ALMINE RECH

Portraits / Abstraits

Sep 9 — Oct 9, 2021 | Paris, Matignon

Almine Rech | Paris, Matignon is pleased to present *Portraits / Abstraits*, a group show with works by: Karel Appel, Agustín Cárdenas, César, Antoni Clavé, Carlos Cruz-Diez, Günther Förg, Markus Lüpertz, Pablo Picasso, and Vivian Springford.

The artistic genre of the portrait is almost as old as civilization itself, and has remained endlessly fascinating. Since ancient times, artists have continually attempted to represent their own image, or that of others. Through the centuries, portraits have served as official documents, objects of veneration, visual family trees, or psychological studies. When it meets its objectives, the portrait elevates the essence of its subject.

Five of the nine artists in *Portraits / Abstraits*, who are all masters of 20th-century art, approached the portrait from eclectic and shifting angles. Not satisfied with a simple representation on canvas, each tried to depart from classical ideals and experimented with multiple and surprising approaches to the portrait, without ever giving up the very principle of the genre: capturing the spirit of the model.

Visage éveillé, a 1962 oil painting by **Pablo Picasso**, is the focus point of the exhibition. It picks up certain elements of Picasso's cubist portraits, tinged with an abstract expressionist sensibility. Picasso did not use perspective, which gave him complete freedom as to the model's features, and their complexity draws the viewer in. Picasso was always rooted in a reality that became partially abstract by the gestural brushstrokes of his painting. Through multiple points of view of the face on the plane of the canvas, the eyes of his subject shine with emotion, and the frontal and profile views merge.

Antoni Clavé's painting *Deux Mains* (1964) offers launching point for the show The work is an homage to the Spanish Renaissance doyen El Greco, who was a hero of Clavé's. The composition of the work is that of a formal portrait but artist has obscured the face, leaving only a ghostly presence whose hands imprint the center of the painting. The painting's color palette, as well as its dignity, follow El Greco but through his obscured subject Clavé retains a singular aura of mystery.

Also on view is **Karel Appel**'s 1962 artwork *Nude* from his *Nude Series* of the early 1960s. Appel, who worked for years with various female models, captured in his paintings a raw, enduring femininity, something few artists dared to do before him. And even if the model for this painting remains anonymous, the viewer is immediately invested in this figure because of Appel's energetic application of paint and free style. Is the woman depicted here entranced, worried, or haughty? Perhaps all three at once. There is a connection here to the complex layers that simmer under the surface of every individual. *Männer ohne Frauen, Parsifal*, a 1994 artwork by **Markus Lüpertz**, is from his famous eponymous series, produced between 1993 and 1997. The subject of these paintings, as seen here, is a romantic hero, a reference to the character from Wagner's last opera. Here, the subject seems almost caged, trapped behind the hatched lines of Lüpertz's brush. His emotion is palpable in the tears flowing down his face.

César's 1997 sculpture *Stéphanie* depicts the Nouveau Réaliste's long-time companion and muse in twisted bronze. Produced shortly before his death the following year, the work expresses the youthful vitality of its subject. In the center of the sculpture, César cast a small self-portrait emerging from the shape of the shield surrounding *Stéphanie*, poignantly linking himself to his lover in an eternal sculptural embrace.

The exhibition also presents abstract paintings from 4 artists in contrast with the figurative portraits, abstraction and figuration coexisted in the 20th century and continue to do so.

The untitled painting by **Vivian Springford** (1984) has at its center a liquid, cloudy shape, which is characteristic of the unique and emblematic technique of Tachisme that allowed her to keep the colors separate. The shape, with a darker border, explodes in the artist's palette, which is rich with a plethora of colors, from mauve to chartreuse and crimson. By **Gunther Förg** a painting on canvas from his emblematic Grid series will be on view, along with oil painted monochrome panels bearing delicate compositions of rectangular shapes traced in the paint matter. All his works are extremely elaborated in terms of color research.

Carlos Cruz-Diez's physichromie (2014 and 2016), from his eponymous series, uses color kinetically. The artist's approach combines colors so that the viewer almost feels them as sensations of touch.

Standing on its square base, the sculpture *Un seul fil* (1989) by **Agustín Cárdenas** recalls classic Greek and Roman statuary in its dignified posture. The form becomes an elegant abstraction evoking the sculptural work of artists such as Giacometti and Brancusi, with whom Cardenas matured as an artist when working in Paris. Born in Cuba, he moved to Paris in the mid-1950s.

— Jessica Holmes, writer and critic