

ArtNexus, Summer 2024

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# ArtNexus

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## Luis Caballero

### Cecilia Brunson Projects

Twenty-nine years since Colombian artist Luis Caballero (1943-1995) passed away marks his first retrospective solo exhibition in the UK. Showcasing his intricate charcoal renderings of the male nude, made during the final two decades of his life, the exhibition *A Deliberate Defiance* at Cecilia Brunson Projects in London not only highlights his artistic skill but also displays his remarkable ambition in creating his own distinct visual style. “One could say he is an abstract painter using the body as his medium, or a sculptor who sculpts in two dimensions” curator Daniel Malarkey reflects on the exhibition, “I curated this exhibition to spread the word and in hopes that other curators will take on his legacy.”

Caballero’s work has been overlooked in art history despite the artist’s significant contributions to the art world. Caballero grew up

during La Violencia, a period of civil conflict and political unrest that occurred in Colombia from the late 1940s to the early 1960s. Seeking freedom to express his sexuality, Caballero moved to Paris, where he embraced classical forms and painting while forging his own path within a modernist framework. His investigation into the human body and sexuality is crucial as it intertwines with the Latin American narrative, addressing themes of violence, sexuality, and the influence of the church. Malarkey emphasizes the importance of considering not just the artworks themselves but also the biographies of the artists and their place in history. "Curating changes how art is viewed," he explains, "and therefore, the pictures become more powerful in exciting and emotionally gratifying contexts." He envisions artworks not as isolated pieces but as participants in a dialogue—a conversation among artists and their works.

Caballero blurs the distinction between his own body and that of others. In his drawings, figures intertwine not as distinct entities but as various representations of a singular body—comprising the artist's, his lover's, and Christ's. The figures, devoid of distinct facial features, are depicted on a life-size scale, enveloping the viewer. Standing in front of each work, the viewer goes beyond a dialogue with the artwork; an introspective dialogue has begun. In one work from 1989, all works are *Untitled*, the figures intricately replicate topographical landscapes with their muscular flesh undulating and captured amidst scattered charcoal dust. Caballero has sculpted his own body of experience or constructed a *particular loci* of feeling from a particular part of his life. In the exhibition *A Deliberate Defiance*, all the works were completed in the period 1979-1982. The series of works tell a particularly beautiful story of when Caballero was at the peak of his career in Paris during a significant moment in queer history. These works, rendered in grayscale on paper and canvas, reflect Caballero's preferred medium. His artistic practice was driven by an intimate sentiment, as Malarkey explains: "Caballero talks about how he experiences the body as he draws it, and there is a sensuality to this that a sculptor would feel in sculpting legs and arms." Dissolving private and public space, Caballero's work embodies the conditions of perception of the world, anchoring our body as the site through which phenomenological systems can take place.

Besides wanting to showcase and continue highlighting the artistic legacy of Caballero, the motivation behind Malarkey's curation

**Luis Caballero.** *Untitled*, 1979. Charcoal on paper laid down on canvas. 46 1/2 x 59 1/2 in. (118 x 151 cm). Photo: Frederick Wilkinson. Courtesy: Cecilia Brunson Projects



is rooted in a deep admiration for Caballero's distinct artistic voice. "Caballero's line is so uniquely his own," Malarkey emphasizes that just as one can identify a Rembrandt drawing by his distinct line, Caballero's line is similarly recognizable to those familiar with his work. For Malarkey, Caballero's work shares similarities with Jenny Saville and Lucian Freud in their exploration of the human body and its complexities. Like Saville and Freud, Caballero captures, with visceral intensity, the rawness and vulnerability of the human form. All three artists challenge conventional standards of beauty, confronting viewers with the unfiltered reality of the human condition.

But why has Caballero yet to achieve global recognition? Several queer artists under the age of 45 have gained significant acclaim by portraying male figures embracing one another, including Louis Fratino, Doron Langberg, and Salman Toor. Edward Lucie-Smith stood out as the sole English-speaking art critic who supported Caballero's work. Compared to his peers of the same generation, Caballero's depictions of bodies in motion possess a heightened sense of gesture and emotion, possessing a strikingly contemporary feel. In the face of the severity of the AIDS epidemic, especially in France, Caballero's courage and authenticity, shaped by the enduring struggle of the community, imbued his paintings with a unique vitality and a sense of urgency. These artworks hold significance in marking this pivotal moment in history. Outside of Colombia, his legacy has largely been forgotten over the past twenty years, until now. Malarkey expresses optimism that the discourse surrounding Caballero's work may be gaining momentum, noting that Tate acquired a significant piece last year. Caballero's portrayal of survival, love, and defiance beckons viewers to embrace their own courage, encouraging them to immerse themselves in his world—a world that warrants continued exploration and exhibition.

SOFIA HALLSTRÖM

MADRID / SPAIN

## Mateo López Travesía Cuatro

Despite its lyricism, apparent of real, the title of Mateo López's exhibition at Travesía 4 gallery in Madrid truly names his method: *Camina Habla Canta Baila* (Walk Speak Sing Dance). Without his random walks through the streets of New York City or Bogotá, López would not have come across abandoned objects on sidewalks and curbs, the interesting objects he picked up and took to his studio, first in Brooklyn between 2014 and 2022, and then in Bogotá. In both locations, he placed those objects on shelves without any organizing principle other than what chance dictated, and the shelves became filled with such collections. There they remained silent, their names lost along with their utility, until a random day when, without any rational explanation, they grabbed López's attention once again and prodded his imagination.

By then, none of the objects was alone: all had entered into a play of affinities and counterpoints with their neighbors on the shelves, with which they originally had no connection. In that way, they gave rise to the matrix of a language *in nuce*, always awaiting an interlocutor with whom to engage in dialog in order to exhibit their extraordinary communicative potential. Shedding the prevalent interest in basic geometric forms that marked earlier periods of his career, Mateo López became that interlocutor, the audience that gave the objects, born of neglect and chance, an opportunity to speak. And to sing and dance.