

# Alejandro Cardenas

## RAVINE 23

Jan 11 — Feb 18, 2023 | London

In his new show titled RAVINE 23, the Chilean artist Alejandro Cárdenas takes us on a journey where he critically expands on his signature subject matter: The avoidance of overdetermination on the basis of a single meaning, movement, or style. In his delicate crafting of apparently intimate scenes inhabited by humanoid beings, Cárdenas presents us with a new body of work that is eerily familiar as well as visually provocative. As in previous projects, Cárdenas thinks through possibilities of working with space as a symbol, and, in this specific case, of the ravine as the background of a narrative on resilience and creativity.

Both enticing and mysterious, the group of 10 works—8 paintings and 2 sculptures—further distill the artist’s fascination for visual synthesis. The free-flowing interplay of references deriving from established movements in the history of art with various expressions of popular culture comes to life in this show. Given the growing trend in the contemporary art world of artists creating exclusively through the lens of contentious categories, such as race, class, and gender, this is a divergent and significant enterprise. His figures’ mutability and permeability avoid being confined within a single space, thus sidestepping swift, commonplace interpretations.

Discussing Cárdenas’ art requires more than naming the references we could possibly identify as its sources. Granted: Evocations of Surrealist dream-like spaces, Futurist velocity, and Sci-Fi landscapes come to the fore as an immediate point of departure. However, the core of the artist’s ingenuity, as it is seen in the works for RAVINE 23, also begs a careful reckoning of the history of Latin American and Caribbean modern artists deploying visual devices that push against one-dimensional analysis. The hybridization of form—a result of the region’s cultural intermixing—has prompted these artists, as well as Cárdenas, to create unique forms of expression that exceed the artistic conventions of their time.

Paintings by Wifredo Lam in Cuba, for instance, bring to mind a confluence of references and styles that defied the artistic expectations of avant-garde art. Radically conflating symbols from Afro-Cuban spiritual traditions, Cubist angular forms, and Surrealist cadavres exquis, Lam’s work synthesizes a unique visual proposition. His work is evidence of what Jamaican scholar Sylvia Wynter aptly described as “the hybridity of humanness,” or the understanding “that we are simultaneously storytelling and biological beings” (Wynter, 2015). Similarly, Cárdenas’ gesture of creating visually hybrid scenes of domesticity compels us to become more critical of the complexity of our humanity, our bodies, and systems of thought.

Resisting a single-handed reading of Cárdenas’ work is, therefore, a way to do justice to his artistic endeavors. Paintings shown in RAVINE 23, such as *In the Presence of the Planarian* and *Recovery*, present us with overlapping messages where emotionally charged compositions of leisure and pain are saturated with vibrant colors, complex patterns, and textural interplay. While aesthetically pleasing, this visual excess invites us to openly think about the artists’ creative process, while also exceeding his individuality as a maker. The absence of elements that would point to a specific time or place in the composition underscores Cárdenas’ interest in exploring a multiplicity of meaning.

Other pieces in the show, such as *Ravine*, further explore this lack of specificity alongside a hopeful outlook, in what the artist denotes as “self-contained utopias.” This large-scale landscape painting depicts Cárdenas’ signature creatures dwelling on the walls of a cliff, showing signs of social organization and mutual enjoyment in a desolate space. The contradictions in this theme follows cues by artist Matthew Barney, one of Cárdenas’ early influences, as a visual transgressor, while also resorting to the otherworldly as a poignant commentary on the uses of imagination as a socially-conscious act. This is precisely one of the most compelling aspects of Cárdenas’ work, for it invites us to use creativity as a tool to rethink social and power structures.

Although politically charged, there still remains a sense of play and levity in Cárdenas’ pieces in this show. *A High Window*, for example, immerses us in a snapshot of a lush domestic space, where a figure placidly looks out the window into an arid landscape. The sinuous lines, both evoking art nouveau and psychedelic aesthetics, set the stage for a scene where the lighting orb, a new pictorial motif for Cárdenas, becomes a central visual element. Signifying both head and flower, its use comments on the interconnectedness of life across species and life forms. The contrasting colors and angular volumes further add nuance and contradiction to the composition, bringing attention to the interior decoration as a counterbalance to the arid conditions of the ravine’s landscape.

As it indulges in the fantasy of creating intricate, alternate realities, Cárdenas’ art also evokes the work of writers from the Latin American Boom, particularly Jorge Luis Borges and his meticulously crafted universes. In doing so, the pieces in *RAVINE 23* effectively create an informed and original space for themselves, privileging imagination over saturated social and political signifiers. Contrary to eulogizing escapism, they playfully subvert artistic conventions while keeping grounded in the critical issues we face today.

– Julián Sánchez González, PhD Candidate in Art History, Columbia University