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Between looking and being looked at

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When a figure turns up in recent paintings by William Leavitt, it's difficult to determine his or her exact location in space. Usually cropped at the chest or cut off at the knees and illuminated by a source that does not always correspond with the light infusing the landscape, the figure doesn't quite fit into the common world. The effect, subtle rather than stark, is disquieting — yet readily recognizable.

Leavitt is showing seven paintings from the last two years at Margo Leavin Gallery, along with two drawings. Most of the paintings are wide horizontals, crossing the expanse of a distinctly L.A.-style landscape with the format of a movie or wide-screen TV. Against this backdrop, the cropped figures are captured as if by a zoom lens.

Leavitt doesn't hide his brushstrokes, but he does make them seamless and uniform. The application of paint yields a smooth, consistent surface across the image. The continuity is more photographic than painterly, without being stylistically Photorealist. Seamless

paint helps the brain accept — without immediately questioning — the logic of sudden, dramatic and no doubt impossible jumps in space. Yet it also suggests the privileges of painting over photography.

"Girl in Green Coat Walking at Dusk" shows exactly that. Set against a silvery sky on a residential hillside street, the smiling young woman bundled in a stylish overcoat walks directly toward you, as if in anticipation of a greeting.

Oddly, however, receding blue curtains at the right carve out the edge of a domestic interior. Indoors and outdoors abruptly collide.

Where are you standing in this scenario? Are you located out on the street to meet the girl? Or are you indoors being Gladys Kravitz, spying on a passerby? Leavitt choreographs a quiet dance between looking and being looked at, where dislocation is the order of the day.

Another painting shows two summery figures in the background, standing in a dappled pond or stream, while a third wearing a business suit is slammed up against the foreground picture-plane. It's titled "Alien Baptism," which could serve as a motto for what the artist seems to be after in his work.

The source for this sort of destabilizing compositional maneuver is venerable — Edouard Manet's 1863 "Luncheon on the Grass," a Modern visual manifesto on an artist's freedom to invent in order to create a desired effect. The responsibility of the reality on the canvas is to illuminate the world outside it, not to

follow the rules of nature or society. Leavitt drags that Modern painting tradition into a post-modern era dominated by the analog and digital phantoms of media, slyly refreshing and revitalizing it along the way.

Margo Leavin Gallery, 812 N. Robertson Blvd., West Hollywood, (310) 273-9603, through Feb. 11. Closed Sundays and Mondays.

Internet images caught, modulated

New York artist **Sean Dack** kidnaps images of young women from the Internet. Trolling live video feeds and self-portrait photographs posted on personal websites, he records the images

onto videotape, then projects stills onto light-sensitive paper in a darkroom. The results are not a little creepy.

Yet they are also weirdly poignant. Intimate portraits show vulnerable people who are not just total strangers to a viewer but to the artist as well.

For his solo L.A. debut at David Kordansky Gallery, Dack is showing a suite of 10 unique C-prints titled "Diminished Returns/Innocent Eyes." The photographs are shown framed and hung edge to edge. Three verticals are interspersed among seven horizontals, like the pattern of a futile Morse code.

The face in each is seen tightly cropped in close-up, while the printing has been modulated in [See Galleries, Page E27]



WEB BROWSER: Sean Dack's collection of altered images of women taken from websites is s

[Galleries, from Page E26] the darkroom. The imagery ranges from crisp and defined to blurred or high-contrast. The inflections call attention to the existence of technology — and human intervention — standing between the subject and viewer. One image is even broken up into a mosaic pattern, which gives it a battered look.

The portraits recall advertising images and fashion photographs, but the terms of the transaction are obscure. Each woman is captured in an obvious moment of self-presentation, but the act of capture is partly what makes the pictures disturbing. "Take me," they say — to everybody in general and no one in particular. And they have been, as much by us as by Dack.

Because of the high-frequency technology used to make them, the prints are washed in lurid tones of crimson. Passion, whether of the ardent or suffering sort, is on blunt display. But Dack puts it at a distant, anonymous remove, which substitutes gravity for easy sentimentality. It isn't easy to like these pictures, but neither is it easy to look away.

David Kordansky Gallery, 510 Bernard St.,