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**MAJOR RETROSPECTIVE OF SAN FRANCISCO ARTIST
ROBERT BECHTLE AT SFMOMA**

From February 12 to June 5, 2005, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) will present the exhibition *Robert Bechtle: A Retrospective*, the first full-scale survey of the work of this important San Francisco-based artist. Organized by SFMOMA Curator of Painting and Sculpture Janet Bishop in close collaboration with the artist, the exhibition features ninety works—paintings, watercolors, and

drawings—that trace the artist’s oeuvre from his first photo-based paintings of the 1960s to his works of the present day. Since his work emerged in the context of New or Photo-realism in the late 1960s, Bechtle’s family genre scenes, streetscapes, and images of cars have become icons of middle-class American culture. The exhibition will be the most comprehensive presentation of the artist’s work to date.

Despite widespread exposure in the context of Photorealism and inclusion in important surveys of American art in the United States and abroad, Bechtle’s work has not been the subject of a major museum show since the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento mounted an early career retrospective in 1973. The SFMOMA exhibition will span the artist’s forty-year career with work drawn from local, national, and international collections as well as a major publication. “This exhibition promises a critically important and highly deserved assessment of one of the great American realists,” states Bishop. “Bechtle paints life as it is, focusing on the quotidian through quiet, highly exacting works that have the capacity shift our perceptions of the most familiar aspects of our daily lives.”

Bechtle was born in 1932 in San Francisco, and raised across the Bay in Alameda. He studied graphic design and painting at the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland, earning his B.F.A. in 1954 and M.F.A. in 1958. He began painting seriously in early 1960s, finding his own voice through a tightly controlled realism that was distinct from the expressionistic paint-handling characteristic of Bay Area Figurative art—the then dominant mode of expression among his local peers and predecessors. Bechtle’s interest in painting elements from his immediate surroundings as they actually



Alameda Chrysler, 1981
Oil on canvas; 48 x 69 in.
Meisel Family Collection, New York; © Robert Bechtle

more



Marin Avenue – Late Afternoon, 1998
Oil on canvas; 36 x 66 in.
Private Collection, Atlanta; © Robert Bechtle

looked, rather than an interpretation of how they looked, led to his use of black-and-white photographs as studio aids in 1964. The following year, the artist began taking slides for color reference, which he soon began projecting directly onto canvas. After outlining the contours of the forms in pencil, the artist then builds up the work with paint to establish the presence of form, light, and color. The photograph provides Bechtle with

the beginning structure for the painting, which allows him to make artistic changes in the content and composition of the work as he paints.

Bechtle's paintings emphasize Northern California residential neighborhoods—replete with stucco houses, repetitive rows of palm trees, and the ubiquitous parked car. Bechtle's preference for wide, empty spaces; his flat, sun-bleached palette; and his detached mode of recording detail impart a certain sense of alienation to his frequently banal subjects. The comprehensive exhibition will include works such as *'61 Pontiac*, 1968–69, arguably Bechtle's most famous painting. This painting, featuring Bechtle, his first wife, and two children standing in front of their family car, has never been shown on the West Coast. The exhibition also includes the painting *Alameda Gran Torino*, 1974, a deadpan image of the family wood-paneled station wagon that is one of Bechtle's finest works and part of SFMOMA's collection.

Other early works include *'56 Chrysler*, 1965, set in front of the artist's mother's Alameda home; and *'46 Chevy*, 1965, featuring Bechtle's brother sitting in the artist's own convertible, which is the first piece to make use of a snapshot-like aesthetic—a major direction of his work for the duration of the 1960s and 1970s. Major family genre scenes include *Roses*, 1973, featuring a trio of women on a suburban sidewalk, and *Agua Caliente Nova*, 1975, an honest view of the family experience of the Western landscape. The exhibition also includes *Frisco Nova*, 1979, an important hinge painting between the artist's snapshot-inspired paintings of cars and people to his more recent emphasis on landscape.

The exhibition continues with San Francisco residential landscapes including *Sunset Intersection—40th and Vicente*, 1989; the companion paintings *Mariposa I* and *Mariposa II*, 1999 and 2000, which make use of the artist's hilly Potrero Hill neighborhood; *Near Ocean Avenue*, 2002, with its dramatic use of Renaissance perspective; and *Jetta*, 2003. Bechtle's recent work is also represented by major interiors—both self-portraits and double portraits of himself with his wife, art historian Whitney Chadwick, in such pieces as *Broome Street Zenith*, 1987, and *Potrero Table*, 1994.

To accompany the exhibition, SFMOMA is producing a major monograph in collaboration with University of California Press. The catalogue will include a career overview by Janet Bishop; an essay on the artist's evocative formalist strategies by Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth chief curator Michael Auping; an essay on Bechtle's position within the history of the intertwined and often conflicted relationship between painting and photography by art historian and painter Jonathan Weinberg; catalogue

entries by curatorial associate Joshua Shirkey; an essay by contemporary artist Charles Ray on his personal experience of the painting *Alameda Gran Torino*. The catalogue will also include ninety color plates, an illustrated chronology, an exhibition history, and a bibliography.

After its San Francisco presentation, the exhibition will travel to the Modern Art Museum at Fort Worth (June 26–August 28, 2005).

Robert Bechtle: A Retrospective is organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The exhibition is generously sponsored by the Estates of Emily and Lewis S. Callaghan and the Richard Florsheim Art Fund. Additional support is provided by Collectors Forum and The Modern Art Council, auxiliaries of SFMOMA.

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Museum hours: Open daily (except Wednesdays) 11 a.m. to 5:45 p.m.; open late Thursdays until 8:45 p.m. Summer hours (Memorial Day to Labor Day): Open at 10 a.m. Closed Wednesdays and the following public holidays: Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's Day.

Koret Visitor Education Center: Open daily (except Wednesdays) 11 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.; open late Thursdays until 8:30 p.m. Summer hours: Open at 10 a.m.

Admission prices: Adults \$10; seniors \$7; students \$6. SFMOMA members and children twelve and under are admitted free. Thursday evenings, 6 to 8:45 p.m., admission is half price. The first Tuesday of each month admission is free.

SFMOMA is easily accessible by Muni, BART, Golden Gate Transit, SamTrans, and Caltrain. Hourly, daily, and monthly parking is available at the SFMOMA Garage at 147 Minna Street. For parking information, call 415.348.0971.

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