

ARTF CITY

Brian Calvin's Dewy-Eyed Girls: The Same Is Not the Same

By Paddy Johnson and Whitney Kimball

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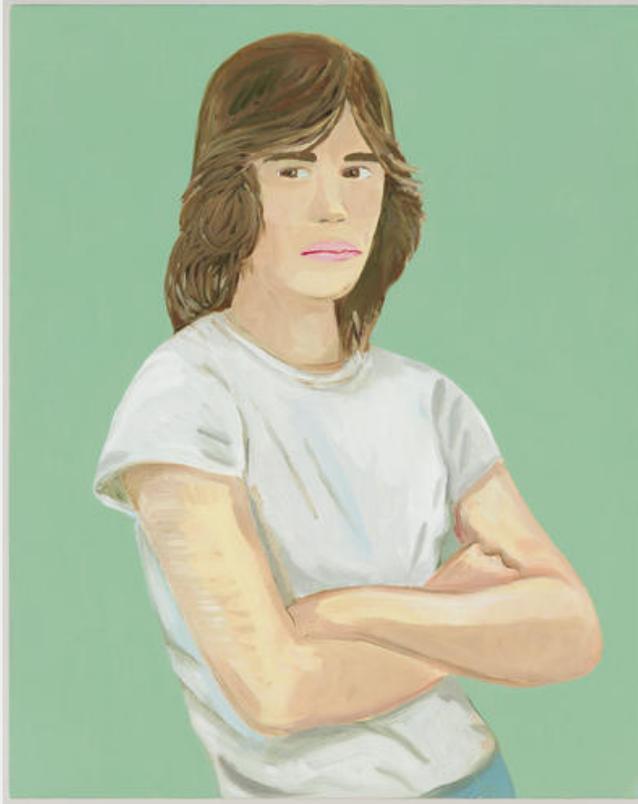
Anton Kern Gallery
532 West 20th Street
Runs through October 4, 2014

What's on view: Hard-edged cartoon paintings of models with dewy eyes and sensuously-parted lips

Whitney: Despite lack of original subject matter, this was, surprisingly, one of the best shows we saw all day. Calvin achieves an Alex Katz-ian hollowness in his dispassionate rendering of women with twinkly eyes and lips that are just barely opened—the central theme of the show. The characters are all abstracted down to a few economic marks; the use of pure black turns a soft mouth into mouth-hole. Mouths are turned vertically and further objectified. Brushstrokes are absolutely regulated, with rows of vertical darker pinks for the lip-creases and horizontal bands of white across the tongues, just touching the back of the top teeth. Eyelashes are reduced to horizontal stripes. Calvin successfully transforms mouths into something more emblematic, but I'm not sure whether there's much commentary on mouths aside from mouths as objects of beauty. Like Katz, the emotionless, all-surface treatment recalls the deep-shallow L.A.-style of *Drive*, or a Sofia Coppola movie. It looks like symbolism, but the whys are fuzzy and elusive. Intentionally, I think, but do added mysteries make it deeper? Not this time.

Paddy: An ungenerous assessment of this show might look at those lips as little more than compositional studies. I certainly got that sense in some of the portraits. The difference between “For No One” a close up painting of a sad, young woman's face, and “Only Child” a portrait of the same woman, but with less of her hair cropped out isn't much more than the placement of her face on the canvas. The

lips are a little more iconic though, and in the context of the show, I began to wonder if they signified more than just a painterly exploration. Those subtle shifts in perspective, paired with the titles, do inform how you interpret them. The difference between “Mouthful”—having so much to say you’re silent—and “Another Lost Thought”—having so little to say you’re silent—is pretty small in the end. I think those images are a good analogue for that.



Brian Calvin, “The (Matt Dillon) Pose,” 2014. Image courtesy of Anton Kern Gallery.

So, I don’t think they are as empty as Katz, but the subject herself—a self-conscious teenager—seems almost incidental. Seems like that’s a missed opportunity. Maybe that’s what those Matt Dillon posing paintings are for—deeper exploration of his subjects? Eh....looking at them again now, probably not. The repeated poses just seem like mimicry to emphasize the point that the same is not the same.