ALMINE RECH

Vaughn Spann
The Heat Lets us Know We're Alive

Jan 15 — Feb 22, 2020 | New York, Upper East Side

Almine Rech is pleased to announce the first solo exhibition of Vaughn Spann with the gallery. On this occasion, the artist will present a selection of new abstract and figurative paintings. The exhibition will be on view from January 15 to February 22, 2020.

The common-sense theory of language is that it says what it means. Or that it means what it says. Perhaps there's a difference; perhaps not. Put simply, it comprises statements that are either true or false, and questions that help ascertain whether statements are true or false. Because truth, in the end, is what language is supposed to be about. The learned-sense theory of language is that it is a social construction, it changes according to who you are, with whom you are conversing and according to all the experiences they have accumulated, it changes through history, it changes with geography, it changes according to context. These days, everyone knows that language is a very slippery thing. That's what happens when you try to express an infinity of ideas with a limited set of symbols. On one level, Vaughn Spann's art explores much of the same territory, no more so than in his current exhibition, *The Heat Lets us Know We're Alive*.

Beach Side (2019), featuring a woman clad in a swimsuit on a sandy shore implies the heat of the sun, the heat of passion, the heat of politics (her swimsuit is decorated in the Pan-African colours), the heat of the living body, and ultimately the heat that sustains life. *Cosmic Symbiote (Marked Man)* (2019) is in many ways its opposite, part of a series of works that developed during a period in which the artist was frequently stopped and searched. It might imply the heat of injustice, the heat of oppression (to reference Martin Luther King, and numerous of Spann's previous works, such as the diptych *Lost in the cosmos of black bodies (we love you, we will always remember you)* (2019) or the sculpture *Who shall be held accountable?* (2019), as much as it implies alien status and, through its colour palette, the sense of being frozen out, through its graphic imagery a once-popular sci-fi series, and in social terms an influential American Muslim minister and civil-rights activist. The options, for a viewer, remain multiple. The truths are many. They may even contradict each other.

Which might (alongside a brief stint studying biology) relate in turn to the artist's interest in polycephaly. That swimsuit-wearing woman has two heads, after all, as does the male in a green tracksuit sitting next to some rabbits and a woman caressing Dalmatians in others of the works on show. One might be reminded, for example, of Avalokiteśvara, the Buddha of compassion, whose head split into 11 so that they could better hear the cries of those who suffered and whose two arms shattered into 1,000 so that they could better help them. Watchfulness is something Vaughn's work communicates too, as much as it does the notion of public and private personas. One of our swimsuit-lady's heads looks blissful, eyes shut, as it leans into the head of a horse, the other stares out at the viewer, inviting, yet vigilant. It's as if she's conscious of what happens within the frame and without. Which is why it's a little creepy too.

In biological terms all this might be a question of mutation and adaptation. In art-historical terms appropriation: Picasso and his masks; or the masks before Picasso. Just as, when you paint a picture of a person with a dog and it enters a dialogue with all the other paintings of a person with a dog. With European depictions of privilege and power, (if you're the artist or someone who follows his work) with your own previous abstractions of the Dalmatian patterns, with Disney's movies and other sugar-coated myths and (un)realities. Art too is a very slippery thing. 'That', as the artist notes, 'is the human experience.'

- Mark Rappolt