ALMINE RECH

Alejandro Cardenas
ARACHNE

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The Nobility of Painting

A Chilean-born American artist based in Madrid, Alejandro Cardenas is celebrated for his surreal paintings and sculptures that blur the line between figuration and abstraction. Born in 1977 in Santiago, Chile, he spent his formative years in Miami, earned a BFA from the Cooper Union School of Art in 2000, and has since built a multidisciplinary career spanning illustration, music, graphic design, fashion, and fine art. Employing a unique visual language that combines science fiction, surrealism, and ancient mythology to explore a post-human future, his work often features recurring symbolic elements across his fantastical paintings, drawings, and sculptures.

Returning to Almine Rech for his sixth solo show, his second one-person exhibition with the gallery in New York, and his first in its expansive Tribeca location, Cardenas is showcasing 11 new paintings and a series of drawings, arranged in a dynamic installation. Titled “ARACHNE,” the engaging exhibition references both Ovid’s fable of Arachne and a painting in Madrid’s Museo del Prado that interprets the fable by Diego Velázquez. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (Book VI), Arachne, a shepherd’s daughter and talented weaver, claims her skill surpasses that of the goddess Minerva (aka Athena, the Greek goddess) and refuses to acknowledge divine influence. After a contest in which they both weave stunning tapestries, but Arachne’s depicts the Gods mistreating mortals, Minerva destroys Arachne’s woven work and transforms her into a spider, condemning her to weave forever.

In Velázquez’s circa 1657 painting, *Las Hilanderas* (The Spinners), also known as The Fable of Arachne, the foreground depicts the weaving contest. The goddess Athena, disguised as an elderly woman at a spinning wheel on the left, while Arachne, a young woman with her back to the viewer, is winding yarn on the right. In the background, on a raised platform or stage, Athena, depicted in full armor, raises her arm to punish Arachne. The tapestry behind them features a reproduction of Titian's *The Rape of Europa*, paying homage to the Italian Renaissance master. By contrasting manual craft (Arachne) with high intellectual art (Athena), the work is often read as an allegory of the arts, serving as Velázquez’s personal statement on the dignity and significance of the painter's profession—one that requires not only skill but also a mind’s eye.

Velázquez’s visual story mirrors Cardenas’s own experience when he first decided to pursue painting. Since he was six, he had been drawing in sketchbooks and was fascinated by serial comics like *The Adventures of Tintin*, science fiction movies like *Star Wars* and *Dune*, and Ray Bradbury novels such as T*he Illustrated Man*. His seventh-grade teacher in Miami told him that his drawings weren't art, just cartoons, and at Cooper Union, both professors and peers told him that painting was dead, or that when one did use paint, it wasn’t to express one’s imagination. Having grown up reading Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel García Márquez, and Isabel Allende, Cardenas—a visionary artist—has been shaped by Magical Realism as much as by science fiction and comics, making his imagination his primary tool.

Moving to Madrid in 2023, after living in Santiago, Miami, New York, and Los Angeles, deepened Cardenas' understanding of painting. After countless hours looking at masterworks at the Met, MoMA, and the Neue Galerie while living in New York, and after visiting other museums in cultural capitals during his travels and stays, the Museo del Prado became his sanctuary for studying the medium—and the starting point for this current solo show. Having transitioned from painting with acrylic on canvas to oil on linen around the time he moved to Spain, he found himself in an environment where painting was part of the culture, rather than merely something within an art world subject to trends.

After nearly eight years of continuous painting, with his cast of anthropomorphic characters evolving across various fictional domestic and environmental realms, his new body of work—the first made completely analog, by purely drawing and painting, without any digital engagement—places his humanoid figures living life to the fullest in an abandoned futuristic world. His post-human creatures make love in a stylish room overlooking modernist, geometric towers in an overgrown city reclaimed by nature, playfully dance in a circle while holding hands and delighting in their folly, and bring a guitar to a stylish terrace with a commanding view of a peaceful, carefree domain, dressed to the nines.

And while the thread linking the paintings is this futuristic, sci-fi realm—an imaginative world that's completely opposite the cities we inhabit and the World Wide Web we surf—it's meant to be a real place, a shell of a civilization where jobs and bank accounts no longer matter and only art and love remain. It's a futuristic myth, like one that Ovid would have written in his time, yet it's also linked to his tale of Arachne. One painting portrays sculptural sages in rippling, draped robes observing a plantlike creature, birthed from a vine, becoming entangled in its own web, while another canvas captures a flamenco dancer in a vibrant red gown with her arm held high, gripping her swirling dress, moving as fast as the spinning wheel in Velázquez's symbolic painting, and a blue ribbon that's ensnaring the stumming guitar players like a spider's web.

Two other paintings echo Athena's role in *Las Hilanderas* and in Ovid's fable. One depicts a cloaked woman reminiscent of her portrayal in Velázquez's canvas, and the other is based on the robotic doppelganger from Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis*—one of cinema's earliest and most iconic artificial humans, known for her metallic form and provocative cabaret dance—now shown wielding a weaver's tool in her raised hand, ready to lead the oppressed working class toiling in a subterranean city against the wealthy elite living in luxury skyscrapers. Ironically, Lang's science-fiction masterpiece, set in a futuristic urban dystopia, is often interpreted as taking place in 2026.

Staged within Cardenas's expansive hand-drawn grid, filled with sketches from his preparatory notebooks and functioning as another kind of web that captures his works, the artist's imaginative exhibition becomes an alluring gesamtkunstwerk, or a complete work of art, as all his shows have been since making painting his passion. His reimaginings of art, design, mythology, and fantasy are masterfully woven into a dreamlike vision of the future.

— Paul Laster, writer, editor, and curator