ALMINE RECH

Genieve Figgis
Imaginary Friends

Nov 19 — Dec 19, 2020 | London

Almine Rech is pleased to announce *Imaginary Friends*, Genieve Figgis' fifth solo exhibition with the gallery since 2015 and second presentation in London, featuring a selection of never-before-seen paintings.

Humans are resolutely social animals. Yet it takes an unprecedented global pandemic—with its attendant dictates to keep our distance from others—for us to acknowledge our primordial need for group belonging. Whether school classes, social clubs, worker's unions, circles of friends, crowds at the bar, or the momentary communion of a dinner party, our collective affiliations are integral for the formation of group identification, generating our sense of security and social power. Sigmund Freud defined the social masses as "temporary entities consisting of heterogeneous elements that have joined together for a moment." Forced into social isolation as part of urgent public health strictures, we mourn the loss of this feeling part of the mass, we are wistful for the days when we could count on safety in numbers, and we long for an identity that is completed by our friends—whether real or imagined. As Oscar Wilde wrote in *De Profondis*—his poetic lamentation of his fall from grace, composed in solitary confinement at Reading Gaol, "Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation."

Painted over the long months of COVID-19 confinement, Genieve Figgis' conjuring of "Imaginary Friends" came forth to fill the social void. Inspired by group pictures, found photographs, snippets of social media, and even the period costume drama "Catherine the Great," Figgis immersed herself in lush scenes in the genre of social portraiture. Her signature style of figuration, with its dynamic swirls of paint and atmospheric renderings of ornate scenes, deftly construct this lost social fabric that we collectively pine for. The community of a lavish dinner party is telegraphed not only by the assembly of individual attendees, but the collective pageantry: the rendering of each golden tassel, ruffled dress sleeve and elaborate place setting, as conjured by Figgis' fine brushwork. Every detail that defines identification with the mass becomes a charged talisman of our identification with a select clique. Who doesn't have romantic nostalgia for the awkward huddle of a group portrait taken in front of the fireplace, or mugging for the society shutterbug's lens? It's not about the individual "who's who" posing on the red carpet in *Fashion Friends*, it is the well-heeled ladies' conformity of pearl necklaces and nearly identical strapless gowns that Figgis paints with the cold-eyed precision of a social scientist. With an incredible pictorial economy, Figgis is able to project a complex social storyline onto these characters who themselves are often blurred, faceless pools of painterly bravado. The tension between what is depicted and what is left to the imagination—character, ambiance, genre, plot—goad the viewer to expand upon the implicitly elaborate shared social scenarios in each of these scenes, in which imagined and real friendship, royal kinship, or other fibres of the social fabric are interwoven.

Imaginary friendship not only resonates with this strange era of forced separation, it is a metaphor for the act of painting itself. While it may seem like a 'party for one', the painter's studio is a cacophonous space that is haunted by the grand spectres of art history. For Figgis, her internal and external dialogue is with her personal triumvirate: Goya, Velázquez and Hans Holbein. These forebears whisper in her ear, sometimes guiding her hand and animating her imagination as part of a transhistorical painterly conversation. As Figgis explained of this period in her studio, "As I made this work, I found these figures slowly surrounding me and the faces became my only companions." We can understand her words not only referring to the imaginary friendships and social groups she depicts on the surface of the canvas, but also more profoundly the transmission of collective visual memory embedded in her compositions, indebted to her ancient antecedents, who she imagines alongside her at the easel. For, even the lone painter must be classified as a part of the genus *Homo Sociens*.

- Alison M. Gingeras