ALMINE RECH

Sasha Ferré
Averno

Jan 19 — Mar 2, 2024 | New York

Almine Rech New York is pleased to announce *Averno*, Sasha Ferré's second solo exhibition with the gallery, on view from January 19 to March 2, 2024.

I am tired of having hands
she said
I want wings

—Louise Glück

We are having a telephone conversation across Paris and London, talking about a show that will take place in New York in a few months' time. During the call, Sasha Ferré tells me that the exhibition will be called *Averno*. The term sounds ancient and Mediterranean, probably Greek or Latin. It carries with it sea salt, cicadas chorusing under the afternoon sun, and warm summer nights. I do not know its exact meaning so I ask—"Why *Averno*?"—an expression of curiosity that I hope does not betray my ignorance. "The Averno marks the entrance to the underworld," she says, "it is a liminal space, in between worlds."

The real Averno exists. Lake Avernus is a volcanic crater located in the region of Naples that belongs to the same volcanic arc of the Vesuvius, the volcano whose explosion immortalized the towns of Pompeii and Herculaneum. It was the Roman author Virgil, in his epic poem *Aeneid*, who described the Averno as the entrance of the underworld. It is an appropriate name for an exhibition that happens underground. It enhances the comfort and mystery associated to it—the quietness and silence, the possibility of creating and controlling an environment that exists within and for itself, a sort of womb that feels like a safe, unknown, and timeless space.

But there is more than a mere spatial allusion in this reference. Underground environments are important zones of creativity. In nature, the understory—the underlying layer of vegetation that grows between the canopy and floor of a wooded area—offers a crucial layer of incubation, growth, and stability for the whole ecology of a forest. It is a territory of invention, cooperation, and persistence. In the arts, many movements were called underground because of their radical, independent, and original forms of expression, which often challenged dominant cultures and ideologies.

The underworld that the *Averno* of Ferré's exhibition leads to is also the haven of the bygone souls. It echoes Louise Glück's compilation of dark and nocturnal poems gathered in the book that bears the same name, *Averno* (2006). In it, the late poet explores the complementarity of truth and fiction, life and death, youth and old age. What she describes in the poem *Persephone the Wanderer* as that "rift in the human soul / which was not constructed to belong / entirely to life." Ferré's Averno is also a space where something intense and untamable is being desired and plotted, echoing Glück's poem *Blue Rotunda:*

“I am tired of having hands
she said
I want wings—
But what will you do without your hands
to be human?

I am tired of human
she said
I want to live on the sun—”

Indeed the energy that emanates from the paintings that constitute this *Averno* is contagious and brutal. It is centrifugal and centripetal, organic and alien, soft and savage, telluric and celestial, raw and complex.

It is rare to sense a transference of mood across the making and the viewing of an artwork. Generally, the experience of a painter remains locked within the making and what emerges are the figures and forms that have been created. Yet the haptic pleasure of a body making art is evident and contagious in Ferré’s paintings. By working horizontally, traversing and occupying the canvases and wood panels that lie freely on the floor, Ferré’s body performs a continuum of choreographic gestures which still reveal themselves in the final artworks. These movements are accompanied by a form of tactile pleasure that, again, is intensely expressed by her paintings but that also emerges from how her hands hold and her fingers mix the painting materials she uses. Ferré works with pigment sticks of oil paint, which are handmade with beeswax and plant wax combined with linseed oil and pigment. These oil sticks allow her to work directly on a canvas or a wood panel, without any brushes or solvents. Her gestures, repeatedly applying the colors with her hands, mixing the pigments with her fingers on the canvas while new hues emerge, are retained and remembered by the materials that hold them. “The hand caressing colors makes butterflies,” I scribbled on my notebook while we were still speaking on the phone. That hand is improvising a gesture rehearsed for very long. It is grounding a practice that knows how forms come into being, and what becoming means from a plastic point of view.

It was said that the volcanic fumes that emanated from the crater of the Averno were so toxic that any bird flying above it would die. Hence its Greek name, ἄ ϝορνος, birdless (ἀ, without, ὄρνις, bird). Here, instead, a multiplicity of creatures, living beings, and expressive possibilities manifest themselves the more each painting is looked upon. These paintings are as wild and free as the colors and traces they hold. This new *Averno* opens itself to host a permanent present in which the instant becomes the movement and the movement becomes the form. Here, the *Averno* doesn’t pull downwards. Instead, it stays in joy, forever erupting and pulsating.

— Dr. Filipa Ramos, Lecturer at Art Institute at the FHNW Academy of Art and Design, Basel