

Life is overtaking me

The painting practice of Joe Cheetham (b. 1992, Epsom) defies static categorisation, fluidly adapting style and medium to articulate varied moments of human emotion. As such, Cheetham's current exhibition "Life is overtaking me" can be perceived as a non-linear continuation of his first solo show at L21 "Something for the weekend" (Palma de Mallorca, 2021). While in his previous work the use of cartoonish figures, primary colours and an ingenious spray paint technique allowed the artist to capture the frenzied communal joy of bodies raving, this new body of work, executed in oil, uses a muted palette and a more subtle approach to create a quiet, yet pervasive sense of anxiety, insecurity and alienation.

Cheetham's latest paintings evade traditional compositions of foreground and background, creating scenes where form and colour exist on a single plane. The artist plays with a deliberate ambiguity of time, gender and physical expression to build a tension that exists just under the surface. Within these scenes the figures coalesce, closely occupying the same space and yet never touching or interacting, turning away from each other, seemingly uncomfortable in their proximity. With subtly distorted and exaggerated human forms the characters are equally distinct and homogenous. The character's gaze finds the viewer but never quite engages, instead looking through, past or beyond, their expressions at once sad, neutral, questioning, even suspicious.

The paintings are heavily cropped and densely populated, deliberately obscuring and concealing what the viewer sees. Like his characters, Cheetham's focus exists both inside and outside of the frame, carefully controlling what is seen and crucially unseen. The characters, externally lit, seem vulnerable and exposed, as if threatened both by the light's source and the shadows it creates. These prominent shadows lurk, detached from the bodies, forming figures of their own to contribute to a sense of claustrophobic unease.

Made within the context of a global pandemic, environmental collapse, cultures of individualism and systems of greed, the paintings included in '*Life is overtaking me*' speak to the sense of isolation and creeping malaise caused by contemporary existence.

From a conversation between Joe Cheetham and Cristina Ramos.