ALMINE RECH

Brian Calvin
More

Apr 27 — May 28, 2022 | Brussels

Almine Rech Brussels is pleased to present 'More', Brian Calvin's sixth solo exhibition with the gallery, on view from April 27 to May 28, 2022.

Brian Calvin is an artist whose methods are both modest and expansive. For three decades he has pursued the representation of the human figure – mainly faces, mainly women. Within these self-imposed parameters (which, of course, he periodically abandons) Calvin has created a body of work that is at once elusive and familiar, winsome and affecting, historically referential and stridently contemporary.

Calvin's exhibition *More* follows his last with Almine Rech, which was titled *More Days* – itself a play on the title of an exhibition early in Calvin's career simply called *Days*. Every picture by this artist builds on its precedents, both within his oeuvre and within the canon of Western and global art. He is an artist who, in his own words, sees painting as "a long game."

Calvin says he "walked backwards" into Picasso, whose synthetic Cubist portraits have become an explicit influence on his work since 2020. Cubism, for Calvin, is a means of packing more information into a given pictorial container. More time, more space, more colour, more texture, more pattern and decoration: after Calvin first empties out the shapes of these faces, reducing them to elemental forms, he fills them back up to the brim, almost to spilling point.

In previous paintings, Calvin experimented with multi-figure compositions in which faces were stacked and aligned in order to create complex intersecting arrangements in shallow pictorial space. In this new exhibition of acrylic paintings and pastel drawings, individual faces predominate, but Cubism enables Calvin to represent multiple viewpoints within single tightly-cropped heads.

The paintings are full in other ways too. Look at the figures' eyes in paintings such as *Tilt* and *Draper*. The irises crystallize into psychedelically intricate subsections, and the shadows and makeup around the eyes explode into dazzling fields of pattern. Colour, which Calvin has long deployed to captivating effect, here is pushed towards maximum saturation.

Despite the outrageous excesses of palette and decoration, Calvin's paintings are anchored in a realist tradition. These faces belong in our world; they are people we can imagine meeting and interacting with or, at the very least, seeing on our screens. They are fully realized, and fully grounded, even if – on reflection – heavy blue and green eyeshadow is rarely seen these days.

This balance between specificity and abstraction, naturalism and idealism, is at the root of Calvin's paintings' appeal. He has a remarkable ability to capture certain characteristics – shyness, perhaps, or anxiety, or hesitancy – that set his pictures apart from most images of women in mainstream media. (When did a photograph of a fashion model, for example, have half as much inner life as one of Calvin's muses?) Nevertheless, these women are ultimately nothing so much as figments of his imagination, actors in a world that is his own aesthetic construction.

When is a picture of a face not a portrait? Calvin's paintings test the tolerance of this category. Unlike in his previous exhibition, *More Days*, none of the works in this exhibition are titled after subjects' names. While they all embody distinct identities, it is questionable whether those identities relate to the people on which they might have been based, or whether those people would anyway recognize themselves in their representations. It is, of course, impossible to know whether any of our faces represent our true inner selves. Calvin's painting *Backstage*, in which blond hair is pinned back like theatre curtains, acknowledges the face as a façade, a platform on which drama might unfold but which is ultimately an opaque screen.

As pictures of young women made by a man who is also a husband and father of girls, it is impossible to think about Calvin's work without considering beauty. In many pictures, these women are self-beautifying – sporting flowers in their hair, for instance, or wearing makeup – but they are generally not beautiful according to the anodyne standards of the fashion and entertainment industries. Calvin might not flatter his subjects, but he does approach them with empathy, admiration and respect. His work has long been recognized for its easy, quick charm – and indeed its beauty – but over time it emerges as something more nuanced, more ambivalent and less carefree, something that takes root and blossoms in the empty space between his subjects' outward appearances and their inner lives.

- Jonathan Griffin, writer and art critic.