

Jean-Pierre Villafañe
Outside And Aching
On view September 7 – October 9, 2022

On September 7th, ATM Gallery will unveil *Outside and Aching*, a solo exhibition of new works by Puerto Rican artist Jean-Pierre Villafañe on view through October 9th.

Outside and Aching offers the viewer a voyeuristic experience of the city and the pleasures New Yorkers indulge in. Influenced by his background in architecture, Villafañe presents private spaces rendered in section-cut type depictions of interiors, allowing the viewer to pry in on unfolding scenes of fantasy and deviance, themes the artist devotes much of his imagery to. While one may habitually walk the streets of New York unphased by its daily eccentricities, here, the artist forces us to engage and further yet, trespass.

Provocatively lifted skirts, ambiguously interwoven limbs, and sensually exposed flesh all testify to the artist's familiarly ambiguous visual language. The play of entangled bodies imbues these paintings with implicit eroticism and invites the viewer into the space as willing participant, following the limbs of one figure only to be guided to another, losing oneself in the compositions much like one loses oneself in the city. These arranged and rearranged bodies create a system of bodily disarticulation whose unstable nature only works to destabilize the viewer.

Evoking the world of architecture, arches and columns form a fundamental compositional element in the artist's work. These elements are both literal in their framing of space and echoed in the cut of figures' faces, creating a dialogue between figure and structure that further engulfs us in the works. By accentuating angularity and structure, faces appear closer to masks from behind which identities cannot be revealed and true origins are concealed. Our gaze is suspended here by the impenetrable nature of the mask. Melting into the architecture, these masked faces exist in harmony with the city, becoming part of the fabric of the built environment around them—of New York itself—rather than mere transitory inhabitants.

Paintings crackle with electrifying energy as the theatrical figures seem constantly in motion. Appearing possessed, almost slaves to the act of dancing, these figures enchant the spectator, summoning the latter to join in. Figures not only threaten the artist's own control through these theatrical movements but the spectator's control too. One may believe they have power as voyeur, only to experience these dancing bodies as dominating figures in a pictorial space from which they are exiled. This theme is brought to its culmination with the sole sculptural work in the exhibition, *The Midnight Special* (2022), a box made from the inside out, which not only psychologically exiles us, but physically exiles us as well.

The play of mirrors in *The Midnight Special* (2022) places the illicit and fetishizing gaze into question as we find ourselves looking through a peephole only to see our own reflection staring back at us. Calling attention to the disjuncture between distance and intimacy, this sculptural work demonstrates how the presence or absence of a spectator affects the pictorial content it

depicts. Our role in the space is revealed as *The Midnight Special* (2022) is only complete when inscribed with our gaze, sealing our fate as willing participants and trespassers.

Closely identifying with the city he observes, Villafañe offers a depiction of New York not as it is traditionally regarded but rather as it is intimately experienced. The use of the voyeur's gaze permits him to transform the bewildering city into a stage set, allowing him not only to tame the city within the confines of a canvas or sculpture but to domesticate it too. In doing so, the spectator is offered a theater of the daily performances of living. Images within images explicitly reinforce this theater-like rendition of New York. In the left panel of *Rear Window* (2022), a skirt appears instead as a curtain, with two slipping heels facing each other as if acting in dialogue; in *Showdown* (2022), a leg slips through the cracks of a fire escape only to find rescue in a shadow; in *After Hours* (2022), a figure lurks in through a window as if peering at an unfolding scene from backstage.

Through *Outside and Aching*, Villafañe reveals New York's unrelenting life and furthers his practice as a painter of all that is spectacular, hidden inside the everyday. After a pandemic that subdued much of the city's vitality, the artist's subjects possess the pulse of life that recent chaos had suspended. Sealed scenes of celebration reestablish a city as spectacle, one in which desires are gratified and embraced.

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