ALMINE RECH

# Javier Calleja
# CURIOUSLY

## May 30 — Jul 25, 2026 | Paris

**Almine Rech Paris, Turenne is pleased to announce 'CURIOUSLY', Javier Calleja's sixth solo exhibition with the gallery, on view from May 30 to July 25, 2026.**

“I’m not a revolutionary artist, I’m an evolutionary artist,” Javier Calleja says, without hesitation.

He’s right: if contemporary art was born and came of age amid the cradle of a revolutionary aesthetic — always defining itself against the dominant aesthetic — it is possible that in the twenty-first century things have shifted somewhat, or that they, too, have simply evolved.

His work does not carry the charge of aesthetic, stylistic, or structural revolution. What it offers instead is the excitement of perpetual evolution within the framework he has defined and the system he has built. That system summons a cast of characters whose ancestors live in comics — he mentions Francisco Ibáñez Talavera (1936–2023) in particular — and in the history of painting, Yoshitomo Nara among others: small figures, often shown face-on, looking the viewer straight in the eye. Setting is not really at stake: a flat color, a cloud; the figure presents itself like an object, like a thing whose composition invites appropriation. The simplicity of the arrangement gives pride of place to text, which appears on the characters’ T-shirts, in clouds or comic-strip speech bubbles: “The path of the truth is made of realities,” reads one figure in a drawing on paper presented in the exhibition, a speech bubble hovering above him. He appears to be perched on the snow-covered peak of a small mountain.

Javier Calleja grew up in Málaga in the 1970s and '80s. “My biggest influences were cartoons and comics. In particular Mazinger Z cartoons and Francisco Ibáñez Talavera’s comic strips. Inspired by these, I started drawing as a child, so my work developed from there and still carries some of those characteristics,” he says. A competitive gymnast first, he turned his professional attention to the visual arts at twenty-five. He studied fine arts at the University of Granada: “It was difficult for me when I was a student in the 1990s because all the big artists were really intellectual. Every artwork had to have a thousand words behind it, it was very conceptual. [...] the big artists of that era, they were always writing, always thinking, always planning, talking about the work.” Calleja was not entirely persuaded by any of this — he was drawn instead to emotion: his art is made to be felt, not necessarily interpreted. It is through feeling, in any case, that he speaks to those who look. “I can talk about technique, why the big eyes, why this, why that; but you need to have your own idea or emotion about the painting.”

Of the work of Ibáñez Talavera Calleja says he was struck above all by the character of Rompetechos, “a man who doesn't understand everything, only made of circles, round face, round eyes, round nose.” He drew him thousands of times. Later, his own characters seemed equally fated to a kind of geometric perfection. The figures who populate the works in his Paris exhibition have, however, taken full advantage of the freedom he has granted them. In this body of new work, perfect circles no longer govern the making of these characters — spare as they are, yet so expressive: eyes become oval, sometimes spilling beyond the contour of the face; heads are occasionally a little square. They become, in short, slightly more human, as though they were now ready to face the real world — to observe it, to take its measure. “There is no cure for curiosity,” one of them says.

More than Cocteau ("Critics judge works of art, not knowing that the works are judging them"[1]), the works of Javier Calleja call to mind Paul Virilio, who put forward the hypothesis that we do not go to museums to see works of art but to be seen by them. Rarely does this ring so true: his figures look back at us and build a relationship with the viewer that is almost intimate — not only do they return our gaze, they speak to us through their miniature slogan-like phrases. "Take my Hand," "Me First": the messages these figures address to us in the exhibition 'CURIOUSLY' articulate a dialogue between work and viewer that Calleja says he shaped by reflecting on the fact that he had been taught mathematics and physics at school, but not respect. "Rights are vulnerable," he says, "and no one taught me my rights." His characters, deftly wielding innocence and irony, remind us how complicated it is simply to be in the world: like adolescents, they seem to be discovering how things work — social relationships, the construction of an identity.

One cannot move through the exhibition — which Calleja conceived with the cabinet of curiosities in mind — without savoring the charged pleasure of works whose messages seem to answer one another: "It's my decision" and "Your opinion" conjure Virilio again, this time declaring that one went to the museum not to see the giraffes but to experience the proximity of giraffes and lions. The way Calleja stages his hangs — or the works themselves, occasionally flanked by very, very large decorative frames — might evoke Pop Art, but today it is entertainment, more than anything, that inspires these colorful displays. Art has moved on. "I tried to do something new and I did the same, so now I do the same and it seems really new," Calleja tells me — his works invariably described as featuring "characters with big eyes." It is strange, because there is so much more, it seems to me, beyond those big eyes; yet they have come to stand in for the elusive strangeness of his work. Intimate, simple, immediate on the surface, his works are in truth extraordinarily complex and disorienting, never fully resolved. What they assert is less a univocal statement than a vehicle for reaching something less legible, deeper, perhaps inaccessible. They illuminate — even as they preserve their shadows — something seminal within us, something we reach for, ceaselessly, without ever quite arriving.

— Éric Troncy, art critic, curator, and co-director of Consortium Museum in Dijon, France

[1] Cocteau, Jean. Le Rappel à L'ordre ... Paris, Stock, 1926.