

William Beckman at Forum

William Beckman's achievement as practitioner of a kind of hyper-realistic portraiture has little to do with photographic veracity. It is grounded on familiarity with Northern Renaissance painting. (In a catalogue essay for this recent show, Donald Kuspit offers a comparison to a 1500 self-portrait of Albrecht Dürer.) For Beckman, the manner in which the flesh of his subjects is portrayed seems to reveal a kind of cosmetic truth, and the works that feature the cool visage of Beckman himself repeat a forehead and jowl lines furrowed in a manner that is not altogether convincing and perhaps was not intended to be so.

Adjusting for the incidence of light as it strikes a painting, in the oil-on-wood panels included in this exhibition, Beckman produces a surface that looks seamless. Crafted to appear without emotion, his subjects—himself, his family—are thrust toward the viewer and the picture plane. Three self-portraits, each roughly 18 by 15 inches, track Beckman's visage in his early 60s. *Self-Portrait (orange shirt)*, 2003, introduces the artist in a T-shirt and frameless glasses that slightly magnify the eyes and the flesh around them. The iris and pupil reflect light. Folds of skin at the corner of the mouth and the neck seem exaggerated, and between the ivory ground and orange shirt, paint builds up along the line of neck and shirt, a detail differing in manner from the smooth facture in similar passages elsewhere.

In *Blue on Blue Self-Portrait* (2006), Beckman sports layers of zippered jerseys. The accretion of paint along the edges between forms is gone. In the reflective fashion of a glass vase in a Netherlandish still life, clearly defined light sources—mullioned windows—can be seen in his spectacles. The grooves lining his face show increasingly Shar Pei-like creases and folds, suggesting an extended period of time spent in the sun. In *Red, White and Blue, S.P.* (2007) the signature eye-glasses reflect both mullioned windows and the fairing of a red Ducati racing bike; the blue of the title is observed in his layered jerseys and his eyes.

In *Studio No. 3 (Ducati)*, 2004-05, Beckman wears the look of hard, clean narcissism like a warrior. He is dressed in racing leathers and carries a helmet next to a gleaming red Ducati Testastretta 998, the mighty sort that won the World Superbike championship in 2002. A racer's access pass on the studio wall behind him, small hand tools, a glove at his feet, a tube of red paint and a coffee can of brushes suggest his hands-on relationship with both bike and studio. Hard won, the commanding presence of these portraits speaks less of the mirror or photograph that may have served as reference and more about the conquest of the viewer. —Edward Leffingwell

William Beckman: *Studio No. 3 (Ducati)*, 2004-05, oil on panel, 95 by 80 inches; at Forum.

