

## Review: Dan McCleary at Carl Berg Gallery

6:00 PM, April 16, 2009



A young woman sitting in a coffee shop stares idly at the stream of artificial sweetener pouring into her plastic foam coffee cup. Another gazes at a menu, mirroring the young man opposite who is looking at messages on his flip-phone. Seated at an office desk, a man looks into the screen of his laptop, while the woman seated next to him looks straight at the viewer — who, of course, is looking back at her.

Nothing of major consequence is happening in any of these painted genre scenes by Dan McCleary. But each is endowed with a clear-eyed sense of gravity that recalls the likes of Piero della Francesca, Georges de la Tour and, more recently, David Hockney. Think of them as celebrating the monumentality of the mundane.

Three new paintings and two etchings form McCleary's lovely, sophisticated show at [Carl Berg Gallery](#), plus a group of 11 small mono-print portraits in the back gallery. The mono-prints suggest the thoughtful complexity of McCleary's deceptively simple work: As portraits, each face is unique — a condition functionally replicated in the unique image that a mono-print produces.

The paintings are executed with an even, unblemished light. In each one, the pictorial subject — such as it is — is the act of looking. McCleary invites reciprocation from his audience.

A man's grayish 5 o'clock shadow emerges as a rainbow of pink, violet, ocher, rose, off-white and brown. A foreshortened arm resting on a yellow table top couldn't physically fit into the available space, but visually it sits comfortably within the composition. Hands, a sugar shaker, drinking cups, a napkin holder and other objects are arranged on a tabletop in an architectonic display of random casualness. Each of the three pictures features another picture (or, in one case, a blackboard) on the rear wall, parallel to the picture plane, framing our perusal of McCleary's fabricated image.

The gorgeous etchings — one showing sprigs of acacia in a glass of water, the other sprigs of Queen Anne's lace — use the dense blackness of the etched ground, flat in one and hatched in the other, as an inky foil that makes the objects appear illuminated from within. McCleary is careful to replicate the illusion of the stems' displacement as they pass from air into water. It's a simple bit of natural legerdemain, but it corresponds to the artist's own hard-won sense of artistry.

-- Christopher Knight

**Carl Berg Gallery**, 6018 Wilshire Blvd., L.A., (323) 931-6060, through Saturday.

*Above: "Alex, Robert & Sam" (2009), oil on canvas. Credit: Carl Berg Gallery*