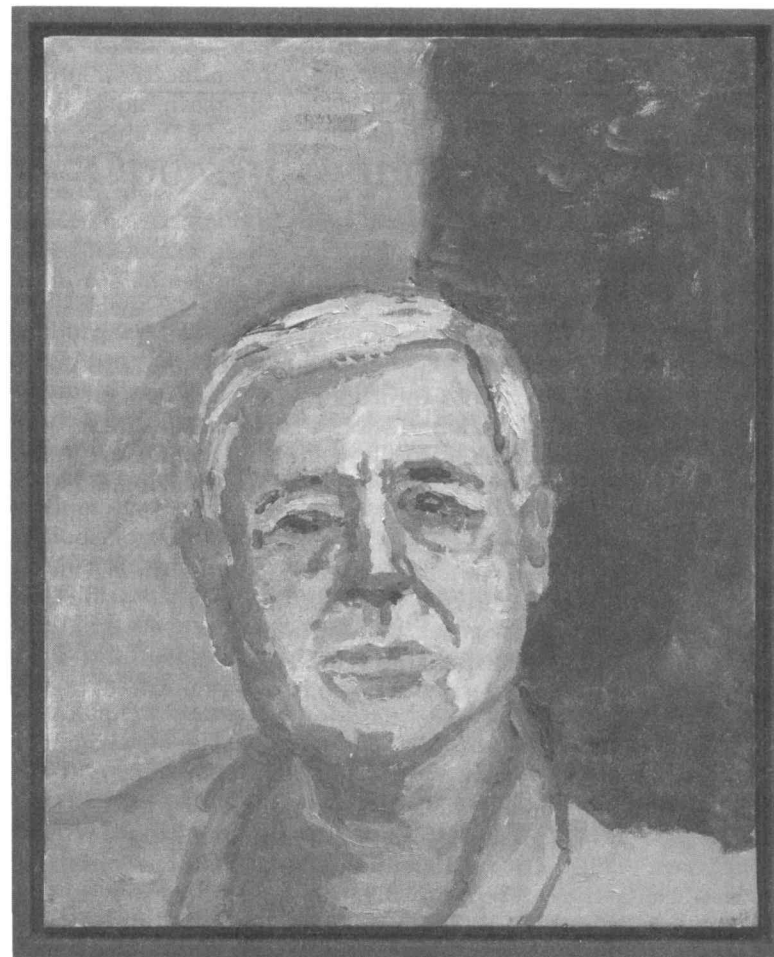


to grasp what the paintings are made of, we can't avoid feeling acutely the tension between the cool, pared-down elegance of the Cornrow series and the visible robustness and brutality, the haunting tactility of the paintings' surfaces. Did the title's "actual and implied" refer to this kind of opposition? Maybe.

At Betty Cuninghame Gallery, on the Lower East Side, "Graham Nickson: Eye Level" surprised even those who have been following the work of this British-born, New York painter for decades. Known for his large, enigmatic gatherings of agile full-length bathers, evocations of a modern-day Arcadia furnished with lifeguard's chairs and beach towels, and for superheated skiescapes, Nickson showed a series of about two dozen portrait heads, most of them painted in 2019. A small number had been made about fifteen years ago, while an intimate canvas about 10 inches square, one of the few where the sitter did not confront the viewer, dated from 1972, when Nickson was juxtaposing rows of small related paintings with his larger ones, modern versions of the predella panels of early Renaissance devotional works. Despite the existence of these precursors, he had never exhibited any of the single heads before. And, it's worth noting that unlike the subjects in the recent exhibition of single heads, the figures in Nickson's large paintings of bathers frequently turn away from us or cover their heads in some way. A figure who faces us is usually an exception. Each of Nickson's cast of characters in his beach paintings exists as an identifiable personage—the man drying his back, the person doing the headstand, the balloon woman—who often recurs in different paintings, yet their identities are most clearly established by their poses, and they seem more significant as components of a complex whole than as individuals.

The initial surprise of seeing a group of single heads by Nickson notwithstanding, the directness and material forthrightness of the recent portraits may have been their most striking quality. As we studied each one, we were quickly captured by the bold, staccato touches of the brush, the modulations of color temperature, the intensity with which the sitter often stared back at us. A male head, titled *The Observer* (2019), was among the most compelling works in the series. The silver-haired sitter eluded our gaze, tilting his head slightly. But what really held our attention was the way the broad, emphatically placed planes of brow, cheek, and chin responded, spatially, to the assertive vertical division of the wall behind him, half black, half gray. The memory of Matisse's Fauvist heads made itself felt. So did Cézanne's slow accumulations of touches. But the painting, like all the others in the show, had its own distinct character. Nickson describes himself as being struck by the presence of the single heads, when he looked at them as a group, a presence he terms "awkward and insistent." It's an apt characterization. The best paintings of the series are somewhat uncomfortable, because of our awareness of the slow, repetitive process of their making, and also impossible to ignore.

For initiates, most of Nickson's sitters were identifiable—fellow artists, a gallerist, an art historian, all part of his circle—but likeness was



Graham Nickson (British, b. 1946), *The Observer*, 2019. Oil on canvas. 20 x 16 inches. © Betty Cuninghame Gallery. Photo credit: Lexi Campbell.

plainly not the issue. His single heads are no more literal than the hieratic, solemn bathers in his beach paintings or the burning metaphors for sunrise and sunset in his landscapes. The overall fabric of paint was clearly of more concern to Nickson than the particularities of individual features. Likeness seemed to have emerged almost inadvertently, an unwilling result of intense scrutiny and of concentrating on translating the perception of planar and spatial relationships into mark-making, all but detached from thinking about what those planes comprise. In some ways, it's the effort to reconcile the insistent presence of the sitter with the equally insistent presence of the painting as a *made*, autonomous object that makes Nickson's single heads so engaging. It will be interesting to see whether he continues to make portraits and, if so, whether he will show them.