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Children's Stories

Kim Carpenter on the recent works of Claudia Alvarez



Claudia Alvarez creates paintings and life-size sculptures of children that are indisputably sweet, gentle and delicate. Wide eyes, dainty features and slight limbs are prevalent, as are pale pink tones and soft lines. But these are no sentimental portraits of "Precious Moments." Alvarez's innocence has an edge, and through her figures' unflinching gazes and strong body language, she communicates both the fragility and strength inherent in the human condition. For Alvarez, a former ambulance driver who worked with terminally-ill patients—particularly children—the child serves as a point of departure, a vehicle she uses to explore complex emotions such as grief and joy, hope and despair. For that reason, her work often has a haunting, transcendent quality that creates a dialogue between artist and viewer. Children may be Alvarez's primary subject matter, but the artist is addressing wider issues of physical and emotional pain.

In "Cosas de un Niño (A Story of a Child)," she exhibited 14 recent oil paintings and five ceramic sculptures as well as small, child-sized ceramic shoes. While her paintings initially seem tender and serene, they communicate a silent urgency that is at once arresting and disquieting. Alvarez begins her paintings with a charcoal drawing and eschews brushes in favor of using her hands to apply paint directly to the canvas. She then often sands and reworks the image, resulting in softly sophisticated surfaces. Through her delicate applications, Alvarez creates a dreamy, pensive atmosphere, infusing the children's still postures with barely apparent tension. Interestingly, Alvarez does not use live models or photographs for her work. Instead, she relies on her memory to create composite portraits that convey the essence of a child's personality, which in turn lends her work a distinct narrative quality.

Se Fuey, which features a young boy against a deep black background, emerged as one of the show's most powerful works. Translated as "He's Gone," a flesh-colored silhouette dominates the canvas. Only the outline of a boy remains; Alvarez includes no face, no distinctive features. Still, this dead child is remembered, a hovering ghost that exists within a family's collective memory, his very absence creating a fierce sense of presence. Other works depict children looking off into the distance, their faces often hidden or obscured. *El Viaje (The Journey)* captures a little girl seated in a small rowboat, with just her back and part of her profile visible. She

is departing from the viewer, her journey both literal and metaphoric. In contrast, *Jump* features a girl looking head-on at her viewer, her large eyes unblinking, her expression inscrutable. Although her knees are drawn to her chin, the outline of her legs extended is just visible beneath the layers of paint. The girl appears floating, suspended beyond any fixed place or time.

For her sculpture installation, Alvarez placed her seated figures, roughly 13 inches high by 8 wide, in pairs, a boy and a girl each back-to-back, save one lone figure positioned off to the side. These children are gathered together within the same space, but they nonetheless remain separate and alone. The children's faces are turned to the distance, and their eyes



remains fixed on some invisible point beyond the viewer as if they are lost in thought. Devoid of color, these white sculptures resemble fine porcelain more so than ceramic, which underscores their delicateness and fragility. Except for the figure seated alone, Alvarez created these sculptures without arms, which she purposefully omits to concentrate on the figures' facial characteristics and torsos. In this regard, her figurative sculptures emerge as vessels meant to convey the body as a container for the soul.

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Claudia Alvarez, ceramic sculpture, 2005.