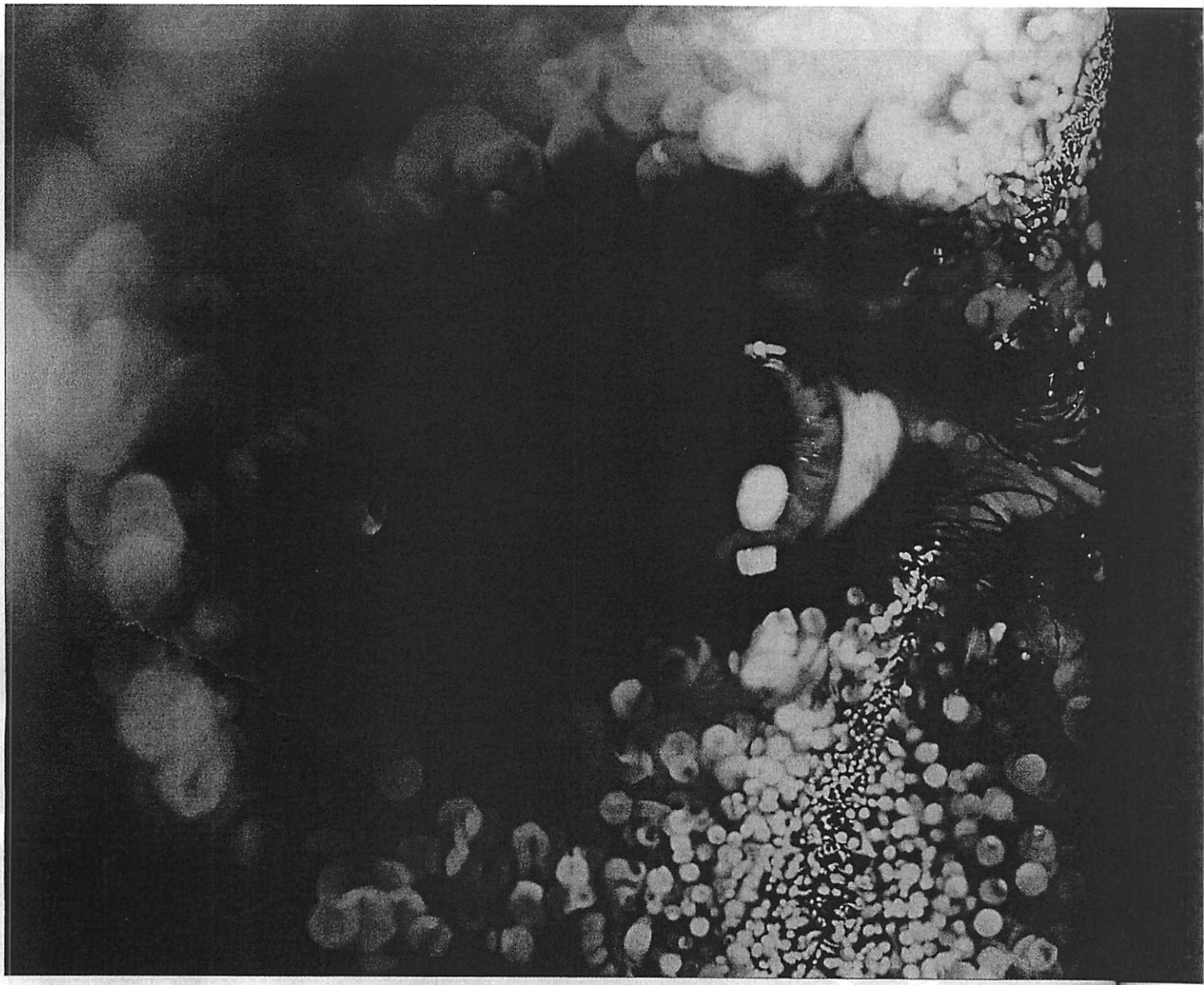

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Slides and Prejudice

The controversy around painting from photographs continues, as new image-making technologies keep the debate alive

BY LINDA YABLONSKY

The image that the Whitney Museum has chosen to promote "Day for Night," its 2006 Biennial, is an extremely close view of a woman's eye. The eye is green and heavily made up with hot pink shadow and sequins. Taken from a 5-by-9-foot painting by Marilyn Minter, it has a tawdry sort of glamour.

The eye appears in color on the dust jacket of the exhibition catalogue, while an enlarged detail is printed in black and white on the cover. The original, *Pink Eye* (2005), was partly fingerpainted in enamel on aluminum. In reproduction, however, it looks just like a photograph.

In fact, Minter created the painting from two different photographs that she shot herself and combined on a computer in Photoshop, the digital equivalent of a darkroom, before projecting the result onto her painting's surface and tracing it. That is enough to make some people scream—despite the power of the image, the evidence of the artist's hand, and her transformation of the source.

These days, photo-based painting is as common as rain and just as inevitable, as younger artists such as Nick Mauss,

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COURTESY GAGOSIAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

Lucy McKenzie, and Wilhelm Sasnal take up the practice and exploit it. Yet it often complicates the public's understanding of art and can easily put painters who use photographic aids, including computers and projectors, on the defensive. The question is: why? Why should a painting based on a photograph be considered a less legitimate work of art than one painted from observation or one that is simply abstract?

After all, artists as disparate and as celebrated as Chuck Close, John Currin, Peter Doig, David Hockney, Malcolm Morley, Albert Oehlen, Elizabeth Peyton, Gerhard Richter, Jenny Saville, and Luc Tuymans routinely paint from photographs, as did Andy Warhol and the photorealists before them. Leon Golub worked almost exclusively from found photographs, though his roughly textured paintings seldom look it. Even Picasso is said to have based the figures in *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* on published photographs. And Edgar Degas's photography almost certainly had an influence on his cropped paintings of women in their baths, but these works' artistry is not open to question.

Laura Hoptman, curator of the Museum of Modern Art's 2003 exhibition "Drawing Now: Eight Propositions" and currently a curator at the New Museum for Contemporary Art in New York, sees nothing wrong with an artist using photographs, especially in a work of conceptual art. But she admits to an almost involuntary prejudice. "As a drawing curator," she says, "nothing irritates me more than standing next to something traced from a projection and hearing someone say, 'What a great hand!'"

Now the biennial, cocurated by Chrissie Iles and Philippe Vergne, is moving the tangled relationship between painting and photography to the forefront of the discourse on contemporary art. "I'm trying to raise questions about that relationship, not just define it," says Iles, the Whitney's curator of film and video.

"There is an ultraconservative definition of what art is, and it comes from a romanticized view of how paintings are made," she says. "If you've painted something that's copied from something else, or had someone do it for you, or if you've involved a projection, then it's not art. That's very ignorant," she contends. "The only thing that has a relationship to value is quality."

"It's an old prejudice," says Bennett Simpson, associate curator of Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art. "The question is really about appropriation."

Even that debate would seem to have been settled more than a decade ago, but new generations keep stirring things up. In a still-resonant March 2004 column decrying what he perceived as the homogeneity of photo-based painting, *Village Voice* critic Jerry Saltz called for a moratorium on the use of mechanical devices like projectors to replicate images on canvas. He accused young artists who trace images of producing "fake art" and, rather than transcending their source materials, of "just trying to get the photo right."

Saltz's protest came some time

LEFT Marilyn Minter, *Pink Eye*, 2005. BELOW Damien Hirst, *Dissection Table with Tools*, 2002–3.

COLLECTION VANESSA APELLE DE PEETERS/COURTESY SALON 94, NEW YORK

before the storm of outrage that greeted Damien Hirst's March 2005 show of photorealist paintings at the Gagosian Gallery in New York, though it wasn't entirely clear whether critics were objecting to the paintings' morbid content (morgues, crack addicts, lab animals), their sky-high price tags, or their having been painted by assistants who copied the images from photos in newspapers and magazines.

That controversy took place, of course, some time after the storm of outrage that greeted the publication of Hockney's *Secret Knowledge*, the 2001 book in which the artist proposed that Old Masters like Caravaggio, Ingres, and Vermeer had availed themselves of mechanical aids like the camera obscura or camera lucida. The issue was still hot the following year, when concurrent Thomas Eakins and Richter retrospectives stirred up anxieties examined in a story titled "Does a Painter with a Camera Cheat?" by *New York Times* critic Michael Kimmelman. "Tools are tools," wrote Kimmelman, "whether they are brushes or lenses. What artists make of them is the issue."

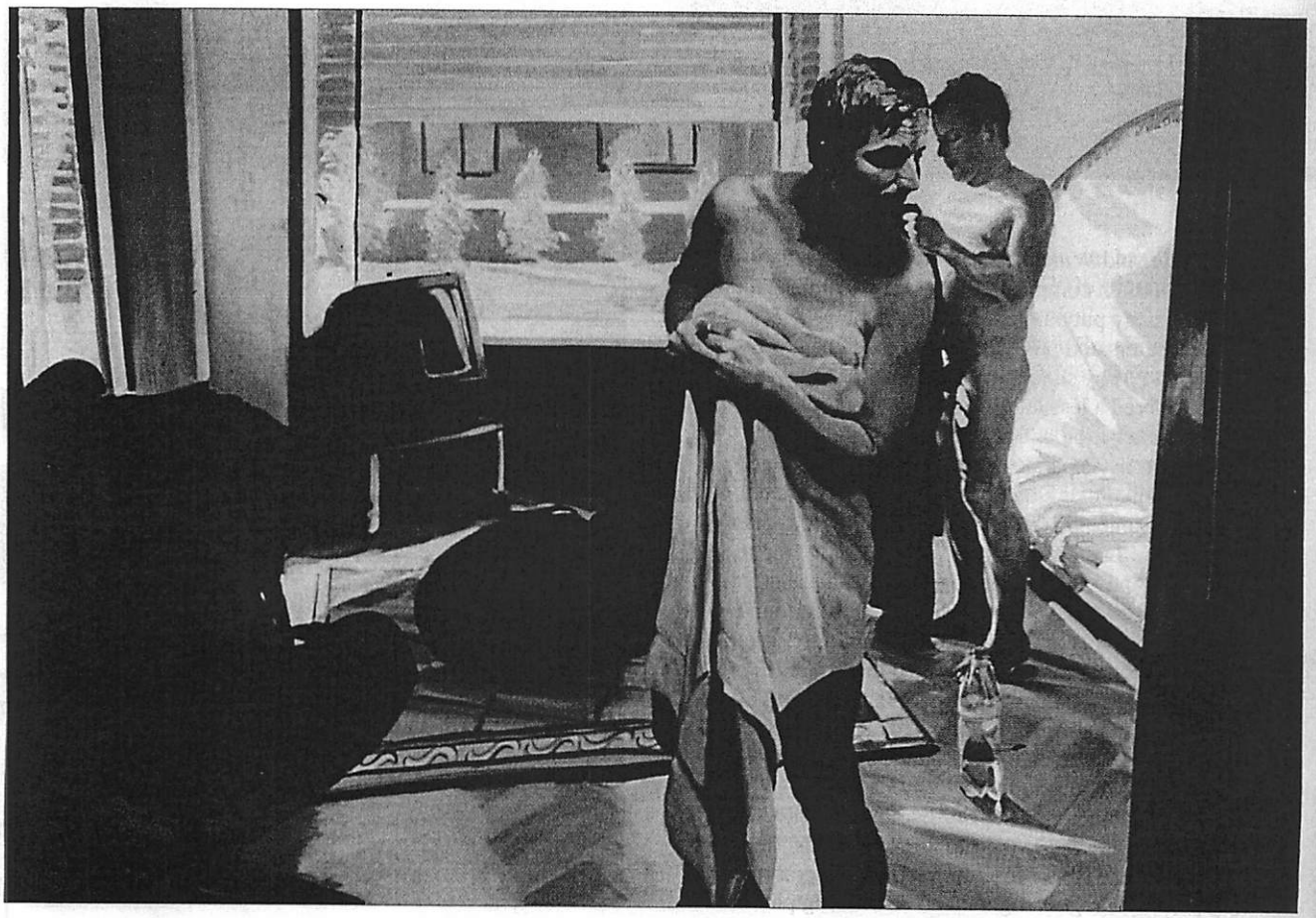
One artist who has persistently concerned himself with these questions is Morley, currently the subject of a retrospective (through the 16th of this month) at the Museum of Contemporary Art in North Miami. Organized by Bonnie Clearwater, the museum's director and chief curator, the exhibition includes early works that Morley based on images in promotional brochures, still-life tableaux based on actual objects, and his recent return to hyperreal paintings like *The Death of Dale Earnhardt* (2003), adapted from a news photo of the race-car driver's fatal crash.

But Morley has never used projectors to appropriate an image. Rather, he imposes a grid on the source and reproduces the image on his canvas one square at a time. "Morley is more interested in painterly process than image," says Clearwater. "Others—like Richter and Tuymans—are more interested in the photograph as a subject, or they are like Damien Hirst, who is not interested in doing the painting himself. Malcolm wouldn't think of having anyone else do it."

Hirst has been roundly criticized for not being a "real painter." Currin, on the other hand, is generally considered a master draftsman. Yet even he makes use of photographs, both his own and those he finds in old magazines. "I paint from drawings that I make from photographs," he says. "I would never paint from photographs themselves. In most, the color is what Fuji thinks is color. And they're so small I have to make up a lot. That's also what I like about them."

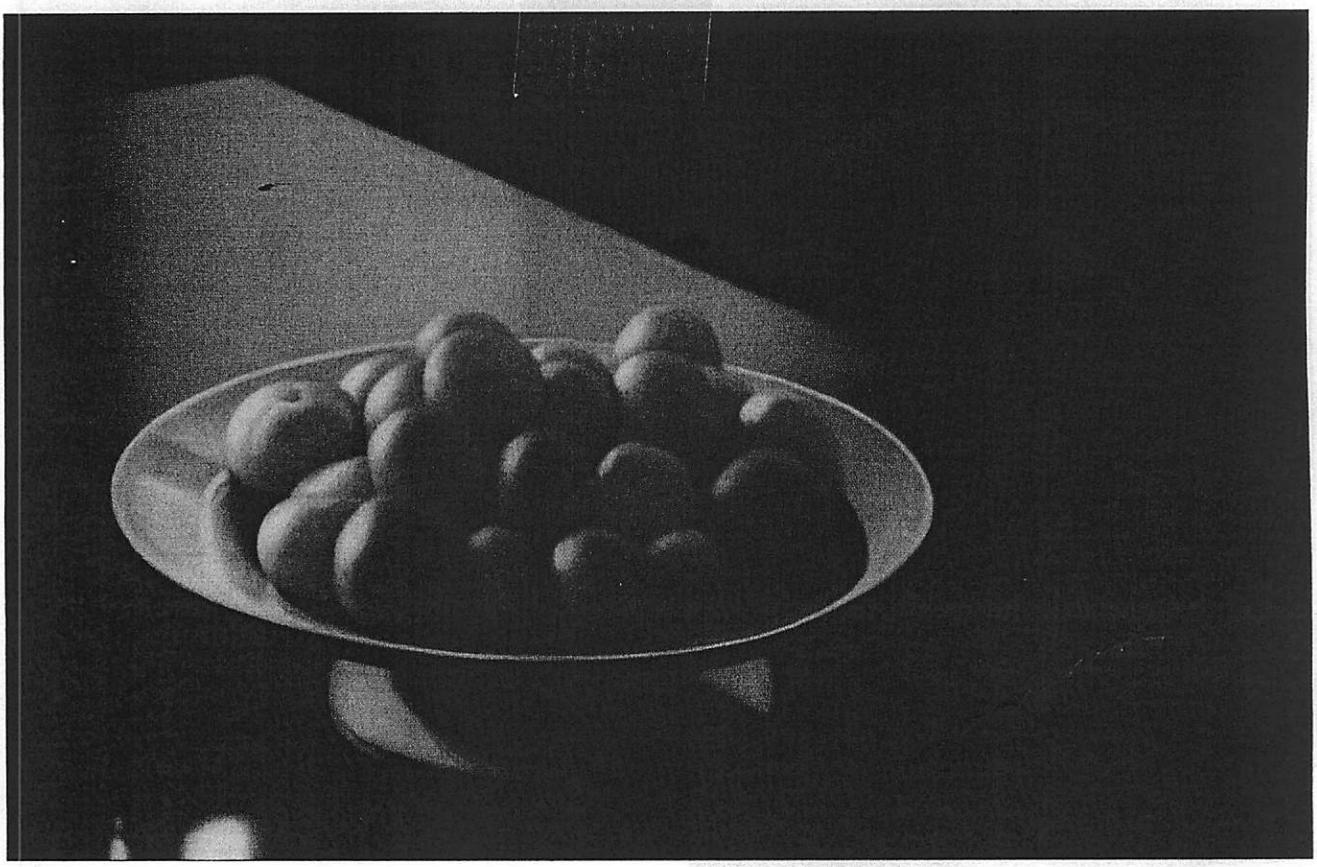
Nevertheless, he says, "in the back of my mind, there's always some notion of cheating, though that's absurd. It's like saying, 'Don't use electric lights.'"

Clearly, these issues are on artists' minds. "People suspect it's easy to paint from a photograph," says Matvey Levenstein, whose luminous interiors, shown last fall at Larissa Goldston in Chelsea, came from his own snapshots. "I know it's not easy. And my photos are bad, so I have to make it up in the painting. But I don't try to take good pictures.



Eric Fischl, *Bedroom Scene #4 (You Leave Your Lover to Answer the Phone)*, 2004.

COURTESY LARISSA GOLDSTON GALLERY, NEW YORK



Matvey Levenstein, *Clementines*, 2000.

COURTESY MARY BOONE GALLERY, NEW YORK

In fact, I rarely see any photograph as good as a painting."

Minter makes no bones about her use of a projector to help speed up her drawing process, which gives her more time to paint. "I don't feel guilty about it," she says. "I don't make art if I don't have photographs. I even show them together with the paintings. For me," she says, "the issue is how you get your effects. Are they transcendent or more like an annual report? All you ever get from photographs are clues. You still have to make space three-dimensional. You need to create the illusion."

Billy Sullivan, another artist included in the biennnial, is known for subjective portraits of friends and family that, many say, anticipated Peyton's more nostalgic work by at least two decades. All are based on his own photographs—slides that he projects onto his canvas to start, and then onto the wall beside it as he works.

An image from one of Sullivan's photographic "sketchbooks" might become a painting decades after the fact. "I never know what I'm going to use until the day I use it," he says. "And then the painting takes on a life of its own. That's what's good about photographs. They give you a freedom to figure out what you want."

Peyton, whose new show of portraits opens this month at Neugerriemschneider in Berlin, has a similar perspective. "I used to think there was no difference between using photographs and drawing from life," she says. "But photographs give you distance. They let you be alone to work. Still," she adds, "I always liked having a memory of how a person moved, rather than a static image. In the end, though, if you get a good picture, it doesn't matter how you got there. When I see a great painting, I don't care how somebody made it."

Over the last few years, artists have made increasing use of Photoshop—Eric Fischl, for example, who is best known for his voyeuristic, psychologically charged paintings of amorous couples, employs it to collage together different images until they register as something he wants to paint. "I am part of a generation that was schooled in the belief that discovery and execution should occur simultaneously on the canvas," he says. "For nearly 25 years I had held on to that belief, feeling that were I to know what I wanted to paint before I discovered it, the painting would lose its vitality. When I began working in Photoshop, essentially separating the discovery process from the execution, I feared it would kill the painting. What I discovered instead was that it freed me to explore painting itself."

It doesn't work that way for Currin. "With Photoshop, you can get your ideas pretty far along without drawing," he admits. "But that's why I stopped using it. In Photoshop, everything becomes completely divorced from the physical side of painting—and that's the whole point of it. Drawing on a computer screen is depressing. I'd rather be looking at porn."

The issue is unlikely to be settled as long as technology keeps offering artists new options. "What's interesting is what a rich vein this has been to mine," Clearwater says. "There's always something new coming out of it. What's exciting is how each artist has come up with different answers and different results." ■