

Art in America

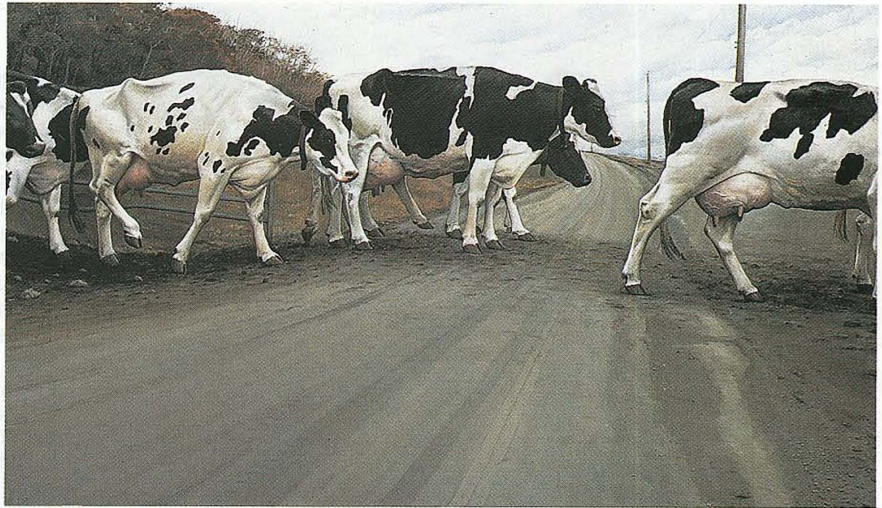
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William Beckman at Forum

William Beckman's latest exhibition included several landscape paintings and some choice examples of the work for which he's best known: meticulously rendered realist portraits of ordinary, mostly middle-aged people who appear to be deeply offended at being looked at. The show also included five paintings of cows, a departure for Beckman. These pictures—three small and two huge—find the artist more interested in exploring his virtuosic and, as it turns out, extremely versatile handling of paint.

Among the people portraits was *Overcoat Series No. 3* (2002), in which a man and a woman with angry, defiant expressions stare directly at the viewer. The man wears street clothes and the woman is naked, for no apparent reason other than to discomfit anyone who dares to observe her normal, not-quite-ideal body. In *Studio II* (2000-01), Beckman himself appears shirtless, holding a palette. The artist has rendered his likeness with a precision worthy of Ron Mueck or Duane Hanson. One can't help but be fascinated with the lifelikeness of the veins of Beckman's hands, the wrinkles on his face and his pale belly. His eyes—disgruntled and confrontational—are also vividly painted.

Ever detail-oriented, Beckman paints landscapes like he paints people, extremely realistically and with great attention to minu-



William Beckman: *Crossing Series No. 5*, 2002, oil on canvas, 90 1/4 by 156 inches; at Forum.

tiae. *Great Plains Dakota, MN* (1999), for example, depicts a flat, see-forever, amber-waves-of-grain stretch of land. The perfectly blue, puffy-clouded sky and bitsy little silos make for a prelapsarian vista only slightly altered by humans. As usual, Beckman's mastery of his medium has the power to make viewers want to scrutinize things that in real life wouldn't be especially interesting.

In the cow paintings, on the other hand, Beckman breaks away from the restrained realism with which he's associated. In the gigantic *Crossing Series No. 5* (2002), a pinkish udder is painted with a gestural bravado that brings to mind the work of Jenny Saville. But the paint is applied so thinly that the weave of the canvas

remains visible. The much smaller *Standing Cow with Ear Tag* (2003) shows three cows on a patch of ground that is rendered almost impressionistically. One cow, a Holstein, has a tiny dab of orange paint on its head, a whimsical trace of color (and humor) in a finely wrought composition of mostly neutral tones. It's as if the artist can't resist reminding the viewer of the difference between paint and the sorcery of bringing it to life.

—Sarah Valdez