

ALMINE RECH

PURPLE

art

alejandro cardenas

INTERVIEW BY BILL POWERS

PORTRAIT BY CAMERON MCCOOL

ALL ARTWORK BY ALEJANDRO
CARDENAS, COPYRIGHT THE
ARTIST

perched on a rock looking
at the sea or trapped
inside four walls, all
one needs is an exit
door, or a morphological,
metaphysical change of
identity.



ALEJANDRO CARDENAS,
IF ANYTHING COULD BE LEARNED,
2020, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS,
48 X 65 INCHES, COURTESY
OF THE ARTIST AND ALMINE
RECH GALLERY

ALEJANDRO CARDENAS,
LEVANT SENTRY, 2020, ACRYLIC
ON CANVAS, 40 X 32 INCHES,
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST
AND HARPER'S BOOKS



BILL POWERS — In one of your new paintings, there's a figure standing on a veranda overlooking the water. Do you imagine that creature is on vacation?

ALEJANDRO CARDENAS — I see it as living in its own world, a parallel world to ours. It's funny because I've always wanted to paint figuratively, but I never wanted to paint people. When you look at a painting of a person, you look at the person, as opposed to the entire painting. I wanted to skirt that impulse, so the figures and the environments are more integrated. I wanted there to be a harmony in the composition.

BILL POWERS — I remember Jeff Koons once saying that, in portraiture, one of the first segregators as a viewer is gender. We ask ourselves whether we're looking at a male or a female.

ALEJANDRO CARDENAS — My figures are purposefully ambiguous in that regard. It was another element I tried to remove. If you can combine ambiguity with specificity, that's a really intense mixture. I grew up reading Gabriel García Márquez, who was a master at that.

BILL POWERS — We all live three lives: our public life, our private life, and our secret life.

ALEJANDRO CARDENAS — I think my paintings are a combination of all three. There's a private aspect to the creation of the work, as it's just me alone in the studio. The secret part is in terms of where the images originate from. Finally, the paintings will be shown in public and live their own lives.

BILL POWERS — When you paint a figure sitting on a giant rock in the ocean, do you imagine that creature is stranded there or reveling in their isolation?

ALEJANDRO CARDENAS — The big cliché in art is that it's a mirror to where you're at in life, right? If you feel stuck, then you will probably project that perspective onto my painting. However, to me, the figure is perching on a rock in the same way a sea lion would. Maybe, a moment later, it might jump off and swim away. I did make this work during the pandemic, so

perhaps it's laced with some of my frustration in general right now — not just that we're cut off socially, but how we're not taking care of the planet. I practically stopped eating meat and avoid buying certain products, but, beyond that, what can we really do? I'm frustrated living in a country where the politics are not particularly humanistic. Now that I'm a parent, you can multiply my frustration by however many kids I have.

BILL POWERS — As we look at your source imagery, one cartoon shows a man slumped over in a tuxedo, and the speech bubble reads, "Still I mustn't let it get me down." Then, in your version, the text is removed. ALEJANDRO CARDENAS — My focus is on the composition and the gesture of the body. I try to stay true to the context and the mood of what's happening.

BILL POWERS — Do you feel a connection to Max Ernst or Salvador Dalí?

ALEJANDRO CARDENAS — A few people have labeled my work as new Surrealism, which I'm not sure I agree with. But I will say: I think a hallmark of Dalí or Ernst was this absolute trust in their imagination. That aspect does resonate with me. Throughout history, there have been painters that go deep into the imagination, like Bosch. My imagination and my mind are equally as much of a reality as the physical world.

BILL POWERS — In another painting of a figure sitting on a window ledge, the subject almost looks Native American.

ALEJANDRO CARDENAS — Yeah, it's a reanimated Peruvian mummy called Rascar Capac from the *Tintin* story *The Seven Crystal Balls*, one of my favorites.

BILL POWERS — So, are they escaping their circumstances or at a window in a Shakespearean way, about to break into verse?

ALEJANDRO CARDENAS — I love the narrative depth and possibility in every painting. I always imagined I would end up an animation director because I love art forms where you get to build a whole universe. When I was at art school at Cooper



Union in the late '90s, everyone thought painting was a waste of time, a dead medium. The head professor was Hans Haacke. If you made figurative paintings — unless they were ugly and brutal — they were written off as decorative.

BILL POWERS — Is that why you abandoned art to go work at Proenza Schouler for 11 years?

ALEJANDRO CARDENAS — If I wanted to stay in New York after graduating, then I needed to get a job, and I was really interested in fashion. Designers like Helmut Lang, Martin Margiela, and Miuccia Prada were redefining fashion. One of my seminal aesthetic experiences was seeing one of the green Prada stores for the first time. I was dumbfounded. It was in Bal Harbour in Miami. All the other stores were brown with brass accents. The Prada store felt so earnestly futuristic. I was super into the campaigns they did, too. I remember seeing the Glen Luchford images with Amber Valletta in the woods. The ambiguity inherent in those pictures was really powerful. And the way they created a consistent visual narrative between the campaigns, clothes, and stores was really new and inspiring. I ended up getting an internship at Prada in Milan.

BILL POWERS — And what did you actually do at Proenza?

ALEJANDRO CARDENAS — Originally, I created their logo, all the branding, and show invitations, etc. And for the first 10 years, I also designed every custom textile and every print. I worked very closely with Jack McCollough and Lazaro Hernandez.

BILL POWERS — Didn't you show at Rivington Arms before going into fashion?

ALEJANDRO CARDENAS — In 2001, my friends and I started an art collective/band called Lansing-Dreiden. We were actually in the first show ever at the gallery. We wanted to create our own context, and we had rules that applied to almost everything.

BILL POWERS — Tell me some of the rules.

ALEJANDRO CARDENAS — Everything was in black-and-white. Also, we wouldn't use proper nouns in our songs or writing. We published a newspaper called *Death Notice* and got so much shit for being pretentious, but we were young and didn't care.

END



OPPOSITE PAGE: ALEJANDRO
CARDENAS, *CREEPING
CONSEQUENCES*, 2020, ACRYLIC
ON CANVAS, 40 X 32 INCHES,
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND
STEMS GALLERY