

SOUL SEARCHING

IN THE U.S.A.

A spate of shows in Southern California reveals artists casting a critical eye toward thorny questions about American identity.

BY MICHAEL DUNCAN



Above, Martin McMurray: *Protagonist No. 20*, 2010, acrylic on wood panel, 17 by 11¾ inches. Courtesy Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects.

MARTIN McMURRAY AND DARIO ROBLETO are both artists who have used the nostalgic qualities of Americana for larger purposes. McMurray's exhibition of new paintings at Susanne Vielmetter showed the San Francisco artist to be freshly engaged with classic American themes. The show provided an oblique critique of imperialism in "V.F.W.," a series of small portraits of haughty uniformed military figures from the Civil War to the present, including one in Arab headdress. An installation of wooden facsimiles of books with back-cover portraits of their pompous U.S. military authors augmented the wry social commentary.

Most potent, however, were selections from a series titled "Protagonists" (2009-10), which depicts rural Americans with midcentury garb and hairstyles, posed in front of a Greyhound station or Trailblazer bus. Ranging from down-and-out farmers to army and navy men, the bus passengers share a compelling, hangdog plaintiveness that evokes the works of Walker Evans. Posing stiffly as if for photographs, these "everyman" subjects are rendered bluntly and slightly larger than life, with oversize heads that stress a kind of human commonality.