ALMINE RECH

José Lerma
Fichureos

Nov 18 — Dec 22, 2023 | Paris

Almine Rech Paris is pleased to present José Lerma's third solo exhibition with the gallery, on view from November 18 to December 22, 2023.

In fewer than a dozen brushstrokes per burlap canvas, José Lerma paints topographies. Blocks of subtle color buttressed by thick globs of acrylic bear a figurative likeness, together forming what appears to be a woman with a short bob or dark hair wrapped around an elongated neck. Having previously referred to himself as a landscape painter, Lerma renders his portraits, or what he terms “people-shaped abstractions,” with a distinct gesture, creating works of both the recognizable (the human figure) and the unfamiliar (the artificial and anonymous).

This paradoxical tension is where the title of his latest exhibition originates. Fichureos is Puerto Rican slang derived from the English “to feature” and mixes with Spanish to form a colloquialism. Often used by reggaeton musicians, the word translates to an ostentatious displaying of oneself, or showing off with pretense and ornamentation. Featuring shares a Latin root with facture—the act of creating something—and means addressing a certain body part, emotion, or energy, all of which are aesthetic choices that further tether the word to the art-making process. For Lerma, fichureo is an irresistible way to think about the links between his physical and philosophical inputs.

Comprising a series of large-scale impasto portraits, the exhibition is a progression of the artist’s recent works, drawing from the same initial experience. “I had an epiphany looking at Gérôme’s ‘Reception of the Grand Condé at Versailles’ at the Musee d'Orsay where secondary diminutive characters depicted in the balconies were painted with just a few quick brushstrokes,” Lerma says. What were ancillary figures become central for the artist, as he spotlights the subjects otherwise relegated to the periphery and subsequently creates another dichotomy: backgrounding vs. featuring.

Formally, the portraits in Fichureo also hold this contradiction. The colors are inviting and calming, while the material dramatically asserts its presence. We see the severe, sweeping marks of paint met with the softness of the palette, while the bright, theatrical light source illuminates the backs of several characters, keeping any potential identification in the face shrouded in darkness. Lerma, too, draws on the impulse of fichureo, that of showing off one’s prized or perceived attributes, by rendering portraits that capture that same sense of inauthenticity. The subjects are not real people but rather composites or figments, all painted without context and reminiscent of plastic mannequins.

Bisected to an excessive degree, each figure embodies a split, two distinctive modes meeting at a central line. Lerma is interested in the push and pull that emerges from opposition, although he gravitates ultimately toward co-existence. Part of his desire is simply to play with form and material and exaggerate the extent to which he can explore false appearances and deception, particularly through works defined by their physical composition. Returning to the contrast between figure and abstraction, Fichureos comprises what the artist calls “paint portraits,” or depictions of the paint itself, once again upending the notion of what portraiture can be. “There’s always a thing that isn’t,” Lerma says. And with that, he brings us closer to clarity.

– Grace Ebert, writer and editor