

BIENVENU STEINBERG & J

Djamel Tatah

Solitary Figures

June 8 - July 15, 2023

Opening Reception: Thursday June 8, from 6-8 pm

Biennu Steinberg & J is pleased to present Solitary Figures, Franco-Algerian artist Djamel Tatah's first solo exhibition in the United States. Curated by Richard Vine, the exhibition will showcase eleven of Tatah's full-size figurative paintings, produced between 2011 and 2021. These works question our presence in the world and our relationship to the humanity that surrounds us. A fully illustrated catalog with essays by Richard Vine and art historian Barbara Stehle will accompany the exhibition.

"Tatah's works...comport perfectly with a major strain of postwar European thought and sensibility. To immerse one's self in Tatah's compositions is to feel the world of Beckett, and Sartre, Giacometti, and Antonioni," Vine contends. "But what are we to make of Tatah's figures, his silent arrivals, in an American context? Truth be told, they are more recognizable here, more disturbingly relevant, than we care to admit."

Living in France, Tatah produces enigmatic untitled canvases, whose subtle combinations of figures and abstract shapes explore the connection between the personal and the universal. The melancholic, plainly garbed, Mediterranean-looking figures that populate his paintings pay tribute to displaced persons throughout the world. Reflecting the concerns of thinkers such as Albert Camus, Tatah's characters can be read as icons of existential despair. Stripped of visual detail and narratives, they inhabit a universe of emptiness. "My painting is silent, and imposing silence on all the chaos of life is almost like making a political statement," Tatah has said, "it allows one to step back and examine one's relationship to others and to society as a whole."

Reflecting both modernity and hybridization, Tatah's paintings of isolated figures or groups of people engaged in subtle psychological interactions recall Eugène Delacroix, Édouard Manet, Eadweard Muybridge, Edward Hopper and Alex Katz. Elements from Islamic art, Byzantine icons and Fayum mummy portraits as well as motifs from Persian, Indian and Arabic illuminations are also present.

The genesis of Tatah's paintings is a digital-image archive that includes family photographs, news shots and historical works. He manipulates these images to create line drawings that he then projects and traces on the canvas. Painted with a mixture of oil and wax, the figures attain life-size proportions against abstract backgrounds flooded with color. Tatah's alterations seek to rid the original figures of all superficiality and give them a timelessness. The chalkiness of his white mask-like faces conceal personal identities. The artist has withdrawn all forms of accessory to concentrate solely on movements, postures and backgrounds. The generic nature of the figures' gazes, their facial expressions, and body gestures invites the viewer's personal interpretation.

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Born in 1959 in St. Chamond, France, Djamel Tatah studied at the École des Beaux-Arts de Saint-Etienne from 1981 to 1986. He has taught at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Paris, since 2008. He lives and works in Montpellier. Tatah's works has been shown throughout France and internationally including: Salamanca Arts Centre, Spain (2002), Guangdong Museum of Art, China (2005), MAMAC Nice and Château de Chambord, France (2009-2011), Villa Medici, Italy, (2010), Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Algiers, Algeria (2013), Maeght Foundation in Saint-Paul, France (2013-2014), Modern and Contemporary Art Museum of Saint-Etienne Métropole, France (2014), Lambert Collection in Avignon, France (2017-2018), Berggruen Museum Berlin, Germany (2021) and Fabre Museum Montpellier, France (2022-2023). Tatah's work is included in prominent private and public collections such as the Barjeel Art Foundation (UAE), The British Museum (UK), Musée National d'Art Moderne Centre Georges Pompidou (France), MAACAL (Morocco), Maeght Foundation (France), Lambert Collection (France), Modern and Contemporary Art Museum in Saint-Etienne Métropole (France), and Fabre Museum Montpellier (France).

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