ALMINE RECH

Ali Cherri
Last Watch Before Dawn

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I am obsessed with Ali Cherri's watercolors. More recently, the artist has described his practice as having "two main branches": sculptural objects and moving-image works. Yet I would gently quibble and propose that—intentional or not—his intimate watercolors, which emerged during the COVID-19 lockdown, constitute a third and crucial branch. Whether understood as studies or private reflection, they serve as an essential entry point into the broader cosmology of Cherri's concerns: death, violence, occupation, imperialism, and the objects and artifacts through which these histories are sedimented, mediated and retold.

Rendered with controlled yet fluid brushwork, Cherri's watercolors exude a kind of effortless realism. They are startling in their quietude, seductive in their beauty and deeply in conversation with his broader practice. In the series "Dead Inside" (2021-ongoing), for instance, deceased fauna—foxes, fish, birds—alongside wrecked automobiles summon echoes of Andy Warhol's "Death and Disaster" series (1962–67). In "We Grow Thorns So Flowers Would Bloom" (2023), depictions of prickly-pear cacti, rendered with a scientific precision reminiscent of Hilma af Klint's botanical works, appear at once diagrammatic and radiant. Encountering them, I was gobsmacked by their disarming elegance and deceptive simplicity. Again, I am utterly obsessed.

Motifs from these works resurface in *The Watchman* (2023), Cherri's oneiric film following a Turkish-Cypriot soldier—Sergeant Bulut—stationed at the border of the unrecognized Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. In the film, the lanky, blue-eyed soldier ritualistically buries robins that repeatedly collide with the glass of his watchtower. Later, he passes a withering wall of prickly-pear cacti—plants historically used as border markers throughout the Mediterranean. The film concludes with Bulut spotting a troupe of larger-than-life, lost soldiers marching along the night horizon. When he asks whether he will return if he marches with them, silence follows. The brigade turns back, and the film cuts to black.

The Watchman forms part of Cherri's ongoing trilogy examining the figure of the soldier—an enduring subject in the artist's oeuvre. The second installment, *The Sentinel* (2026), debuts in 'Last Watch Before Dawn', Cherri's first solo exhibition at Almine Rech, New York. In *The Sentinel*, Sergeant Lafleur—another spindly, fair-skinned soldier with piercing blue eyes—injures himself while on watch, following a botched suicide attempt. After treatment and evaluation, the garrison's physician encourages him to leave the barracks for fresh air, suggesting distance from his suicidal thoughts, which Lafleur dismisses as little more than ennui.

In what may be a dream sequence, Lafleur wanders through a carefully staged plaza or square punctuated by Cherri's works, including the large sand-and-clay sculpture *Soldier 2 – Weapon on the Shoulder* (2024). He then descends into a subterranean bar called Les Survivants (The Survivors), where he encounters the cocktail singer Loula. Singing in Arabic, she performs a song inspired by Oscar Wilde's "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" (1897), the epic poem chronicling Wilde's imprisonment and the execution of his fellow inmate, Charles Thomas Wooldridge, who murdered his wife. As the refrain goes—both in Wilde's poem and in the song written by Rabih Mroué—"Each man kills the thing he loves."

Loula and Lafleur sit down afterwards to share a conversation about life and death, as she comments on the satyric wall lanterns that watch over them. Part of Cherri's new series "Nocturnal Light" (2025), and premiering here in *Last Watch Before Dawn*, these bacchanalian bronze mask sculptures are eerily piercing—sinister and macabre yet full of folly—marked by a lime-green patina that lends them a charming severity. They leer, grin and sneer—full of mischief, dread and theatrical menace. Cherri's engagement with bronze began with his 2024 exhibition 'Envisagement' at Fondation Giacometti in Paris, which explored the shared preoccupation—between Cherri and Giacometti—with the human face as both subject and site of meaning. Since then, bronze has become a medium through which Cherri stages frictions between the monumental and the vulnerable, permanence and rupture—a welcomed counterpart to his sand-and-clay he is best known for.

This should not come as a surprise, but my favorite work in the show is Cherri's latest watercolor series, *To Save What Can Be Saved* (2025), also exhibited for the first time. Drowsy soldiers hover in a void—suspended in negative space as if caught mid-fall, mid-dream or perhaps mid-death. The effect is unnerving: we are made witness to their unravelling and to the quiet futility of eternal vigilance. Taken together, *Last Watch Before Dawn* unfolds as a meditation on fragile bodies caught within immovable systems—where watchfulness corrodes into exhaustion, and history reveals itself not as past tense, but as an unrelenting present.

— Terence Trouillot, senior editor of Frieze