

Frieze Los Angeles: Hernan Bas

Booth B9, 29 February–3 March 2024



Hernan Bas, *Absinthe drinker*, 2024
Acrylic on linen
71.1 x 55.9 cm
28 x 22 in
© Hernan Bas
Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro

Victoria Miro is delighted to participate in Frieze Los Angeles (Booth B9) with a solo presentation of new paintings and works on paper by Hernan Bas.

The stillness at the heart of Hernan Bas' paintings is often one of calculated ambiguity, held in counterpoint to the transportive effects – of literature, beauty, the supernatural – experienced by his subjects and, by proxy, us as viewers. Inspired by a recent painting from his acclaimed series *The Conceptualists*, currently on view as part of the artist's exhibition at The Bass Museum of Art, Miami, many of the works in this presentation focus on a lone male figure drinking in an absinthe bar.

For Bas, absinthe, legendary symbol of decadence, mind-altering muse and rocket fuel of avant-garde art and literature from the 1850s until its prohibition half a century or so later, has long been of interest as a source of cultural reference. Here, like Manet, Degas and Picasso before him, Bas takes the figure of the absinthe drinker along with its attendant rituals and paraphernalia – glass, slotted spoon, sugar cubes, the slowly dripping ice water from an absinthe fountain – to create works that serve up a heady concoction of glamour, wit, bohemian sophistication and (in echoes at least) transgression. They pivot around a sense of escapism – from the norm, from now, from ourselves – be that via an overproof spirit or a captivating face at the bar.

None of the young men depicted are actually caught in the act of drinking. Rarely do they even meet our gaze. We search details for clues, check glasses to see how much, if any, of the enrapturing liquor has been consumed, try to gauge if the 'Green Fairy' has taken hold. Throughout, Bas has had fun with the colour green as a motif and an active agent. It flashes in his subjects' eyes, is echoed in clothing or interior décor, even denotes a phantom parrot perched on the shoulder of one figure, a rare hallucinatory moment in these otherwise crystalline scenes.

In the large painting *A Bohemian at breakfast*, details – such as menu items chalked above the counter, marks and initials scratched into woodwork – stack up, providing a secondary narrative as we study the central character, whose perhaps idealised existence is denoted by the impossibly vertical ascent of the smoke from his cigarette. Inspired in part by accounts of the Manhattan art scene in the 1950s, the work asks, what does bohemianism mean today? What might it look like when no-one smokes, and especially not indoors?

Bas employs various processes in pursuit of disarming clarity. The works on paper, created through a time-consuming ink transfer technique combined with screen printing, require multiple applications as well as pinpoint accuracy to achieve their depth. Silkscreen, too, is employed to conjure the requisite transparency of the umbrella in the painting *The forecast called for clear skies*. Taking us outdoors to a garden of blousy hydrangeas and more tropical blooms, this is a work of light, reflection and endlessly refracted art historical reference, its beauty intensified, with classic Bas humour, by a gathering storm.

A bittersweet moment unfolds in *Gold-leaf toast (12:08 AM)*; pictured moments after midnight at New Year, balloons yet to deflate, champagne half drunk, but already a shadow of introspection or something approaching regret creeps across the subject's face. More upbeat is *Vampire*, in his white, double-breasted jacket with blood-red buttons and bow tie, about to blow a party horn to celebrate, according to the balloons floating above him, his 142nd birthday; no age at all for a vampire and a blink of the eye in the history of painting.

Jonathan Griffin has written that 'Though he deals with archetypal figures such as the innocent virginal youth or the corrupting demon or vampire, it is never clear with which character Bas associates himself (nor, by extension, whose side we the audience should take).' Griffin has also noted that 'Bas leads us into a world that is at once conventional and deeply strange. The classic subjects of traditional painting – landscape, portraiture, domestic interiors – are all represented in his oeuvre, but are invariably fissured or confounded by unexpected intrusions.' The fissures here might be wormholes, since painting's ability to time travel and to take us with it is a connecting thread, linking subjects as apparently conventional and yet as deeply strange as a birthday party and a drink at the bar.

About the artist

Hernan Bas, born in Miami, Florida in 1978, lives and works in Miami. Solo exhibitions of his work have been presented at venues including Space K, Seoul, Korea; CAC Málaga, Spain; Kunstverein Hannover, Germany; the Rubell Museum, Miami, USA and the Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York, USA. Hernan Bas: *The Conceptualists* is currently on view at The Bass Museum of Art, Miami, USA, until 5 May 2024.

His work has also been shown as part of significant group exhibitions at the Samsung Museum of Art, Seoul; Busan Biennale, Korea; Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, Germany; the Whitney Biennial; and the Venice Biennale as part of *The Collectors*, conceived by Elmgreen & Dragset for the Nordic and Danish Pavilions in 2009.

Works by the artist are included in the collections of MoMA, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Brooklyn Museum of Art, the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Hirshhorn, MOCA Los Angeles, SFMoMA, MFA Houston, and the Rubell Family Collection, among others.

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