ALMINE RECH

Javier Calleja
Still on time

Jun 1 — Jul 29, 2023 | London

Almine Rech London is delighted to announce Still on Time, Javier Calleja's third solo exhibition at the gallery.

Javier Calleja's expressionistic children with their pale pink cheeks are not as naïve as they seem. Over the last several years, the Spanish artist has been portraying them in paintings, drawings, sculptures, and installations where they have the rare ability to instantly transmit a feeling, emotion, or state of mind to the viewer. But what these characters and their short missives tell us either candidly or mischievously is about our particular place in the world. As they adapt to the contemporary environment, they subtly jeer at the absurdity of our time through poeticized quotidian scenes.

Though he has a major exhibition at the Centro Cultural Fundacion Unicaja (Palacio Episcopal) in his native Malaga since March 2023, Javier Calleja here presents some twenty new paintings and drawings, thoughtfully assembled to offer a rich and exhaustive synthesis of a pictorial universe in constant evolution.

Still children or not quite teenagers, his signature characters resist the world, sometimes with tenderness, sometimes with a casual rebelliousness, and always with a keen sense of humor or touch of irony. A master of social satire and minimalist gesture, Javier Calleja endows them with gigantic, brightly colored eyes, breathing life into them with a wide emotional spectrum: from complicity to disappointment, wonder to nihilism, even combativeness.

These endearing characters with their often delusional hopes and desires seem helpless but never give up. On the contrary, they confront life head-on with both wisdom and optimism, all while turning the viewer into an ideal accomplice. The short and punchy messages they bring – "What to do now?", "No problem", "Same old story", "No step Back" or "This is your lucky day"– are full of panache, like a child, half-bewildered and half-delighted, finding magic in a simple three-leaf clover.

Javier Calleja most often constructs the scenes inhabited by these emblematic characters from his own experience and personal childhood memories, likening the creatures to tiny avatars of himself. His pantheon of influences was first forged in his youth, through the popular 70s and 80s cartoons and comic books, especially the manga Mazinger Z, a predecessor of Goldorak, as well as the works of Spanish cartoonist Francisco Ibáñez Talavera. In the gap between image and text that drives his works, as well as in the cohabitation of organic forms and geometric patterns, or in the use of several bold colors in the abstract backgrounds, one can also assume an attraction to surrealist painting, with Magritte coming to the fore.

Continuing one of the key concepts already apparent in his early practice, Javier Calleja plays with humor and subtlety via the effects of scale and proportion. This is especially apparent in the way he presents his paintings and drawings as a whole and in the explosive interplay of their size, where the interaction between the small and gigantic comes back like a leitmotif. Then there are the wooden frames of a deliberately exaggerated and anachronistic thickness, shaped into baroque curves around his large-format portraits. Thanks to this almost hallucinatory distortion, each one of his exhibitions feels like diving into nonsense, harkening back to Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland. Javier Calleja's pictorial work, where pop culture, surrealism and social satire intertwine, reveals an incredible propensity for self-reinvention; in short, he creates children's stories for adults, tales which bear a universal significance.

— Charles Barachon, Journalist and Art Critic