ALMINE RECH

José Lerma
MADRIYAL

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What do we see in José Lerma's paintings? A portrait or a landscape, a human figure or a heap of matter? Painting or sculpture? Abstraction or figuration? The artist delights in subverting our expectations, placing us in a field of tension where nothing is ever fully identifiable.

The nine works presented in the gallery are at once sculptural objects and "*process abstractions*" that take the form of a face. Each canvas oscillates between delicacy and excess: refined pastel colors, elegant female silhouettes, but also exuberant masses of paint, overflowing, almost aggressive. José Lerma embraces this resistance, the art of "*doing things wrong*" as a method of inquiry. Rooted in painting but open to every medium, his practice remains unclassifiable and prolific, exploring materials and techniques without hierarchy. Constantly overflowing the frame, his work engages the scale of the body and plays with codes through humor, generating critical dialogues with the history of painting.

Portraiture, a recurring thread in his work, becomes a tool to question the ties between representation, art, and power. His earlier series draw on forgotten historical figures or close friends transformed into models. Here, the protagonists are anonymous silhouettes, imagined figures. José Lerma approaches a more fundamental pictorial necessity, where the human figure serves as a frame, a stable contour within which he can push material explorations. These idealized faces are less portraits than they are containers: pretexts for painting. He favors a Mediterranean palette of subtle shades, colors that emerge slowly, illuminated by an entirely invented artificial light, recalling William H. Bailey.

Each painting follows a rigorous, artisanal process: he carefully designs the forms and colors in advance, then fabricates his own mixtures, a dense blend of acrylic, synthetic binders, and construction materials. Poured in overwhelming quantities and applied in a single gesture with almost no margin for error, the material turns the act itself into something intensely physical. For ten days the canvases lie flat, drying, before they are finally lifted upright and revealed.

For José Lerma, everything begins with the gesture. Drawing came naturally; painting an extension of this impulse. From the heroic splashes of Abstract Expressionism to Lichtenstein's parodic brushstrokes, and the monumental impastos of Bram Bogart, he revisits the history of gesture in painting by exaggerating material and infusing it with artifice and irony. It becomes at once an immediate trace and a laborious construction: the spontaneous sketch expands into the monumental.

For years, José Lerma worked as a nomad, creating in situ from what he found in the cities where he exhibited, embracing instability and the impulse of constant novelty. Since settling in his studio in Puerto Rico, his practice has shifted. The portrait series testifies to this change: a rare moment of continuity in his career, it belongs neither to monotony nor repetition but to a will to deepen. Each canvas is a new lesson, a way of pushing further his exploration of gesture and matter.

— Margaux Knight, independent curator