

GLADSTONE

Karen Rosenberg, "Robert Bechtle," *The New York Times*, February 6, 2014

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ART & DESIGN

Robert Bechtle

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Robert Bechtle's "Six Cars on 20th Street" (2007), a San Francisco streetscape, in a solo show at Gladstone Gallery. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

Art in Review

By KAREN
ROSENBERG

Gladstone Gallery

515 West 24th Street, Chelsea

Through Feb. 22

For decades, the painter Robert Bechtle has been making oddly cropped, resolutely banal streetscapes of his hometown, San Francisco. His detached, decentered photorealism is strangely compelling in a show of small watercolors and charcoal drawings; there's just enough of the artist's hand and eye in them that they aren't mistaken for the work of a Google Street View car.

Throughout, Mr. Bechtle manipulates light and simplifies forms so as to undercut the seeming randomness of his compositions. In "Six Cars on 20th Street," the strangely squeezed horizon — just a strip of blue sky at the very top of the picture — is made even more remote and compressed by the glare of bright sun on the road that takes up most of the picture. The stripped-down facades of rowhouses in "Down Arkansas Street," meanwhile, make San Francisco look more like Hopper's New England.

In the drawings, textured paper adds an unexpected element of sensuality; "Twentieth Street Pastoral," for instance, has a lushness befitting its title even though it shows just a single tree shading a parked car.

And the presence of a couple of self-portraits — that's Mr. Bechtle, peering over his shoulder from the driver's seat of his convertible in "Bob's Sebring" — implies that although we may be in the Bay Area, we're not quite in Silicon Valley. His photorealism might seem to indulge technoutopian fantasies of driverless cars and automated landscapes, but it ultimately insists on the presence of the painter.

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