ALMINE RECH

Jess Valice
Mara

Mar 7 — Apr 20, 2024 | New York, Upper East Side

Almine Rech New York, Upper East Side is pleased to present, *Mara,* Jess Valice's first solo exhibition with the gallery, on view from March 7 to April 20, 2024.

On the face of things, stoicism can look a lot like exhaustion. In fact, fatigue, with all its causes and variations, may be our modern-day version of stoicism. Or so we may surmise from spending time with Jess Valice's portraits: the straight-ahead stare of large hooded eyes, the small tightly-closed mouths, and the massive yet contorted solidity of her figures convey both determination and resignation, poise and detachment. These figures remain resolutely silent in the face of any pain we may imagine them suffering—and we know, everybody hurts.

Over the past few years, during which time the self-taught painter has developed a distinctive stylistic consistency, Valice has homed in on what she's called a vacancy of expression that is capacious enough to be a screen for projection and an ocean in which to get lost in thought. She depicts a kind of dazed waking dream state. Her subjects gaze assertively at us, connecting directly while embodying an essential aloneness and distance, perhaps a melancholy. Having come to painting from the field of biopsychology (also known as behavioral neuroscience, or the study of how the brain and nervous system determine behavior), Valice is drawn to representations of psychological opacity and blockage, replete with all the ineffable richness and complexity buried inside each person's remote unknowability: "There is this overwhelming sense of fatigue that I think is typifying our generation, the weight of a spectrum of emotional responses that digital space provokes in us every day… It's all so complex—this is where the science and melancholia come in—the recognition of this blankness as a widespread response. It's too much to feel." Rather than a symptom of the organism's failure, numbness is a psychological coping mechanism, a refuge, a recuperative state, and unlikely source of strength.

Valice's people tend to fill the frames in which they are pictured, often cramped or bent to fit within her canvases, which are scaled to or larger than life. Their environments are characteristically austere and mundane, frequently monochromatic. Her aesthetic updates Social Realism of the last century, imbuing attractive Gen Z and Millenial subjects, posed with nonchalant savvy, with the monumentality and heroic grit of a figure like Fougeron's working class wife in Return from the Market (1953). There are painted elements in her growing body of work reminiscent of Francis Bacon and Lucien Freud, Nicole Eisenman and Yoshitomo Nara. While vibrant color may occur—a lurid tangerine or bright blue background over here, a pair of strawberry red ears back there—they are exceptions to what is generally a subdued and sedate palette of dirtied, grayed, and yellowed hues: earthy, warm, and impoverished. Light and shadow, as they articulate fleshy mass, is generally amped up and slicked for seductive appeal. Her proportions are selectively exaggerating to Mannerist extremes, demonstrating a fondness for oversized hands and feet with digits swollen like floppy sausages or engorged tumors.

Or, in past pictures, absurdly enlarged ears rotated frontally to face us like wings or satellite dishes, as though craning to hear something faint and distant. Above all, she emphasizes the eyes, rendering them enormous with heavy lids and puffy bags—tired, sleepless, cried-out eyes. Noses are narrow but bulbous-tipped, reddened as though from the cold or that good cry. Mouths are tight and compact, occasionally so demur as to begin to disappear under the domineering force of nose, ears, and eyes. Heads, as a whole, tend to be oversized, childlike in proportion to their bodies, and often flattened on top, as though succumbing to a pressure from above. Undertones of deformation and dysmorphia signal a warping of perception. Her stress on certain sensory nodes of human anatomy not only magnify features and their significance but seem to reimagine physiological mechanisms to wonder if our anatomies are evolving—to (god forbid) take in more inputs?—in tandem with changing technologies. Though her characters are often non-specific, whether female or male, the fact that they typically bare a pronounced resemblance to the artist herself, only makes the speculative proposition more real, the insinuation and sense of devastation more visceral. As chiseled and heavy as Valice's bodies and faces are, there is a throbbing and swelling that pulses inside the pictures—a tonality at once expectant and bored, weary and on guard, numb and overstimulated.

— Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer, curator and writer