



Robert Bauer:
Adam (II), 2007.
oil on wood,
8 1/4 by 6 1/2 inches;
at Forum.

ROBERT BAUER FORUM

In the absence of discernible personality and direct eye contact, these solemn faces, 21 portraits by Robert Bauer, offered a resounding presence of spirit, almost sacred. Forum Gallery took on the stillness of a chapel, having much to do with their expressions, invoked in jewel-like detail. Given the paintings' shared low-key palette and gravity of focus, and setting aside evidence of the here and now (blue chambray shirt collar, black T-shirt), with a change of garb these carefully chosen subjects could be a saint, a Virgin, or the *Man in a Red Turban*, characters that people the 15th-century work of Hans Memling and Jan van Eyck.

The fine brushstrokes in Bauer's oils on wood render their surfaces flat and the skin tones luminous, compelling the viewer to move close and pause before each one as if to bear witness to a private meditation. The backgrounds are blank, muted, slightly mottled grays, blues or greens. Each surface is precisely measured out in fractions of inches that vary but settle close to 8 by 6. Again, absence, in this case of background subject matter, contributes to the atmosphere of hushed reverie.

How disarming the averted gaze reads in a contemporary context. Only one of the subjects, a youngish man named Adam, comes close to making eye contact, but doesn't; his visage appears five times, more than any other, in three oils and two drawings. This is familial work, all portraits of people known to the artist, painted initially from life and finished from

photographs. Not old, not young, all Caucasian, somewhat anemic, each bears a slightly haunted look.

The panels take the artist at least several months and up to a year to complete. The paintings on paper, executed quickly, show a more textured surface, while retaining the same resonant hum of the more labor-intensive pieces. Bauer brings an astonishing intimacy to the milky surfaces of his graphite drawings, some on gessoed paper. Several of the seven in the show—not studies but completed works in their own right—depict the same subject and pose as companion paintings in oil. The penciled face of *Sarah*, quite different from her likeness in oil, is less vivid, less present, already part of the past: faint, fading, ethereal.

Bauer's realism stands in stark contrast to that of contemporary painters who employ the frank and overt gesture, such as John Currin. Currin's subjects appear downright boisterous and noisy next to the cloistered moodiness of Bauer's. Jim Torok's portraits, like Bauer's, share a scrupulous attention to fine brushwork and spare and somber composition, in miniature. Still, staring directly out with their uniform expressions, Torok's subjects read as contemporary, and therefore vividly present. By comparison, Bauer's hand is intensely subdued, both distant and personal, inviting the willing viewer to be still.

—Elaine Sexton