ALMINE RECH

Chris Succo
Skin N' Bones

Mar 16 — Apr 8, 2017 | London, Savile Row

Almine Rech Gallery is pleased to announce *Skin N' Bones*, the second solo exhibition by Chris Succo with the gallery. The show will comprise of new paintings and drawings by the artist that are based on scenes captured in the ever-growing archive of photographs and sketches Succo takes wherever he goes.

Art follows historical imperatives, or at least it should. These are larger pressures that are exerted on the artist by any number of factors—cultural, political, social, etc.—and which find their expression, however obliquely, in the work through formal means: line, color, content, technique, etc. By necessity these shift with time, given that they are rooted in the ever-changing ferment of the conditions in which the artist finds him or herself in a given place and period. However, this should not be confused, as it too often is, with the cyclical changes of fashion, which, for the most part, respond only to artificial constructions of taste and consumption, always on the hunt for the new and novel. It is against the standard of historical necessity that shifts in an artist's production should be judged.

When, in 1970, the painter Philip Guston debuted his shift from an abstract to a figurative mode at Marlborough, New York he was largely met with confusion and derision. In a painterly discourse dominated by the formalist propositions of the influential critic Clement Greenberg, which posited a teleological drive of painting towards its essence, which was figured as flatness, a material characteristic of the conventional components of painting—the stretched and pigmented canvas. In such discourse abstraction was the royal road and anything else was legible only as a regression. It is only more recently that we have been able to reassess Guston's decision and see that the heightening of political tensions that underwrote Guston's aesthetic shift also supported it, just as other conditions equally supported the abstract painting Greenberg championed. With hindsight we can now clearly see the values of both positions, which was nearly impossible at the time. The sense of intellectual and moral evacuation Guston felt had crept into his abstract project necessitated his shift. However, many of the formal nuances he had developed in his abstract work, such as his color palette and handling of paint, persisted, and in some cases were even extended, despite their expression through a figurative armature.

Guston's is a narrative that has played out, in related but different ways, for a number of artists, from Malevich to Picasso. Now, more than 45 years later the German painter Chris Succo has lately felt himself at a similar crossroads, one of conviction in abstract painting. In the past year or so he reconnected with a sketching practice, which has evolved to inspire a new series of works which draw from personal experiences, but which, formally speaking, walk the line between abstraction and figuration (as, in a way, Guston's also do). Scenes from his recent past, vividly experienced moments in certain places and with particular people, started to come through into Succo's sketches, and thus inevitably map places frequented by the artist. They do not amount to a portrait of himself, but rather a record of fragments of his life and milieu. Bars and hotels, friends and acquaintances, they burst through as well as are concealed by flurries of gestures, wiry lines, made with both brush and spray can, that sketch environs and figures, whose identities would be a mystery except for Succo's identification of them through his titles. This functions to keep the works both personal but also charged, we feel through the titles Succo's proximity to these places and people, but in the degree of abstraction employed we sense the distance inevitably established by the passage of time. They are placed firmly in the realm of memory.

Why, then, did Succo feel the necessity to shift away from abstraction? Perhaps the shift is better figured as a movement from a closed to an open ended way of working. His white paintings, and even the pornographic photo collages, could only invite repetition and refinement, which is interesting in itself, but unsustainable as a solitary practice, it must be augmented with additional series. Further, this is less a shift than an oscillation, for the artist has always worked sometimes in figurative and sometimes in abstract modes, he has not seen a clear distinction between the two, which makes sense given that we live in a time characterized by the collapse, even inversion of these categories. Abstract entities like our smartphones are able to enact real world effects, for example. So if both positions are tenable in the context of the historical situation we find ourselves in, why this introduction of a new body of work that skirts across both boundaries? Surely it is not simply to comment on the present day confusion between them, though it does do this, and powerfully, but also because other pressures have created instability in the larger project of abstraction. That project has always thrived on the generation of discourse, indeed this could be said to be one of its primary features, as demonstrated by the voluminous writings of many of the most seemingly taciturn abstractionists—from Malevich to Donald Judd. For the moment, at least, this discourse has unfortunately been seemingly eclipsed by other, extra-artistic, conversations, which have effectively created a wall for abstraction, though hopefully only temporarily. Further, in this new body of work Succo has found the potential for evolution, which was foreclosed in the necessarily circumscribed nature of his earlier series, both abstract and figurative. As such we view this exhibition from the perspective of being at the dawn of something, the ultimate conclusions of which are left open.

- Alex Bacon, New York, 2017