

Imagining the Future Amid Alejandro Cardenas's Profound, Brooding Canvases

In "ALEXANDRIA," bright stripes and zigzags pop against sprawling environments, telegraphing both impressive depth and intense seclusion.

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Photo credit: Matt Kroening. Courtesy of the artist and Almine Rech

In David Lynch's surreal crime drama *Twin Peaks* (1990), the most recondite, plot-turning scenes happen in the Black Lodge — specifically, in its Red Room: a depth-deceiving, austere sitting area cordoned off by velvet curtains. There, spectral versions of people converse with barely intelligible intonations and long pauses that incite anticipation.

The ethereal quality of the Red Room emanates throughout nearly every artwork in *ALEXANDRIA*, Alejandro Cardenas's first solo show with Almine Rech. The artist created each piece in this presentation amidst the ravage of the pandemic and wildfires that engulfed Los Angeles in 2020, and it shows. From prophetic apricot skies, to barren spaces and isolated characters, the allusions in this exhibit all feel like simulacra of the moment.

The work sits along the east and west wings of the gallery — a nod to the way global scholarship melded in the Egyptian city of Alexandria during the Hellenistic period, one of the inspirations for the title of the show. The paintings in the west wing are grouped by their forest green color palettes, while those on the east side all bear sterile, marble backgrounds. Though the minimalist backdrops, which Cardenas calls “non-spaces,” vary in hue, every acrylic features at least one otherworldly, gender-ambiguous character evincing an emotive pose. These figures — who simultaneously evoke Dali's Surrealism and *Avatar* — are emblematic of Cardenas's work, but feel particularly evocative in the pandemic era.

Unlike the colourful and enchanting exhibition that preceded this one, (Vivian Springford,) Alejandro Cardenas' Alexandria is a harsh reality check. Cardenas uses his talent to directly address essential issues, many of which have long been ignored. Specifically, the decaying condition of our planet, and the quality (or in some cases lack thereof) human existence today — neither of which the artist deems acceptable. And for a good reason.

This new body of work responds directly to living in Los Angeles during the devastating wildfires, that of course only compounded disasters already brought on by the pandemic. Cardenas stays with his “unique humanoid forms, but gives them powerful, yet suggested, emotional expressions.” The figures are then directly contrasted with the “decaying outdoors visible through the gridded windows” Froment said. The eerie scenes mimic the artist's own view from his studio.

While the exhibition centres on a long list of issues plaguing our current world, there are hints of optimism. But, said optimism is only a possibility, if collectively, people do the necessary work. So, the artist has not completely given up, and his aim is not to zap viewers of all hope either. Instead, Cardenas aims to remind viewers of the power that we as humans hold, especially in the here and now. The power that we have to make major and meaningful change.

Despite the “direct correlation to our shared challenges over the past year,” Cardenas cautiously floats the possibility of a brighter future. Each piece in this new body of work contributes to an overwhelming and urgent sense that viewers have to seriously contemplate the present moment. We are pressed to “pause, reflect, and process our emotions as they relate to these issues.” Only then, can we begin to “hope for a more peaceful future of coexistence.”