ALMINE RECH

José Lerma
Guerras Tibias

Jan 11 — Feb 18, 2023 | London

José Lerma's recent hyper-painterly portraits are paradoxically austere. The copious amount of paint loaded onto each canvas counters the scant number of brushstrokes: only three to ten per piece. Though impasto typically conveys dynamism and spontaneity, here it rigidly describes static heads from the front or side. Stark and solemn, the faces in profile evoke Piero della Francesca's classicizing double portrait of the Duke and Duchess of Urbino. Only in place of the early Renaissance master's diaphanous oil glazes is the opposite extreme: clotted slabs of acrylic. With so few marks and fast-drying paint thickened with gels and other materials, Lerma's pictures require careful planning. This methodical process and the profound quietude of the resulting images neutralizes the improvisational bravura associated with gestural brushwork. Beyond the unlikely marriage of seductive expressionism and severe neoclassicism, the series contains many more contradictions that challenge expectations of both painting and portraits.

Traditionally, painted portraits served to identify and memorialize kings, queens, and other elite members of society. Profile views, prevalent on the ancient Roman coins that inspired Piero, were thought to provide the most accurate likeness. Renaissance portrait painters like Piero not only sought to capture the outward appearance of their subjects, but also their status and character. It was not until the era of photography that portraits become democratized; that is, it was no longer a costly luxury to have one's portrait made. Today photographic "selfies" are among the most common images people encounter on a daily basis.

Portraiture—and who has historically been represented in the genre—is an abiding concern of Lerma's. Both his early site-responsive installations and recent studio-based paintings probe the power dynamics of portraits through the ages. For example, his 2010 series of fine-line airbrush paintings of 17th- and 18th-century bankers and royals resemble giant ballpoint pen doodles, thereby deflating the importance conferred by their official portraits. His floor-spanning depictions of these same personages on rugs further upends their dominance by having viewers look down at and walk on their faces. In the more recent Repaintings series, Lerma—who was born in Spain and raised in Puerto Rico—copies rare examples of Hispanic subjects in European and American paintings at the Art Institute of Chicago. Similarly, his series Background People, painted enlargements of marginal figures from Western paintings, reverse typical hierarchies of representation.

Lerma's current portrait paintings frustrate the desire to recognize a particular person—through distinctive facial features and/or character traits—in a depiction referred to as a "portrait." Each work is titled after the first name of the sitter, a mode of address that suggests some level of familiarity and even intimacy between artist and subject. Indeed, many of the titular individuals are Lerma's neighbors and friends in San Juan and Chicago, where he splits his time. Though based on specific people, the portraits are simplified to the point that likeness becomes indeterminate. Varying hairstyles distinguish one person from the next, but their blank visages allow the viewer to project imagined identities onto each. As resemblance recedes, paint itself comes to the forefront. Of course, the very abundance of paint, projecting outward from the canvas, further establishes its position of prominence. In place of metaphorical, psychological depth in the faces portrayed, we find literal depth in the thickness of paint. For Lerma, the portrait is the vehicle for the paint as much as the other way around.

The sculptural quality of the paint contrasts with the flatness of the images, which echo Pop art in their cartoonish simplification. Lerma's particular paint recipe not only has a high viscosity but also a rubbery, matte finish. Unlike oil paint, which is well-suited to rendering the translucency of human flesh, Lerma's thickened acrylic recalls toys, dolls or plasticine. The schematic faces and artificial materiality further thwart the development of character psychology. Contrary to the traditional aim to breathe life into painted figures, Lerma imposes an uncanny stillness and quiet on his by congealing them in the sludge of paint.

In addition to portraits, the paintings also contain landscapes. Viewed independently of the image, the peaks and valleys of paint appear topographical. The accretion of material where brushstrokes meet is like the mountainous ridges formed by tectonic plates. Lerma has fittingly described himself as a "landscape painter" since his work always emerges from his surroundings—in this case, the people around him in Puerto Rico, where he paints outside in an abandoned tennis court.

In the larger works, ranging from six to eight feet tall, Lerma uses a commercial broom to create gigantic brushstrokes. The effect is of a small study that has been enlarged. Shifting scale is another way to dismantle hierarchies and bestow importance on the marginalized. Blown up, seemingly casual sketches of local acquaintances assume the magnitude of aristocratic portraits. The ambiguous scale also destabilizes the viewer's sense of their own size, allowing them to imagine they are indeed looking at a tiny sketch but through the eyes of a child.

Thus further paradoxes emerge: specific and general, figurative and abstract, three-dimensional and flat, organic and synthetic, living and unmoving, portrait and landscape, small and big. Though seemingly placid, Lerma's portraits shuttle between these poles and subtly disrupt our assumptions about what we see so that we may return to an open, curious, childlike state of mind.

— Antonia Pocock, independent scholar

Antonia Pocock, Ph.D., is a scholar of modern and contemporary art and adjunct instructor of art history at Marymount Manhattan College in New York. Her most recent publications include an article on Fluxus artist and musician Ben Patterson in Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art (May 2022) and an essay on the reclusive multimedia artist Bettina Grossman in the catalogue Bettina (Paris: Atelier EXB, 2022). She is currently working on her first book, a study of New York Pop art and Chicago Imagism.