ALMINE RECH

Alejandro Cardenas
CALYPSO

Mar 19 — Apr 23, 2022 | Paris

Almine Rech Paris is pleased to present Alejandro Cardenas' third solo exhibition with the gallery, on view from March 19 to April 23, 2022.

'CALYPSO' is the title that Alejandro Cardenas gives to his third solo exhibition with Almine Rech, and second one in Paris, following 'PARADOXA.' This time, Cardenas responds with paintings and sculptures to Homer's *Odyssey*, and more specifically to the years Odysseus spent with the nymph Calypso in Ogygia. Before turning to the reach of Cardenas' interpretation of that part of the poem, it should be noted that he has divided the exhibition into three parts. The main space focuses on Odysseus's years in Ogygia. One room attached to it deals with the suitors of Penelope, while another offers meditations on the questions that the exhibition raises. Cardenas' latest body of works constitutes a rather unusual moment in contemporary painting and sculpture insofar as it presents the reflections of an artist who quite literally engaged with a classical textual source, in an age where the tendency bends towards oblique presentations of traces of ideas, as Jean-Luc Nancy has shown in *Les Muses*. One can find in the very verses of Homer's *Odyssey* the matrix of the paintings and sculptures from 'CALYPSO.' The works are nonetheless not mere visual ekphrases confined to the *Odyssey*. Cardenas weaves together webs of meaning across time. He intertwines Homer's poem with Ancient Greek sculptures, as well as references from different periods and regions, whose significations thereby find themselves deepened or altered.

The main space's starting point stems from the luxurious flora and fauna of Henri Rousseau's paintings. Rousseau's landscapes—and, as a result, Cardenas'—echo the descriptions that Homer makes of Ogygia, which is said to be made of cedars, junipers, poplars, cypresses, garden vines, violets, parsley, owls, falcons, and sea-crows (see V, 55–75). The gesture towards Rousseau is equally important in regard to the paintings' scales. In the same way as Rousseau plays with the proportions that tie his figures to their surroundings, Cardenas makes his figures larger than nature to render the extraordinary status and abilities that Homer conferred to them. Such a scalar move entails a more painterly brushwork, compared to some of Cardenas' earlier works.

Several of the paintings which emulate landscapes in the fashion of Rousseau also double the *Odyssey* with further elements. For example, *The Fate of Mortals* depicts the iguana as a memento mori symbol, which finds its origins in Florida, where iguanas are labeled as invasive species because of the harm they cause to native wildlife. Like the paintings' landscapes, *Lament of Odysseus* transforms into paint verses from the *Odyssey*. In the poem, Odysseus is described as sitting on the shore shortly before learning from Calypso that he is finally free (see V, 145-155). In the painting, his posture is patterned after the Hellenistic bronze sculpture *Boxer at Rest*, now in the collection of the National Museum of Rome. One may wonder about the golden stripes that run along Odysseus's body. They actually come from the attire of another man who spent his life at sea, Jacques Cousteau, whose wetsuit was embroidered with an array of golden stripes. The appearance of the French naval officer here is not arbitrary. It gives an account of Cardenas' own encounter with one of the many survivals of Homer's *Odyssey*. In the late 1980s, Jacques Cousteau's wooden vessel, Calypso, was indeed rebuilt in Miami, where Cardenas grew up and saw the boat.

In continuity with the paintings, the main space brings into play Cardenas' first human scale sculptures. The two sculptures, *Calypso* and *Odysseus*, both measure six feet and propel Cardenas closer to his conception of exhibitions as works of art in their own right, rather than a set of individual works. Like the paintings' figures, the sculptures' heads recall the numerous shapes of Ancient Greek helmets. *Calypso* inscribes itself in the continuity of a reclining Venus, while *Odysseus* draws on the Kritios Boy.

As noted above, two rooms complement the main space. The room with the suitors of Penelope, and the one forming meditations on the exhibition's questions. *The Dream of Ithaca* is the title of the painting featured in the latter. Mystery and indeterminacy are two terms which characterize it. Are the two figures Odysseus and Penelope reunited? A faint memory of the years Odysseus and Calypso spent together? Penelope and Calypso? Odysseus and his alter ego? Is the blue stripe the water that divides the ecumene from Ogygia? Cardenas' painting remains unresolved. The blue stripe, which occurs in *Hermes Delivers the Order of Zeus*, might be reminiscent of Barnett Newman's zips. If we wanted to anchor our comparison in chromatic criteria, we would mention, say, *Shimmer Bright*, 1968, from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. But it is Newman's words on the Museum of Modern Art's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, 1950–1951, which seem to fit Cardenas' painting best: 'It's no different, really, from meeting another person. One has a reaction to the person physically. Also, there's a metaphysical thing, and if a meeting of people is meaningful, it affects both their lives.' In Newman's painting, it is the zips that fulfil the role of drawing people to the painting. It feels as though the two figures in *The Dream of Ithaca* were first and foremost two persons that the blue stripe draws into the painting's space.

Of course, Odysseus's years in Ogygia revolve around dilemmas of mortality and immortality, beyond antitheses built upon mere oppositions between the positive and the negative, good and evil. But it is also a tale about nostalgia. While Odysseus is sitting on the shore, Homer describes him as 'long[ing] mournfully for his return.' The viewers who embark on 'CALYPSO' may be longing for some kind of return too. After all, longing (*Sehnsucht* in German) is, in the words of Martin Heidegger, 'the agony of the nearness of the distant.'

— Théo de Luca, Author, Yale University