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Does a Painter With a Camera Cheat?

By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

LATELY, one thing after another — a show, a book — has been mysteriously causing people to fret about painters, dead and alive, using "crutches" like lenses, cameras and photographs, or possibly having used them.

It's 2002, isn't it? I'm guessing that psychoanalysts would diagnose this as displaced anxiety.

Detractors of Gerhard Richter's retrospective, which recently closed at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and opens at the Art Institute of Chicago on Saturday, were fuming that his paintings looked "dead" because they depended on photographs — worse, that this dependence betrayed an inability to make an original image, as if an image, having first been captured through a viewfinder, were no longer original, never mind that Mr. Richter took most of the photographs too.

Before that, David Hockney caused an amusing stir by writing a book claiming that old masters like Caravaggio and Holbein used lenses and other optical aids to paint and draw. A vast conspiracy of silence persisted for centuries among artists, who didn't want to own up to this fact. Not, Mr. Hockney hastened to add, that he thought there was anything wrong with using cameras and lenses. After all, he did the same thing. A big conference was convened in New York. Scientists and historians took the stage, each thanking Mr. Hockney for his stimulating ideas, many of the conferees then giving 10 or 15 reasons his theories made little or no sense in most instances — after which artists in the audience, blithely ignoring what had just transpired, rose to compliment Mr. Hockney for proving his case.

Now we await the Thomas Eakins show that started in Philadelphia and arrives on Tuesday at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. We know for certain that like Mr. Richter, Eakins, America's archetypal academic realist, sometimes painted from projected photographs. (They were usually Eakins's own photographs as well.) He didn't exactly hide the truth — he even required his students to use photographs — but his wife tried to hide it after he died.

Why the anxiety? When the photograph was invented, people declared the death of painting. Who needed paintings to tell people what the world looked like now that photographs could do the job better?

What actually transpired was predictable two-way traffic. Degas, having picked up tips from both Japanese prints and the new instantaneous photographs produced by boxy cameras set up on tripods, painted Vicomte Ludovic Lepic on the Place de la Concorde in the mid-1870's. Lepic was near the right edge of the picture, and another man at the other edge was nearly cut out of the frame. The image resembled what Cartier-Bresson would take on the spur of the moment by pulling his tiny Leica out of his pocket, except that Degas painted Lepic before hand-held cameras were invented. Degas learned from one kind of

Enlarge This Image



Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia

A photograph by Thomas Eakins that he used as a guide for a painting.

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photography, then paved the way for another.

Meanwhile, he retreated to his studio to set up carefully staged photographs, ghostly scenes, unlike his paintings, that looked eerier precisely because they weren't painted by hand but made by a machine that ostensibly showed the world just as it was. Since then, it has dawned on more than a few art students who lack Degas's agility that it is easier, or at least less time consuming, to snap a picture than to draw or paint one.

BUT this has not interrupted the continuing conversation across media, which sometimes involves artists who don't even consciously realize the extent to which they are involved in it. Cindy Sherman, having decided she had nothing much to add as a painting student, picked up a camera. A few years ago at the Met she happened onto a mid-19th-century photograph by William Lake Price of someone dressed as Don Quixote, a picture derived from 19th-century genre paintings. Ms. Sherman had never seen it before. The label said: "Theatrical staging has found renewed relevance in the work of such contemporaries as Cindy Sherman."

You may recall that critics of the German photographer Andreas Gursky's show, which appeared last year at the Modern and opens on Saturday at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, complained that his big glossy pictures seemed too stagy. Mr. Gursky digitally alters some of his photographs. Even when his pictures are unaltered, they look too good to be true. He emulates Mr. Richter, who, of course, copies photographs. In different ways, they are making a similar point: that art, whether it's a photograph or a painting, involves manipulation — of color, perspective, scale — which becomes the true measure of its ingenuity and content.

Our displaced anxiety must partly entail a fear of being tricked (mistaking a tracing for a freehand drawing) and, more particularly, a fear of technology: a concern that what makes us human is being sacrificed to the brilliance and reliability of the machine. New digital technology, with its nearly limitless capacity to blur fiction and fact, has only enhanced the fear. But all this misses the point. Realism is a moving target. Skill is more than manual dexterity. Tools are tools, whether they are brushes or lenses. What artists make of them is the issue. The beauty part of art remains its capacity to accommodate different ways of seeing.

I have just spent several happy months watching the realist artist Philip Pearlstein paint two models. Week in, week out, Mr. Pearlstein labored to capture what he saw, which kept changing under his gaze, the way anything does when you stare at it for a very long time. He was especially interested in the effects that a photograph can't account for — the perceptual distortions that happen at the edges of one's vision — and in conveying the pleasure that comes from suddenly noticing what was right in front of your nose, an emotional effect translated through intense scrutiny.

Fidelity in art, it turns out, is about integrity, not optical mimicry. If I were an artist, I suppose it would be comforting to think that Van Eyck and Hals did what they did with mirrors. Anything to narrow the unbridgeable gulf between greatness and me. Unfortunately, there are no shortcuts to genius.

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