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GALLERY REVIEWS



Teens stripped of their veneer Kim McCarty's works illuminate the secret lives of the young. Plus: Liza Ryan, Stephen Wilkes and more.

By Leah Ollman , Special to The Times

Mixed up, messed up, high-spending and sexually precocious -- the public image of teenagers these days is not a pretty sight. But it's a sight the media can't seem to get enough of. Now that 12- to 18-year-olds have been tagged as a marketer's dream demographic, both the screen and the page are full of them and products aimed at them. The navel of the pop culture world is tanned, pierced and 15.

What we -- parents of teens as well as the wider public -- don't have as much access to is the private selves of these liminal beings. Kim McCarty's new watercolors at Cherry de los Reyes hint at what lies beneath the brash and sassy veneers: tenderness, tenuousness, vulnerability. Putting a sociological spin on these portraits of adolescent boys and girls needn't weigh them down excessively. They are images and not propositions, but they do convey -- delicately, persuasively -- a sense of the adolescent condition.

They do this primarily through a style of painting that resonates harmoniously with the subjects. McCarty uses watercolor's fluidity to portray identities that are themselves fluid. She paints mostly wet into wet, so her colors (muted rust, sapphire, pumpkin) bleed and diffuse. She then adds some details (the arc of an eyebrow, for instance) when the surface has dried.

The balance between ambiguity and clarity is perfectly keyed. As with the kids, the general contours are determined; the contents are still up for grabs.

McCarty shows these boys and girls naked against the white of the paper. They appear exposed but not exploited, slightly fragile, with uncalculated expressions of curiosity on their faces. Their heads appear a bit too large for their bodies, as in infancy -- that first phase of identity formation, physical disproportion and phenomenal change.

There is another set of paintings here too, in oil on raw linen, but they command less attention than the watercolors, whose vagueness is more engaging. The oils show boys and girls of a similar age, Anglo beauties all, clothed in bold, solid-color tops. Painted unremarkably well, they follow too closely the conventions of the school portrait.

The expressions of the kids aren't quite canned, but neither are they as raw and searching as in the watercolors. In those, McCarty embraces both the awkward and the accidental, truly capturing something of the liquid nature of (not just adolescent) identity.