

## Review

**Title: *Exactitude: Hyperrealist Art Today***

**Authors: John Russell Taylor and Maggie Bollaert**

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**Reviewed by Dr Michael Paraskos**

*Exactitude: Hyperrealist Art Today* is a 360 page monster of a coffee table book. In size and format it attempts to emulate the equally large volumes written by Linda Chase and Louis Meisel on photorealism, and like them it also sets out to define the phenomenon of photo-based realist art as it exists now. In this lies the strength of *Exactitude*, but also some very serious flaws which effectively undermine its relevance.

In some ways *Exactitude* is very timely, with an undeniable revival of interest in photorealism and other forms of photo-based painting very much in evidence. Other examples of this include the 2007 Hayward Gallery exhibition 'Painting of Modern Life' and the 2009 show 'Picturing America' at the Guggenheim in Berlin. One of the undoubted strengths of *Exactitude* is that it presents in a single volume a snap-shot of predominantly British photorealist artists working today. For future art historians this will prove invaluable as it will offer them a glimpse of a much more diverse art world than is likely to be represented by mainstream art collections, such as the Tate or Saatchi. Consequently *Exactitude* resembles in book form something like a nineteenth-century *Salon des Refusés*, in which artists who are not championed by the Establishment are given an airing. Yet rather like the previous *Salons des Refusés* there is little real editorial control or direction to *Exactitude*, so that some great, some good and an overwhelming number of indifferent artists are mixed together without any real acknowledgement that not everyone included in the book is of equal quality. Such democracy, if it was deliberate, might be laudable, but the truth is the difference between the artists included is not simply a question of competence, it is one of intention. The best and the worst of these artists are divided not only by the quality of their work, but what they are seeking to do.

To be fair to the book, this is acknowledged in the fascinating introduction by one of those artists, Clive Head. Head's work is particularly incongruous in this company as he is dismissive of the dubious dictum, first established by Meisel in the 1970s, that photorealist painters take a photograph and then copy it meticulously in paint. Indeed, as a theme running through Head's introduction, this operates as an oblique criticism of many of the artists included in *Exactitude*. For Head such copying is a worthless exercise, and he makes the reasonable claim that if an artist is simply going to turn him or herself into a human photocopying machine then one might as well stick with the original photograph. In Head's view we are clearly long past the mildly diverting claim that these are not paintings of landscapes, people and things, but paintings of photographs of landscapes, people and things, and if exactitude as a concept is to have any purpose then the artists included under that label need to do more. What that 'more' might be is by no means set, but what is clear from Head's statement is that they always need to remember they are working within a very

long history of art which can offer far more opportunity and inspiration than any photograph could do. How they might encompass that history within their work is in need of exploration, but the first step is for photo-based artists to recognise that just because they use photographs as a base does not mean they have to paint the photograph, any more than a Baroque artist would simply paint their drawing.

This is a post-Meisel, and post-photorealist, concept of photo-based painting that looks to the future, but it makes the politics of Head's introductory statement fascinating in a book that is so full of artists who fail to understand such a difficult concept. What this illustrates is the tension within photo-based painting at the moment, as what is effectively an avant-garde group has begun the process of breaking away from the 'mere' photo-copiers. Once again, future art historians might come to look at this publication as the moment when the split occurred, but for now there is a real danger that the more progressive message that comes from Head's statement is lost amongst the piles of photocopies. Of course, one must always acknowledge that even the photo-copiers are technically very skilful, and this is well-shown by the sumptuous illustrations in *Exactitude*, but there is undoubtedly more real interest in those artists who seek to do more. In this context, one cannot help wishing that the book had a more ruthless and driven editor to reduce it to about a quarter of its size. Similarly one has to question whether John Russell Taylor's art-history-lite style of writing in the main body of the text is appropriate for a book that clearly has an ambition to be as definitive as the earlier volumes by Chase and Meisel.

In all of this there lies the problem of the joint publishing of books like this by Thames and Hudson and a small private London gallery, the Plus One Gallery. One suspects Thames and Hudson ceded almost total control over the content of *Exactitude* to the gallery, which inevitably has a vested interest in pushing as many of its own artists, good, bad or indifferent, as possible. Whilst it is true some non-Plus One Gallery artists do appear, they are very small in number, and there are serious omissions, such as Nathan Walsh and Lewis Chamberlain. Indeed, Chamberlain is probably one of the most suitable candidates for Head's definition of 'exactitude' working today, and his absence from such a large book on the subject verges on the shameful. Neither Walsh nor Chamberlain are represented by Plus One.

Whether this makes *Exactitude* any more than a rather fancy catalogue of gallery artists is difficult to say. It has gems, such as Head, Ben Johnson, Robert Neffson and John Salt, and younger artists who show great promise, like Tom Martin. In addition, it makes some interesting intellectual points, and the production values are high. Nonetheless, one comes away feeling this is a wasted opportunity to make a bold and radical pitch for the future of realist painting, and that it is wasted on a huge scale.