ALMINE RECH

Alexandre Lenoir
Trois Rivières

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Memories are slippery and fickle. They can be both vivid and hazy, make us feel simultaneously closer and farther away from a certain time and place, and be shared by many while also remaining intensely personal. These inherent contradictions are at the heart of Alexandre Lenoir's first solo show in the United States, Trois Rivières which comprises nearly a dozen paintings based on old black-and-white and sepia toned photographs belonging to his grandmother. Although Lenoir never met most of the people in these pictures, the photographs themselves are quite familiar to him as they have decorated the walls and shelves of his grandparents' house in Guadeloupe for as long as he can remember. Translating these fading photographs into large-scale paintings, Lenoir captures the ephemerality of disparate memories while emphasizing their collective resonance.

The tension between distance and immediacy is a palpable in Lenoir's paintings. Ethereal figures seem to shift in and out of focus as they vie for prominence with their verdant backgrounds. Human presence is strong, but also approximative due to blotchy and faint features that sometimes flirt with abstraction. Lenoir's treatment of faces and bodies recalls the experience of seeing a negative image after looking at intense colors or a bright light for an extended period of time. The afterimage, itself a kind of memory, is a fleeting impression on the retina that lets us to see something that isn't actually there. Lenoir, having looked at the figures in the photos with great intensity, captures their phantom afterimages in paint.

Behind the vaporous figures, Lenoir creates an illusion of depth through a labor-intensive process which involves many layers of paint, but notably creates barely any texture on the surface of the canvas. Working with acrylic and oil, Lenoir has adopted a technique that is perhaps more similar to printmaking than traditional painting. Before applying paint to the canvas, the artist covers certain areas with tape so that these masked forms remain untouched by that particular layer of color. This process is repeated again and again, creating multiple color separations directly on the canvas. Each finished work comprises anywhere between twenty and one-hundred coats of paint and likely required thousands of pieces of masking tape.

But for all this meticulousness, Lenoir also allows chance and experimentation inform his paintings. Like the distant memories they represent, Lenoir's canvases are marked by holes and stains. These are the results of chemical reactions between various types of paints and solvents (which he applies liberally to the front and back of each canvas) and the rather violent process of removing the layers of tape from the surface. If the finished paintings bear traces of forces beyond the artist's immediate control, this only underscores the imperfect and sometimes brutal activity of remembering.

--Mara Hoberman