

From San Francisco Museum of  
Modern Art 360, 2016



### Robert Bechtle

American, born 1932

#### **Watsonville Olympia**

1977

Oil on canvas

48 x 69 in. (121.9 x 175.3 cm)

Accessions Committee Fund purchase: gift of Charles J. Betlach II, Jean and James E. Douglas, Jr., Evelyn D. Haas, Mary and Andrew Pilara, Prentice and Paul Sack, and Danielle and Brooks Walker, Jr., 2005

## Juliet Clark on Watsonville Olympia

Robert Bechtle's dazzlingly deadpan paintings play surface against depth with a skill that both attracts and deflects attention. They could almost—but don't—let you forget he was even there, pretending to pretend to artlessness. Take *Watsonville Olympia*. The title sets up a dumb art history joke (Manet, we're not in Paris anymore) but the punch line is a misdirection: Olympia is not the model but the beer in her hand. It's typical of Bechtle to name his portraits after places and things, as though people were beside the point, even this relative standing smack in the middle of the picture. In her bright T-shirt, shades, and smile, she's glowing

with ordinariness yet oddly attenuated, as if the aspect ratio of the projection had gone slightly askew. And she's upstaged by a chair back that presses onto the picture plane, a sublimely awkward compositional intrusion. Its elaborate floral pattern is no more abstract than anything else in this suburban pastoral—the planter box, the careful rocks, the lawn that denies all possibility of drought in the parched California of 1977. Bechtle casts a flat light on the artifice of the normal. He shows it as beautiful, bleak, or both, maybe depending on where you come from.

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