

William Beckman

Forum Gallery
745 Fifth Avenue, at 57th Street
Through Nov. 24

William Beckman is showing his age. He has been painting intensely realistic self-portraits for almost four decades, effectively tracking his own maturation from fair-skinned youth to the craggy 60-something who stares with thin-lipped, Clint Eastwoodish concentration out of the paintings in this exhibition.

Mr. Beckman follows Northern Renaissance painters like Dürer and Cranach in his ambition to give the figure an uncanny sculptural vividness. Without neglecting any wrinkles, he gives skin a relatively simplified, waxy smoothness, which, along with flat, monochromatic backgrounds, enhances by contrast the detailed palpability of eyes, glasses and hair. His figures seem to exist in a space between two and three dimensions.

Two portraits depict a man and a woman who look young enough to be Mr. Beckman's children, and in fact they are. Another is a memorial picture of his first wife, Carol, now deceased. You learn these and a few other biographical facts from a weird but interesting psychoanalytic essay by the critic Donald Kuspit in the exhibition catalog.

But you don't have to know the back story to grasp that Mr. Beckman's show is a meditation on youth, age and mortality. In this context there's something almost funny about his bigger-than-life painting of himself in a leather motorcycle racing outfit, standing next to a shiny red motorcycle: the image of an aging boy-man who thinks he can escape death on a speedy toy.

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