

MUSEUM FRIEDER BURDA

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PRESS RELEASE

RIVALING REALITY: 60 YEARS OF PHOTOREALISM

FEBRUARY 28 – AUGUST 2, 2026



Ralph Goings, *Richmond Diner*, 1983, oil on canvas, 101.6 x 147.3 cm, Waddington Custot, London, Paris, Dubai , Photo: Waddington Custot © Ralph Goings, Goings Family Estate, 2026

With the exhibition *Rivaling Reality: 60 Years of Photorealism*, the Museum Frieder Burda explores one of the most programmatic movements in figurative painting since World War II. This stylistic direction, which emerged in the United States beginning in the mid-1960s, stands for an art that embraces a photographic view of the world, reproducing it illusionistically through painterly means. Over ninety visually stunning pieces by more than thirty artists from across six decades show how this pursuit of painterly realism was redefined with the utmost technical precision—from early works like those of Robert Bechtle, Richard Estes, Ralph Goings, and Audrey Flack to the international developments of the present day. The Frieder Burda Collection provides the point of departure for the show and is complemented by top-tier loans from around twenty international collections, amongst them the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York and the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid.

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Since antiquity, the detailed rendering of reality has been one of the primary concerns of painting. Early on, great artists were admired for their ability to create deceptively realistic images; ancient authors repeatedly tell of works so illusionistic that they were at first mistaken for reality. As a painterly approach that once again foregrounds the pursuit of optical accuracy, the Photorealism of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries also stands in this long tradition, this time under the conditions of photography.

In reaction to Abstract Expressionism, artists like Robert Bechtle, Richard Estes, Ralph Goings, and Audrey Flack returned to figurative painting. Basing their works on photographs, advertising brochures, and other found sources, they transferred images to the canvas in painstaking detail with the help of projections or grids. Their motifs came primarily from the world of everyday American consumer culture, with images of sunlit streets, polished surfaces of cars and motorcycles, gleaming diner interiors, and brightly colored neon signs.

The reality reproduced by Photorealism has always also been filtered through the cool, objective lens of the camera. While human visual perception constantly shifts between focus and blur, photorealistic paintings aim for meticulous accuracy even in the smallest details. They are often characterized by smooth surfaces reminiscent of photographic prints as well as a painterly precision that makes even the finest structures visible. Spray guns are sometimes also used to further minimize the traces of the painter's hand. Some artists assemble their motifs from multiple photographic sources; especially in city views, this approach gives rise to complex pictorial worlds that seem familiar, while at the same time disconcerting in their perfection.

While early Photorealism began as an American phenomenon, the movement spread to the international arena in the second and third generation and is still present in a global context today. New developments in photographic technology and the possibilities of digital image manipulation continue to provide new impulses for the exploration of realism. In Europe, the movement aroused intense interest as early as the 1970s and achieved institutional recognition at *documenta 5* in Kassel, mounted in 1972 under the title *Questioning Reality – Visual Worlds Today*. Major exhibitions in London, Copenhagen, and Paris followed, giving the new artistic current an early foothold even outside the United States.

Rivaling Reality: 60 Years of Photorealism at the Museum Frieder Burda is one of the largest exhibitions ever devoted to Photorealism in Germany and showcases the technical mastery and thematic variety of the movement. With works by over thirty artists, the exhibition offers a multifaceted overview that extends from the earliest days of Photorealism to the contemporary era and is arranged in a partly chronological, partly thematic sequence.

On the ground floor, the exhibition focuses on the founding figures of the movement and their interest in American culture, with major works by John Baeder, Robert Bechtle, Charles Bell, Chuck Close, Don Eddy, Richard Estes, Ron Kleemann, and Richard McLean. On the mezzanine, the cabinet is devoted to a monographic presentation of the work of Karin Kneffel. On the upper floor, the show brings together more recent developments in

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international Photorealism, with works by artists such as Pedro Campos, Andrés Castellanos, François Chartier, Ben Johnson, Bertrand Meniel, Johannes Müller-Franken, Rod Penner, and Craig Wylie. On the basement level of the museum, photographs by Lars Eidingen offer a contemporary commentary on the relationship between image and reality.

About the Exhibition

Curator

Dr. Daniel Zamani

Artistic Director, Museum Frieder Burda, Baden-Baden

Assistant Curator

Judith Irrgang

Director of the Frieder Burda Collection and Research Associate, Museum Frieder Burda, Baden-Baden

Artists (*number of exhibited works)

Alexandra Averbach (2), John Baeder (2), Robert Bechtle (3), Charles Bell (4), Roberto Bernardi (9), Tom Blackwell (1), Pedro Campos (3), Andrés Castellanos (1), François Chartier (2), Chuck Close (1), Davis Cone (1), Robert Cottingham (5), Lars Eidingen (3), Don Eddy (3), Richard Estes (3), Audrey Flack (1), Ralph Goings (7), Don Jacot (4), Ben Johnson (5), Ron Kleemann (2), Alexandra Klimas (2), Karin Kneffel (8), Richard McLean (2), Bertrand Meniel (2), Malcolm Morley (2), Johannes Müller-Franken (3), Yigal Ozeri (1), David Parrish (1), Rod Penner (1), Gerhard Richter (2), John Salt (2), Raffaella Spence (6), Craig Wylie (4).

Lenders:

Eight works from the Frieder Burda Collection by Richard Estes (1), Karin Kneffel (3), Malcolm Morley (2), and Gerhard Richter (2) enter into a dialogue with eighty-seven pieces from eighteen international collections. Lenders include Roberto Bernardi, Holtzbrinck in Stuttgart, the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid, the Olbricht Collection, the Plus One Gallery in London, Raffaella Spence, Waddington Custot in London, Paris, Dubai, and the Whitney Museum of Modern Art in New York as well as numerous national and international private collections, who wish to remain anonymous.

Catalogue

The richly illustrated 200-page catalogue is published by Hirmer Verlag in German and English and is available for a special price of € 39 exclusively in the Concept Store of the museum. The catalogue includes contributions by Lars Eidingen, Judith Irrgang, Jeremy Lewison, David M. Lubin, Christiane Righetti, Daniela Sistermanns, and Daniel Zamani.

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Audio Guide

An hour-long audio tour (cost: € 5) is available in German, English, and French.

Program of Events

For information on the wide-ranging program of events accompanying the exhibition, visit museum-frieder-burda.de/kalender.

Press Images and Exhibition Texts

A selection of high-resolution press images is available at museum-frieder-burda.de/presse. The gallery texts for the exhibition are found on pp. 5–7 of this press kit.

Media Partner

The logo for the television channel arte, consisting of the word "arte" in a bold, lowercase, orange sans-serif font.The logo for SWR KULTUR, featuring the text "SWR" in a bold, black sans-serif font above a right-pointing chevron symbol, with the word "KULTUR" in a bold, black sans-serif font below it.

Museum Hours

Tuesday to Sunday, 10 a.m. – 6 p.m.
Open all holidays

Press Contact

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1) A New Realism

In the 1960s, many young American artists viewed the creative potential of Abstract Expressionism as exhausted. They saw representational painting as an opportunity to embrace a new form of realism suitable for their time. Yet their allegiance to existing lines of tradition in figurative painting was only indirect: By executing their compositions on the basis of photographs, they questioned the traditional relationship between the sibling media of photography and painting. While the human eye can only perceive its environment in an alternation of focus and blur, the works of these artists became the reflection of a “hyperreality” filtered by the cool, objective lens of the camera. Many of the painters achieved immediate recognizability by focusing on a limited repertoire of motifs, relentlessly depicting the same subjects again and again. They found most of their material in the affluent world of American consumerism and entertainment of their time: neon signs, glossy automobiles, suburban streets, and the iconic diners of the 1950s. The photographic feel of the works often appears irritatingly ‘real’, especially when viewed from a distance. Yet, the closer one gets to the compositions, the more clearly their painterly character is revealed. This interplay of close-up and distant view, painterly built-up and photographic appearance is an integral part of the Photorealists’ pictorial strategies.

2) Chrome, Steel, and Glass

The early Photorealists took their motifs from the things and experiences of middle-class America. Like the Pop artists around Andy Warhol, they searched for a visual language capable of reflecting the mundane world of advertising, consumerism, commerce, and industrial production. Serial images of vehicles such as racing motorcycles, trucks, and cars—motifs they often mobilized as symbols of the “American way of life”—played a key role in this regard. Many of the artists reveled in the detailed rendering of chrome, steel, and glass, along with the luminous, flickering play of reflections on mirror-smooth paint jobs. Don Eddy, who became known as a “car painter” in the 1970s, had worked in his father’s auto repair shop as a teenager, where he learned to use a spray gun before becoming an artist. While Ron Kleemann repeatedly painted luxurious racing vehicles as modern fetish objects, his fellow artist John Salt turned to socially critical content: Inspired by the pictorial worlds of contemporary documentary photography, he painted numerous images of wrecked automobiles, evoking associations with poverty, decay, and social destitution.

3) Painterly Skill

The term still life refers to a painting whose subject consists of an artful arrangement of inanimate objects—whether natural items such as fruit, plants, and stones or human artifacts such as fabrics, jewelry, and glass. As an independent pictorial genre, still life painting goes back to the Dutch tradition of the seventeenth century. French painters in the milieu of Jean Siméon Chardin (1699–1779) reinvigorated the genre by strategically employing still life to display their painterly skill, typically choosing contrasting objects whose differing textures and fine gradations of color demanded the highest level of technical precision. The Photorealists gave new life to the genre, finding it amenable to their pursuit of technical perfection and well-suited to their exploration of the modern world of things, always with an eye to pictorial illusionism. While Don Eddy consciously focused on spatially complex arrangements such as glass cabinets with colorful collections of objects, Ralph Goings often straddled the fence

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between still life and interior with his exploration of the ambience of the American diner. Charles Bell became known for his numerous detailed images of vintage toys, a motif that would later be embraced by his younger colleague Don Jacot.

4) Alluring Images

Karin Kneffel speaks an unmistakably personal language in her painting, developing realistic-seeming motifs or scenes that she transforms to the point of the surreal. She creates still lifes, interiors, reflections, and beguiling ornamental patterns as well as sensual surfaces with a deceptive texture. Kneffel's artistic orchestration of colors and forms, her layers of imagery and thematic references, pile up into worlds of extraordinary aesthetic appeal marked by an interplay of visual focus and blur. Working from photographs, the artist continually reinvents her repertoire of motifs. In an elaborate painterly approach, she transforms the photographic originals into velvety, fantastical compositions. While Kneffel's artistic DNA is certainly also grounded in the Photorealism of Gerhard Richter, with whom she studied as a master pupil at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf, she carries his neutral approach further in an emotional visual language that bears witness to a spiritual metabolization of the subject matter. This creative process imbues her pictures with a warmth and vitality that sets them apart from traditional Photorealist painting. Her work is marked by formal qualities as well as by the unique characteristics of objects and places, along with personal experiences, memories, and feelings. The artist draws from these sources for her inventions, offering viewers both seductive surfaces and narrative elements.

5) Heirs of Pop

Although art historians have often viewed American Photorealism of the 1960s to 1980s as the height of the movement, the internationalization of the artistic current in the final decades of the twentieth century has led to a remarkable multiplication of techniques and motifs. In terms of artistic method, rapid innovations in the realm of digital photography and the advent of easy-to-learn image editing programs have played an important role. As in early American Photorealism, still life occupies a key place in the international context of the twenty-first century. Often the choice of arranged objects reflects the ongoing influence of Pop Art and its fascination with commerce and consumerism. Canadian painter François Chartier worked in advertising for many years before beginning his career as an independent artist. Using children's toys, he develops spatially dense narrative tableaux that, not coincidentally, recall the visual worlds of his role model Charles Bell. In her pictorial series *Ocean Waste*, Raffaella Spence creates large-scale compositions with toy figures and plastic packaging floating in bodies of water—a reference to the ever-increasing pollution of the world's oceans. Like many of their contemporary colleagues, both artists base their works on multiple digital photographs, carefully developing the final composition in a hybrid process.

6) Figural Images

In early Photorealism, the creation of large-scale, stunningly illusionistic figural images was particularly associated with the work of Chuck Close. For his many portraits of friends and fellow artists, some monumental, he adopted a strict grid-based method, using photos he had taken himself and transferring their visual information to the canvas detail by detail. The contemporary oeuvre of Craig Wylie, who also prefers to work on a large scale, shows strong

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affinities to the artistic legacy of Chuck Close. The starting point for his works are digital photographs, which he uses to brilliantly capture even the smallest details in the structure and feel of clothing, skin, or hair. While Wylie's portrait subjects are detached from a narrative context and often coolly meet the viewer's gaze, German Photorealist Johannes Müller-Franken presents carefully staged tableaux with a narrative element that seems strikingly cinematic. Using a wide range of photographs, he mingles figure, cityscape, and natural landscape, creating illusory scenarios with an often-disconcerting visual quality that recalls the disorienting effect of digital AI simulations.

7) City and Architecture

In the late 1960s, American artists such as Robert Bechtle and Richard Estes elevated the modern city to the status of a painted motif, often with a cool eye for geometry and striking architectural forms. The work of contemporary Photorealists shows a similar interest in adroitly balanced spatial design. Ben Johnson, one of the leading proponents of Realism in Europe today, is known for his numerous hyperrealistic paintings of interior spaces. He achieves perfect, mirror-smooth surfaces using a time-consuming spray-gun method; in his interiors, he strives for a timeless atmosphere as well as the impression of harmonious proportions in accord with a classical architectural ideal. While Johnson seeks to create contemplative pictorial spaces that invite viewers to meditation and introspection, Raphaella Spence's cityscapes often convey a feeling of energetic tension. In her New York series, she explored the impressive skyline of the city from multiple perspectives, repeatedly choosing a striking view from above in order to capture the dense juxtaposition of cubic structures with compositional finesse. The importance of a photographic vantage point carefully chosen ahead of time also underlies Andrés Castellanos's image of Columbus Circle in Manhattan, based on the striking view from the modern upscale mall The Shops.

Presentation in the basement

Photography as a Readymade: Lard Eidinger

Lars Eidinger (b. 1976 in Berlin) is a German actor, DJ, and artist. In his photographs and video works, he focuses on the transience of everyday life. In keeping with the tradition of the readymade, his works do not result from a planned search but rather from a casual glance at what is visible. Usually taken with his smartphone, he captures urban fringe areas: shopwindows, sleeping people, optical illusions in the cityscape, or even traces of decay. The cell phone camera serves both as a technical means and a conceptual component. He is not interested in the spectacular but in the seemingly inconspicuous. Without staging anything, Eidinger reveals areas of social tension: poverty, isolation, vulnerability—with an attitude that remains attentive without judging. At the same time, many of his motifs have an inherent element of the bizarre, quietly combining comedy and tragedy. His works often touch on central questions of life: Who are we? What remains? What do we see, and what escapes our gaze? Eidinger sees his photographs as extended portraits—not only of himself but also of the viewer. They reflect our time, our environment, and our social condition. Some make us smile; others make us pause. But they always challenge us to take a closer look—and perhaps learn more about ourselves in the process.