitor and the photograph. (Another Sausalito, from 1973 (at right), presents Baltz is something of an encore, with still-flatter plywood replacing the blinds.)



One of Baltz's cleverist pictures is The Berkeley Crisis (1968), which shows part of the front page of the San Francisco Chronicle in an old fashioned newspaper rack, the kind that had a steel grid that held a newspaper in place. As you see the newspaper, you see the steel grid, right in front of it. The photograph is a reference to the cubism of Braque, Picasso and Gris, which regularly featured cribs from sections of newspapers painted onto paintings or stuck onto papier colles. The grid of the rack refers to the implied grid on which cubism, particularly Gris' was based.



Baltz winks at plenty of individual artists too. Sign, Gilroy (1967, and in the catalogue but not the NGA exhibition) features a billboard with roughly the same proportions as a movie screen. The billboard in the picture was built with joined vertical panels, which were painted white. (A relief of a bottle, perhaps a Coca-Cola bottle, is on the middle panel and has also been painted over.) The photograph is a reference to Robert Rauschenberg's 1951 White Paintings. In 1969 Los Angeles' Riko

Mizuno Gallery presented a Vija Celmins solo show and Celmins had already begun to show her trompe l'oeil work in museum group shows around the country. I'd bet Baltz saw that work, in particular Celmins' trompe l'oeil desert-scapes or her rockscapes, because in Irvine Ranch (1970) he presents a rockscape that fills the entire frame of a picture. (A 1968 Irvine Ranch (at right) also seems to refer to the American tradition of trompe l'oeil: Is it a crosswalk? Or fields sheeted for a crop such as strawberries? Baltz included a telephone pole in the far left of the image, which effectively serves as the giveaway that a nail-and-it's-shadow does in trompe l'oeil painting.)

In his catalogue essay, AIC curator Matthew S. Witkovsky notes that Baltz took a clever little step in a further effort to mimic the physical presence that paintings have in a gallery, a step that brought his pictures one step closer to painting: Like many photographers, Baltz cut away the white margin around his prints before mounting his pictures on board. But before mounting the picture Baltz did one more thing: He added another sheet of identically-trimmed processed photographic paper, placing it between the board and the picture. Sometimes Baltz even traced these edges with india ink, emphasizing the way the two objects project from the board. As a result, the pictures pop, kind of like paintings do off of a wall. It works.

The exhibition's only dissonant note comes about halfway through where Witkovsky and Sarah Greenough, the NGA's coordinating curator, have installed two minimalist sculptures and a Richard Serra work on paper. The interjection is supposed to show how Baltz was responding to minimalism in his work. It fails. The large objects divert attention from Baltz's hand-sized, carefully composed prints and suggest that Baltz's work needs 'help.' It does not. The curators' installation seems to suggest that Baltz was directly responding to LeWitt or Serra or Judd. Baltz mostly was not, nor was their work even Baltz's primary "Prototypes" interest.

Fortunately, it's only a one-room interjection. The rest of the show is thoughtfully installed in the NGA's intimate photography galleries. The exhibition and its catalogue strongly suggests that Baltz is due much more curatorial attention.