ALMINE RECH

Aly Helyer
Weight of Love

Jan 16 — Mar 1, 2025 | Brussels

Almine Rech Brussels is pleased to present 'Weight of Love', Aly Helyer's first solo exhibition with the gallery, on view from January 16 to March 1, 2025.

The monumentality of the term *Weight of Love* often implies an atmosphere of intensity and drama, usually associated with feelings of affection and love. However, Aly Helyer is not interested in theatricality. She is more intrigued by the most nuanced manifestations of such heartstrings as a way to explore the human condition. From expressions over interactions to gestures, her paintings examine relationships and physical acts of touching as the manifestation of love. Without a grand narrative or proposal, they manifest one fundamental question - what is to be human?

Love itself can be a burden, weighing heavily and pulling one down. Yet, it can also feel uplifting and cathartic, elevating us and our emotional state. Between those extremes are everyday interactions and relationships—some simple and apparent, others more intricate and perplexing. And the tangible outcome of any relationship is the act of touching. From timidly reaching towards, brushing against, or carefully tapping someone to affectionate hugs, embraces, or kisses, and confrontational physical contact, Helyer synthesizes these acts of emotional intent into poetic snippets of human complexity. Such tactile manifestations of feelings can be likened to the act of painting itself, where the application of pigments to a surface is also driven by intent and emotion. "The painter's task is to create a physical presence," Cézanne proposed, and similarly, it's a basic human urge to express and feel a corporeal presence. The ambiguity and uncertainty of emotions and the perplexity of their manifestation are especially fitting in the fast-paced world in which nothing can be taken for granted, and Helyer is well aware of that! This is perhaps most evident in *Smile*, 2024, where a single figure's expression flutters between a timid smirk and an almost judgmental stare, with asymmetrical, somewhat illogical features accentuating this vagueness and duality. Helyer generally chooses suggestive titles that heighten the ambiance and intrigue around potential narratives. Simultaneously, they allow the artist's environment—music, a book she's reading, or interactions she's had or overheard—to seep in, adding a relevant, complementary layer to her oeuvre.

At first glance, the images appear bright, colorful, drawing-based, and relatively straightforward in content. But when examined more thoroughly and seen within a more extensive body of work, the interplay of color, the delicate brushwork and surfaces, nuanced expressions, overlapping perspectives, and ambiguous interactions elevate them to a profound depiction of human existence and relationships. Stemming from endless drawing sessions where every feature and element gets shuffled around until things fall into place, these paintings exhibit Helyer's reliance on intuition and her drive to communicate. This process might subvert a seemingly "perfect" visage with an additional feature borrowed from another perspective or angle, nodding at the Cubist-like method of a more comprehensive representation. Driven by the possibility of conveying the most inscrutable expressions and emotions, the portrayal of imaginary muses is sincere and deeply felt, avoiding the shallow, transparent demeanors. Once defined in that form, the figures are modeled in color, with an accent on the areas of light and dark. The built-up matte surfaces reveal the physicality of the process, and the unpolished covering allows the underlayers to peek through and create an impression of depth, volume, glow, and even radiance. The frequent bright, vibrant oranges contrast directly with muted and dark grays, accentuating the characters' presence and refining their ageless appearance and racial and gender ambiguity.

From there, Helyer choreographs the relationship between the protagonists and the perspective-free spaces suggested with background elements such as wallpapers, color field-like surfaces, architectural or natural elements, and occasional shadow play. This setting enhances the believability of the image, which functions solely on the painting's terms. Working from her unique, personal perspective, disclosing unseen relationships and challenging assumptions about reality, Helyer is not capturing an objective world but a subjective experience of reality—the very act of perceiving. Existing parallel to the "real world," the protagonists are consciously imbued with a sense of humanity through formal elements that elevate and accentuate their sensitive, melancholic, and perhaps even flawed nature. Ultimately, such well-balanced simplicity of elements, composition, and image structure provides just enough information to stimulate the eye and the mind while withholding much more. "Less is not just more, but more real," David Salle argued in *How To See* when talking about Piero della Francesca's ability to strip his images of unnecessary artifice, and one can also notice this reduction in Helyer's oeuvre.

Generally motionless, calm, and therefore fixed or compact, there is a lightness and even cheekiness permeating the images through the subtle, emotive ambiance radiating from the sitters' most indistinguishable cues and microexpressions. An almost Mannerist approach of exaggerating certain qualities—such as neck length, facial features, and proportions—adds a touch of asymmetry or unnatural elegance, emphasizing contemporary life's preoccupation with appearance. With the addition of postures or compositions sometimes reminiscent of fashion photography and occasional accents on garments, Helyer's work stays firmly contemporary while carrying a rich range of historical references. The nods to the fashion industry and the presentation of models also allude to the fakeness, artificiality, and the feelings of inadequacy or inferiority it often triggers. The youthful appearance of the protagonists taps into the phenomenon of age appeal and the use of juvenescence, vitality, energy, and beauty to convey vibrancy and desirability. Depicted in dubious circumstances, covertly conducting themselves and distantly interacting with their surroundings, Helyer's muses embody the reticence and dominance of the youth culture while revealing its coolness and chicness, along with oddness and awkwardness. Occasionally, they are accompanied by an animal friend, which, besides adding symbolism (freedom, love, loyalty, etc.), further extends the idea of love as a fundamental aspect of human experience, shaping our actions, relationships, and identities.

— Saša Bogojev, writer and curator