

# ARTFORUM

## BRIAN CALVIN

ANTON KERN GALLERY

An unofficial poll conducted on the opening night of painter Brian Calvin's New York solo debut found several visitors prefacing their responses with an identical qualifier: "I wanted to like it, but . . ." This raises a couple of questions: Why were so many so eager to buy into the hype surrounding this laid-back Californian, and why were they so disappointed? An appreciation of Calvin's work has always depended on a tolerance for what the gallery's press release terms "bi-dimensionality"—a flatly undemonstrative mode in which very little "happens" and ambiguity of mood and meaning dominates—and that should have given New Yorkers fair warning to take things slow for once. Yet they seemed nonetheless confounded by the Berkeley graduate's unhurried canvases.

Calvin has drawn impatient fire in the past for his apparent celebration of the melancholic torpor in which the slacker

kids he depicts seem perpetually sunk. It's true that these unnamed characters, with their long, lank hair and doe eyes, don't seem to be doing very much to live up to their position at center stage. Yet if the tenor of Calvin's modest acrylics could hardly be called lively, their calm is never quite dead. Rather, they convey a feeling of unease, the source of which remains perpetually indeterminate. Like the residue of a dream, this sense lingers half-seen and unresolved, coloring the outwardly banal details of lives apparently stuck on pause.

*In a Place* (all works 2004) features a typical Calvin protagonist—long face, wide but inexpressive mouth, smooth-skinned and androgynous—running a string of dun-colored beads from hand to hand, eyes closed. In what? Concentration? Meditation? Boredom? The bland modern interior in which he sits provides no clue, and the landscape visible through the windows behind him is similarly schematic: a couple of leafless trees in a featureless expanse of pale blue and lilac. The figure wears a watch, but we can't quite make out the time; there's a painting on the wall, but only a sliver of it intrudes into the frame. Calvin is regularly compared to Alex Katz, and there's unquestionably something of the elder painter's deadpan graphic chic in his measured arrangements of placid figures and almost-empty space.

Other names dropped frequently in reference to Calvin are Philip Guston and David Hockney, and these alignments prove equally hard to dismiss—even if the resemblances are primarily formal ones suggested by Calvin's cartoonlike stylizations and ice-cream palette. In *Awake (for J.K.)* for example, a figure rests his head against a bathroom mirror, his expression inscrutable (or simply half asleep), while



Brian Calvin, *In a Place*, 2004, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60".

the crisp blue tiling and exaggeratedly lush foliage that surround him suggest an "everybody's happy nowadays" picture-perfection. Only the wisps of smoke rising from an incense holder refer explicitly to a culture (perhaps oppositional, at least youthful) beyond *luxe, calme, et volupté*, or ennui, its constant shadow.

Other clues? Perhaps the attention lavished on certain minutiae of the figures' casual attire: the stitching of a seam or the protrusion of an undershirt? Or their mysterious hand gestures, which in *When and Where* and *Still Wind* approach languid variations on LA gang signs? Calvin never anchors a narrative with a beginning or an end, but concentrates instead on its endlessly protracted middle. Opening night reactions may have been nonplussed, but these paintings take their own sweet time.

—Michael Wilson

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