

MARTOS GALLERY

Art in America

April 2, 2015

ALEX CHAVES

By Tracy Jeanne Rosenthal



Alex Chaves: *Baby*, 2014, oil on canvas, 22 by 18 inches; at Artist Curated Projects.

MARTOS GALLERY

The surfaces shine. Maybe it's sweat. Perhaps the walls, the floors, the chairs and anything that surrounds the figures present in **Alex Chaves's** latest body of oils are perspiring with the labor of becoming abstract. Leaves bloom in interior space. Sinewy lines adorn the upholstery. A cherry hovers in the periphery. Lilies flower from a subject's ear. The palette is Crayola chic: canary, turquoise, candy apple. The paint is maximal, dramatic. Sometimes it splits a body into its planar forms. Sometimes gobs of it line the lips of a canvas, enduring as a frame. The kind of lawlessness that prevails in these works is painting at its psychedelic best. Fantasy is always just a raunchy interpretation of the real.

But the queer hermeneutics of domestic space belong less to the canon of oils than to cinema's variously shunned and celebrated stepdaughter: melodrama. In Fassbinder's *The Bitter Tears of Petra Von Kant*, the camera never leaves the heroine's apartment, which is populated not by people but by the kinds of wretched feelings only German can name. Always failing to boil over into action, these sentiments emerge instead in bizarre compositions, perspectives, and extravagances of fashion and home decor. "I wanted to bring out the inner violence, the energy of the characters, which is inside and can't get through," Douglas Sirk wrote of his totalizing, saturated film sets. Chaves shares Sirk's lascivious eye for the odd corners in the hallucinogenic confines of the home. Rather than "ground" and "figure," Chaves's work seems to demand the cinematic language of "mise-en-scène," or even behavioral psychology's "milieu." Indeed, the faces and muscles bifurcated by reds and blues, and the ghostly white silhouette of a face in profile that twice appears in a high right corner, should signal us beyond representation's worn routines of identification and desire, and toward a better investigation of the bizarre rituals of looking and being looked at, or the hysterical disjuncture between seeming and being.

Feminists invented object-oriented philosophy. Emerging in response to the interiorized morality of the 19th century, melodrama deals in the parallel between interior space and interior life, between women's place as caretakers of commodities and the absurd position of being commodities themselves. Of course, Freud saw melodrama as furnishing the essential machinery for the psychic horror of disclosing one's sexuality to oneself. Chaves revamps not just the anachronistic medium of oil but also melodrama, with its high-wire excesses of subversion and escapism. At stake is the pathos of interiors, both lonely and suffocating, the sublimation of feelings within things, and the drive that makes a Disneyland of every crotch.

Baby (2014) spells out "Baby" in a piquant script. Perhaps the perfect term to conjoin the artist's childlike palette and polymorphous perversity, what is "baby" besides a placeholder, an ultimately uninhabitable projection of the lover onto the loved, onto the half holy ideal/half thing? When Taylor Swift, in a triumph of a music video, throws herself and various housewares across the grounds of an ornate estate, slashing portraits of former partners with kitchen knives and her mind, she sings, "I got a blank space, baby, and I'll write your name." Melodrama discloses the glorious circuits of mutual exploitation that make each individual both culprit and victim. Poor baby, you always hurt the ones you love.