ALMINE RECH

# Brian Calvin
# More Days

## Jun 2 — 26, 2021 | Paris, Matignon

*More Days*, Brian Calvin's new exhibition at Almine Rech Gallery's Matignon space, presents ten new paintings made especially for the occasion over recent pandemic months. The title inevitably alludes – or so it feels – to the period of forced seclusion we have collectively endured worldwide, a seemingly endless amorphous repetition of sameness in a physical and mental universe that shrank more and more as time went by.

Yet *More Days* also refers to the cumulative experience that constitutes Calvin's practice, where every day brings new discoveries and renewed ways of applying paint to canvas, of envisioning compositions and arranging colors in a lifelong quest to create each new work with a fresh perspective. The title also harkens back to *Days*, one of Calvin's first major solo shows at the now-defunct Marc Foxx gallery in Los Angeles in 2000, and with it an assessment of the time that has passed in a career that now spans decades and an oeuvre that has necessarily evolved in the process.

It turns the gaze outwards as well, to all the work that is still left to do, for a painter who has quietly forged his own path in a truly eccentric manner – that is, away from the major art capitals of the world – giving him freedom to explore how to take painting (his own and painting in general) further and to concentrate on formal issues. At a time that has seen a recent upsurge of figurative painters focusing first and foremost on content and subject matter, Calvin has instead continued day after day to condense pictorial concerns within established genres with a defined history (mostly portraiture and landscape), to reinvent them into elements that are recognizable within these categories while not totally belonging to them. His paintings are images of invented figures or places but not actual depictions of real people or real scenery. The new paintings presented in this exhibition thus all continue the work Calvin has done with his "portraits," the elongated, hieratic characters for which he has become well-known, with pictures of various sizes that often draw from historical Cubism, where for example reminiscences of Picasso's *Portrait of Dora Maar* (1937) can be found, as with *Big Scene* or *Middle Distance*.

Beyond the obvious references it soon becomes clear however that what is at stake is an exploration of composition and color, with facial features acting as anchors or signifiers destined to draw the viewer in. Figurative elements serve in fact as devices to explore a more abstract and formal way to reflect on what constitutes a painting. Where the eye would be tricked at first into taking *Close Quarters* for a mirrored image, attentive observation reveals an even more complex sequence of figures where one color or one line does not exactly answer the other and where the actual number of depicted faces is not easy to determine. Symmetry is off, and this so decidedly that it produces a vibration that might even prove visually disturbing or upsetting to some.

Sometimes a face will sport too many eyes or mouths (*Face Paint*), or both eyes will be depicted on the same side of the face (*Bobbi*, *Big Scene*), while skin colors in scenes where several characters are present are likely used to provide compositional balance rather than anything else, as is most evident in *Big Scene*. Close inspection shows a wide array of graphic effects and patterns in aid of this constant quest for compositional perfection, as with the hatchings or dots often used near the eyes, in addition to the lovely brushwork that serves to indicate volume on some of the faces (*Robin*, or in the delicate work for the hair in *Bobbi*).

Overall, the ten paintings in this exhibition underline the wide range of pictorial developments Calvin has been exploring. They vary in size, with the two smaller paintings on linen (*Bobbi* and *Bonny*) showing an (almost) classic motif of a face in profile detached on a colored, empty background, which is also the case for *Twilight Glow*, while on the contrary larger pictures such as *Close Quarters*, *Big Scene* and *Face Paint* would present a near boxed-in effect as the entire surface of the canvas is entirely taken by giant faces. Calvin's paintings have often been described as the epitome of cool or even hipness, when in reality the overall general effect is rather uncanny, a mix of seductive strangeness and humble radicalism in which vibrant, bright colors and schematic giant faces collide to pull the viewer in. To arrive at this brilliant moment in his career, day after day after day Calvin moves painting forward. Let us only hope, in the immortal words of seminal German band Can, that future days will look ever so bright and bring us even more of Calvin's painting:

*I don't have to say no more*
*You know what I'm aiming for*
*Don't care if I break a law*
*I want more and more and more*

- Noëllie Roussel