

# The New York Times

September 17, 2004

ART IN REVIEW

## **Brian Calvin**

Anton Kern

532 West 20th Street, Chelsea

Through Oct. 16

The slender young people Brian Calvin paints look as if they were lifted from a teenage cartoonist's sketchbook. They have comically long faces, oversize heads, huge lips, stringy hair, big eyes with reflections carefully noted, and vacant, vaguely depressed expressions.

Because of the cartoon style and the disaffected moods of his subjects, this Los Angeles-based artist has been called a slacker. The label is wrong, though, because he pays assiduous attention to the formal dimensions of his medium. The way he flattens, simplifies and crops his figures and their Southern California backgrounds and his use of richly saturated colors has earned him comparison with Alex Katz and David Hockney. It does appear that he is at once emulating and parodying those painters, and the effect is amusing.

Philip Guston's high-low combination of sophisticated painting and primitivistic cartooning also comes to mind, but unlike Guston's eventful narratives, little happens in Mr. Calvin's pictures. Some are simply portraits of pretty young women; others show people just sitting or standing in modern rooms.

The storytelling impulse is there, in, for example, the image of a young man with his eyes closed leaning his head against a bathroom mirror and, presumably, relieving himself. But for now it seems Mr. Calvin is more preoccupied with formal and technical issues of painting. He is not so wonderful a painter, however, that you don't wish he would give his appealingly goofy characters more to do.

KEN JOHNSON