

Gallery Weekend Beijing

Jean-Baptiste Bernadet  
Alejandro Cardenas

'Chameleon'

Booth A07-301

May 24 - June 9, 2024

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It is always very interesting to compare two artists whose artworks, at first glance, seem to have nothing in common. While thematic exhibitions seem inevitably to confine the artworks in the prison of their theme, “dual” exhibitions, without putting too many constraints on the eyes and the mind, offer the possibility of envisioning relations or tensions between the works: inevitably we are interested in what brings them together and what distinguishes them, leaving aside expectations, presuppositions, subjects, or styles. Without excessive effort, we then begin to reach another reality of painting, something that is unique to this art: we experience painting as a language.

'Chameleon' temporarily stages the work of two painters of the same generation. Jean-Baptiste Bernadet was born in Paris in 1978 (he lives in Brussels) and Alejandro Cardenas in 1977 in Santiago, Chile (he lives in New York). Both studied art (Bernadet at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Rennes, France, and at La Cambre in Belgium; Cardenas at Cooper Union in New York) and developed their artistic styles in the early twenty-first century. Certainly, both of them looked at paintings from previous centuries, and, a bit like photographer Torbjorn Rodland who stated, “I started out making photographs despite the feeling that there are already too many,” they were discouraged neither by the feeling that there were already many paintings, nor by the situation in which this discipline found itself in the late twentieth century—a bit shaken up by the commonly accepted idea of the end of avant-garde movements. Their respective reflections clearly led them in directions that are different, but perhaps not so dissimilar.

Jean-Baptiste Bernadet decided to develop his conceptual, sensory paintings in a no man's land somewhere between abstraction and figuration: “My paintings are not figurative, in the sense that they do not refer to a particular place or time—they are more generic than that. But at the same time, they are absolutely not abstract, but actually quite concrete, at least as concrete as the memory we have of a sunset, or a particular moment in our life, of which we preserve a memory of a certain intensity, a certain luminosity.” He freed himself from an automatic adherence to abstract expressionism, to which he had been drawn early in his career, to confront a more contemporary question that he expresses in this way: “Can you make expressive paintings without actually engaging too much in a personified macho expressionist heroism of the brushstroke?” His series of *Fugues*, the first step toward this emancipation, borrowed artistic and emotional strategies from Impressionism and Monet.

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All the paintings he has produced for this exhibition are part of the category of what he calls *Grids*, which he began a few years ago, and which look more in the direction of Paul Klee's watercolors. "I wanted to pursue the *Fugue* paintings process with slightly different means, but with the same idea in mind: can you make great paintings, visually rich and with endless possibilities of outcomes, with only a very limited set of tools, a restricted palette? Can you create an illusionistic space within the painting without dealing with perspective and composition and hierarchy? A space that feels both real like a landscape but also totally dreamy and not natural at all."

The painting of Alejandro Cardenas resolved the issue of its figurative quality in a different way. "I've always wanted to paint figuratively, but I never wanted to paint people. When you look at a painting of a person, you look at the person, as opposed to the entire painting." His painting is therefore peopled with figures that are not people but look more like creatures from science fiction that are somewhere between reptiles and insects (recalling *Metahead* from *Black Mirror*, season 4, 2017). These figures are neither male nor female, and they have no eyes or expressions, but their humanity is expressed by a body that is shaped like ours (two arms, two legs, etc.) and offers viewers a surface where a narrative can be projected. They also have the strange quality of resembling abstract anthropomorphic sculptures, interpretations of bodies that have in turn been interpreted in the two dimensions of the painting. They are, essentially, "generic figures," without conventional identities. "I have been looking at the work of Roberto Matta lately and I think I envy his ability to go beyond the human realm to express something truly cosmic and untethered."

On the property that he bought in Giverny in 1890, Claude Monet composed a landscape featuring all the elements he loved (flowers, a pond, a stream whose course he altered, a Japanese bridge, waterlilies, etc.) and this landscape formed a kind of matrix for his painting. Cardenas has proceeded in the same way—except that his composition is virtual—by inventing a world and its inhabitants, and they also form a kind of matrix for his painting. This unreal reality serves as a theater for various scenes placing one or several of these generic creatures in an environment that may be familiar to us. These figures without identities create the sense that these scenes are the site of a narrative that is more universal than particular.

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In all the paintings he has produced for this exhibition, Cardenas gives his figures the epidermal qualities of the chameleon: they feature the color combinations of Bernadet's paintings. "These figures in these white spaces have a trace of melancholy which I think I have infected them with. It's hard to live in the paradox of the past and the future coexisting in such an aggressive way. I think all art is illusion, and then memory."

— Eric Troncy, French art critic, curator, and Director of the Consortium Museum in Dijon, France