

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.

ALMINE RECH

The artist's claymation-like humanoids are faceless, but affecting: in "If this were to continue" (2020), a creature painted violet and chartreuse bears down on the floor across from its brooding cyan and copper counterpart. These characters' body language emotes the exasperation of a harrowing breakup, or perhaps a natural disaster. In "If it strikes" (2020), a pastel figure cocks its hips left as if posing in a Spring/Summer 2021 show. What these characters lack in grins and scowls, they make up for in gestures. Standing in their company, I'm immediately reminded of the bodily hyperbole required to show affection while wearing a mask. Bright stripes and zigzags allow the personalities in these paintings to pop against their sprawling environments, telegraphing both impressive depth and intense seclusion. Perhaps that's why the sculptures in this show, "Continuous Sentry and Sea Krait" (2021) and "Sea Krait Gerwalk mode" (2021) — hollow silhouettes that perch in the middle of each wing of the gallery — don't elicit the same intrigue as the acrylics.

The show's most profound piece, "If anything could be learned" (2020), pictures a dialectic between a humanoid and a leafy figure, whose body sprouts from a missing tile on the floor. While wildlife incinerates outside the window behind them, something new is blooming in this cinematic tête-à-tête. As Cardenas explains of ALEXANDRIA in the press release, "it is about the present moment and the choices we have to make in order to exist as a culture in a world we are destroying, and which we have to start fixing." If there's anything to take away from this show, perhaps it's that fertile communication is our way into a new, blossoming epoch.