

# WADDINGTON CUSTOT

Press Release

## American Painting

Waddington Custot at Frieze Masters

14–17 October 2021



At Frieze Masters this year, Waddington Custot presents a selection of iconic paintings by artists working in the United States from the late 1960s and 1970s, including: John Baeder, Robert Cottingham, Don Eddy, Richard Estes, Ralph Goings, Ron Kleemann and John Salt. The paintings come from a private collection that has taken over a decade to build.

Within this group, each painter developed their own stylistic language in close dialogue with photography, incorporating the detached vision of the camera into a flattened pictorial space. While each artist's approach is distinct, their work shares stylistic sensibilities; in particular they employ a high degree of precise detail to convey scenes of everyday American life in the mid-twentieth century. Typical subjects include shiny cars with chrome bumpers, trucks, motorcycles and gas stations, as well as the symbols of mass consumerism: diners and fast-food restaurants, advertising billboards, and neon store signs.

This mode of painting is often described as Photorealist, a term coined by Louis K. Meisel in 1969. Each composition is indeed based on a photograph; the artists embrace the photograph as a subject and the camera as a tool rather than a competitor. However, in many ways the term is somewhat reductive: the paintings are not merely faithful reproductions of their source materials but often edited versions of them. For instance, some of these compositions combine elements of several photographs within one image. Prescient of today's proliferation of doctored images, these works represent an engagement with the idea of reality in relation to the photographic image, encouraging viewers to question the act of looking and acknowledge the complexity of visual information. Further, rather than engaging with the history of photography, these works reveal an intense interest in the act of painting; not only a fascination with the technical challenges of the surface but the effort to find an American voice in the history of the medium. While these artists purported to remove the artist's individual touch from painting – a reaction against Abstract Expressionism, which was then dominant in the United States – their work reveals an active painting process complete with creative decision-making and hints of the artist's hand.

Light itself becomes a subject in many of these works: painterly reflections in storefront glass or a shimmering swimming pool, the light refracting off a chrome car bumper, or the appearance of artificial neon signage in harsh sunlight. It is a key element in the work of California-based Ralph Goings, who treats each texture and

plane individually and meticulously. In *Interior With Trash Cans* (1976), he lavishes the chrome surface of trash cans and the faux leather seats of an everyday diner with such close attention as to render them seductive and oddly sensual. Goings' intimate watercolour *Thrifty* (1974) uncompromisingly captures the blinding sunlight of high noon bleaching the concrete floor of a gas station.

A further misconception of Photorealism is the idea that it has no European artistic antecedents, which isn't strictly correct. The paintings of Richard Estes, for instance, which emphasise the flatness of the picture plane, respond to the work of Edward Hopper, who was himself greatly inspired by French masters like Edgar Degas and Édouard Manet. Like Hopper, Estes' eerie compositions often include vast panes of glass that prevent the viewer from accessing the scene in full: in *Storefront Reflections Miami* (1961), mirror-like windows obscure the interior space, while in *Flughafen* (1981), they trap us inside looking out.

Hopper's influence is also present in John Baeder's paintings of individual buildings that symbolise American modernity: a gas station, a grill joint, a fast-food diner. Often overlaid with text and a border, they reference picture postcards and in doing so explicitly recall the photographic genesis of the image. Centralising his buildings within the composition, Bader includes hints of their surrounding environments thereby locating progress within the American landscape, albeit a built one. Brooklyn-born Robert Cottingham, who actively rejected the Photorealist label, also pictures America's quickly modernising built environment, in particular shop signage, colourful hoardings and neon advertising.

The landscape is similarly a feature of John Salt's paintings of automobiles, the increasing affordability of which made them an enduring symbol of upward social mobility. From the idea of the travelling salesman to the drive-in movie theatre, the car is embedded in many aspects of American culture. In *Edsel in the Snow* (1992), Salt even makes an explicit reference to the brand of car. In many ways, these works can be understood as a contemporary development of the rich tradition of American landscape painting, and in particular, the mid-19th-century Hudson River School, wherein human progress and advancement were firmly rooted within the landscape. Just as today their 19th-century concept of progress is under question for its colonialist drive, so too the 20th-century conceptualisation of an American dream is entwined with the impacts of consumerism and environmental damage wrought by overconsumption and mass production. This idea is continued through the paintings by Ron Kleemann included in the presentation, which picture everyday vehicles of urban civilisation as degraded rather than glamorous; the NYPD police cars stacked in a garage appear to be defunct, perhaps decommissioned; the sanitation unit of *Private Sanitation* (1976) rears aggressively from the side of the canvas.

The American Dream continues to have an aspirational lustre for many worldwide, and the portrayal here of a glossy but decaying urban landscape might appear to carry a satirical edge. However, any such readings should be understood to be retrospectively ascribed. The artists were insistent that the works were not critical but simply representational; they were cautious not to ascribe social commentary to their paintings.

## NOTES TO EDITORS

### Credit Line

American Painting, Waddington Custot at Frieze Masters, 14–17 October 2021. [waddingtoncustot.com](http://waddingtoncustot.com)

### Image

Ralph Goings, *Interior with trash cans*, 1976, oil on canvas. Courtesy Waddington Custot and the artist.

### About Waddington Custot

Waddington Custot was formed through the partnership of French art dealer Stephane Custot and long-time London art dealer Leslie Waddington, in 2010. Located in Cork Street since 1958, formerly as Waddington Galleries, the gallery has a rich heritage and an international reputation for quality and expertise in works by modern and contemporary masters, with a particular focus on monumental sculpture.

The gallery has cemented its reputation over several decades for high quality and well-researched exhibitions of significant artists operating in the mid-twentieth century and beyond. Today, Waddington Custot represents heavyweight contemporary and modern artists and their estates including Peter Blake, David Annesley, Patrick Caulfield, Ian Davenport, Fabienne Verdier, Barry Flanagan, Allan D'Arcangelo,

Jedd Novatt, Pablo Reinoso and Robert Indiana. The inventory includes works by important modern European artists including Jean Dubuffet, Pierre Soulages, Joan Miró, Josef Albers, Maria Helena Vieira da Silva, Fausto Melotti, and Antoni Tàpies.

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