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GALLERY ONE

Marcos Bontempo: Among the Living

Ricco/Maresca welcomes Marcos Bontempo back with an exhibition of recent works on paper. His familiar cast of hybrid beings appears alongside more finely drawn human figures, while newly emerging interiors give their encounters a sense of place. The work moves between the elemental force of a solitary apparition and the charged relations of a group.

Born in Córdoba, Argentina, in 1969, Bontempo was the fourth of seven children. His family settled in Ronda, Spain, in the mid-1970s, following the military coup in Argentina. Against the backdrop of his strict Catholic upbringing, these images suggest a world in which earthly longing and otherworldly presences meet with a disarming intimacy. There is a devotional intensity to the attention he gives his invented beings, an insistence that each deserves the fullness of a life.

Paper has long been central to Bontempo's practice, and its openness gives even his most densely painted creatures room to breathe. Their surfaces carry a mineral intricacy, full of minute eddies and deposits. Small breaks in the pigment allow the surrounding space to run through a body, lending a formidable silhouette an unexpected delicacy. The more finely drawn human figures have a different kind of elegance. Ink follows a supple, almost calligraphic course: necks lengthen, backs curve, and hands open into extravagant extensions of the arm. Color settles lightly inside these outlines; hatching picks up the body's turns. Precision and exaggeration flourish together, making the slightest adjustment of posture expressive. A face may be left as an empty oval, directing our attention to the rest of the body. A lowered head or a hand lifted toward the cheek can make an otherwise anonymous figure feel almost confiding. Bontempo trusts our knowledge of such motions: the body remembers their emotional pitch before the mind has a chance to name it.

The figures find their bearings through one another. A bent back becomes a bridge; two bodies hinge together at the waist; a woman floats within reach of a creature whose limbs describe a loose circle around her. In these arrangements, a hand can do the work of an entire floor. Weight and balance become ways of feeling a relationship. To lean on another body is to grant it an extraordinary power, while the smallest gap can leave a figure suspended in its own solitude. The unpainted intervals give these exchanges their tension, making a pause as consequential as an action.

The artist's visions also acquire an architecture. Fields of black, rust red, and ochre gather the figures into rooms and small stages. Dark color collects around their edges, giving the scenes the compressed intensity of images seen in a dream. A couch can assume the gravity of an altar; sparse furnishings give an encounter the formality of a tableau. At the threshold of these painted rooms, we become witnesses to a private theater whose figures seem to know more about their exchanges than we do.

Enclosure takes a more portable form in the cages, a recurring motif. A woman wears one around her head. The little door stands open, yet the figure remains still, leaving the possibility of departure unresolved. A structure can be held as an object, fitted to the body, or made to stand for an inward condition. The house-shaped surrounds offer another kind of shelter. Their dark, textured arches have the substance of Bontempo's painted beings, as though architecture had grown from the same living matter. Within them, a solitary figure acquires a nearly monumental poise. The place seems tailored to its inhabitant, making the outline of a dwelling answer the outline of a body.

The strange assurance of Bontempo's figures brings Francisco de Goya's drawings and *Follies* to mind: the impossible has the conviction of something witnessed. Mortality has a shoulder one can touch; devotion can assume an acrobatic pose. Solemnity and absurdity keep close company, giving these exchanges a restless vitality. That vitality is also a matter of paint: a stain gathers itself into a creature; a fine contour acquires the persuasive weight of a body. We can still feel the sweep of the brush, the density of pigment, the quick intelligence of the line. The more defined bodies and inhabited rooms give mystery a place among the things we recognize. Bontempo's visions draw us close, then go on living beyond the explanations we bring to them.