

# frieze

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## **The Painting of Modern Life**

Hayward Gallery, London, UK



The relationship between painting and photography has been the subject of exhibitions since the 1840s. The earliest concerned the new medium's attempts to become art by imitating painting. But, as photography became an inescapable mass medium, things changed. Painting was obliged to make its peace with photography, and it has been doing so ever since. The Hayward Gallery's ambitious exhibition 'The Painting of Modern Life', the first curated by its recently appointed director, Ralph Rugoff, gave us an account of how painters have made use of photography since that pivotal moment in the early 1960s when the canvas confronted the photograph in all its brute, beautiful ubiquity.

The show took its title not only from T.J. Clark's *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (1985) but also from *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863), Charles Baudelaire's great call for art to embrace the changes of modernity while keeping its distance. Baudelaire had already declared his scepticism as to whether photography was up to this task,

seeing it as part of the problem of modern life rather than the solution. Painting, in the very moment of its technological and cultural eclipse, could face the new challenge. It should seize the day or, more precisely, the everyday, since the character of modern life could be best grasped through its smallest details.

Through the mass media and the amateur it was photography that seized the everyday. But in permeating culture so thoroughly it almost relinquished its claim to the critical distance of art. If any distance were to be recovered, the photograph's bald familiarity would have to be estranged. This is part of what Pop art achieved and what subsequent generations of painters do when they work from photography: they estrange it enough to make its deepest impact thinkable.

Many painters claim that using photographs takes the pain out of choosing subject matter: since photos are everywhere, they can be selected easily – 'off the shelf', like Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades. Of course, Duchamp didn't select anything; he selected familiar, mass-produced, authorless things. Painters have tended to select the photographic equivalent: banal newspaper images, functional archival pictures and domestic snapshots of family, sports and leisure. This was the key to Rugoff's hang. It grouped the paintings by these commonplace photographic categories, avoiding art history's default genres. So, for example, 'Politics and History' brought together Vija Celmins' Time Magazine Cover (1965), featuring the LA Watts riots, with among other things Richard Hamilton's Swingeing London 67 (1967–8), his reworking of a press photo depicting gallerist Robert Fraser and Mick Jagger handcuffed together in a police van following a drugs raid. This image has become iconic owing to the endless reproduction not of the original photo but of the painting. Hamilton grasped early on that art itself would not escape mass dissemination and hype. But for those who make the effort to see the work itself the artist has a neat surprise: the handcuffs are real aluminium, protruding from the flat image in a way that slyly escapes photographic reproduction of the art work. Fraser and Jagger revealed their handcuffs while shielding their faces. They were not alone in this show. Nearly half the people in the paintings were turning their backs on the viewer. Perhaps this is art's quiet response to the fact that nothing is more 'in your face' than the modern camera and its images.

This was a show that understood the 'everyday' as more than subject matter: it is a form of experience. Photographs do not just surround us: they colonize the experience of our surroundings. To paint this modern life is to paint not only the everyday but also the medium by which we come to know it. The joy of this show was seeing this idea articulated so elegantly. From Gerhard Richter's unflinching reworking of a press shot of Jackie Kennedy in mourning (Woman with Umbrella, 1964) to Peter Doig's use of two mobile phone snaps to kick-start his lambent Lapeyrouse Wall (2004) the show plotted painting's growing ease with photography. The shock of Richter and Andy Warhol's early work was a combination of subject matter, new techniques and an unflinching approach to photography. Doig and younger painters such as Elizabeth Peyton and Wilhelm Sasnal have grown up not just in a world of incalculably more images but with the rich post-Pop legacy of photo-painting. 'The Painting of Modern Life' traced the growing acceptance that there is no scandal at all in painting photographs (or vice versa). We have all moved on.

Michael Werner 4 East 77 New York New York 10075

In this sense the Hayward show was the successor to 'The Painter and the Photograph', an exhibition curated by Van Deren Coke which toured the USA in 1964 and '65. Coke covered more than a century from Eugène Delacroix to Warhol. What excited audiences was not just the contemporary work but the revelation that for over a century so many painters had relied surreptitiously on photographs as aids to composition, tonality and realism. 'The Painting of Modern Life' began exactly where Coke's show concluded, brazenly pushing photography's influence out into the open with a Warhol 'Disaster' series screen print, Orange Car Crash (Orange Disaster) (5 Deaths 11 Times in Orange) (1963).

Despite its half-century historical sweep, in essence 'The Painting of Modern Life' felt like an intimate group show, presenting several works by each of the 22 featured painters, sequenced and hung with intelligence and restraint, never forcing the argument but letting the arrangement suggest its own rich conversation.

**David Company**