

The New York Times

Art in Review

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William Beckman

Forum

730 Fifth Avenue, at 57th Street
Through April 26

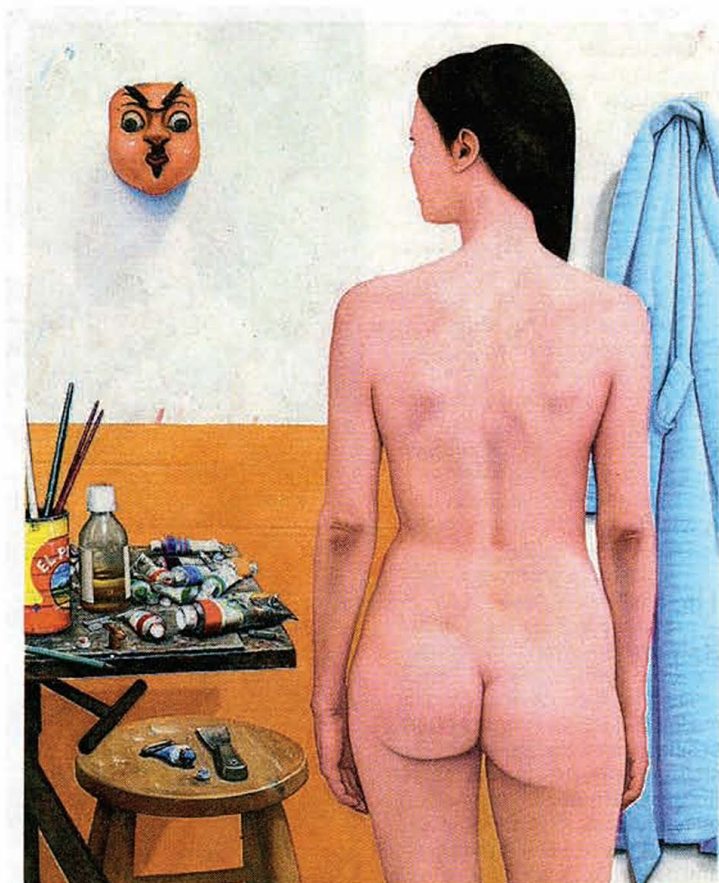
What do paintings want? They want you to not look away. William Beckman's paintings keep eyes from wandering in several ways. They are grippingly realis-

tic, for one. In portraits of his own 71-year-old self, in which he stares back with a grim Clint Eastwood-like mien, he renders the hairs of his head and reflections off his glasses and shiny eyes with a Renaissance master's minute precision. Curiously, that level of detail doesn't extend to the skin. He leaves out blemishes, freckles, moles and the like. So his pictures of himself and of a couple of pretty young people — one male, one female — have a slightly surrealistic idealism about them.

The paintings have sensuously smooth, waxy surfaces, which produces a visually captivating, paradoxical wedding of transparency and opacity. In still lifes picturing paint tubes, brushes and bottles of oil and varnish, the paint is especially assertive, even crusty in places.

The exhibition's two biggest paintings feature nearly life-size female nudity — another reliable eye magnet. One pictures the naked back, from knees up, of a standing, exceptionally fit young model. In the other, the shirtless artist stands at his easel looking out while his model lies on a bed behind him, the focus directed to her bikini-underwear-clad crotch and her parted thighs. There's a lascivious dimension to these, about which Mr. Beckman seems both knowing and not knowing enough. You sense a puritanical struggle between the high-minded artist and the low-minded voyeur. That's part of what keeps you looking.

KEN JOHNSON



WILLIAM BECKMAN AND FORUM GALLERY, NEW YORK

"Studio Five" (2010-12), an oil by William Beckman at Forum.