

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Eddy Frankel, "Kai Althoff Goes with Bernard Leach at the Whitechapel Gallery is some seriously surreal painting," *TimeOut*, October, 2020



'Kai Althoff Goes With Bernard Leach' at the Whitechapel Gallery is some seriously surreal painting



Installation View Kai Althoff goes with Bernard Leach Whitechapel Gallery Photo: Polly Eltes In

Under a filthy plastic tarp, Kai Althoff tells his impenetrable stories. The German painter has lowered the Whitechapel's ceiling and littered it with leaves and debris. You walk under this dirty, constricting canopy to pore over his mystical, romantic, violent works.

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These are dark paintings, like something unearthed from some forgotten library. The papers are faded, the canvases all auburn and ochre. You spy ghosts from Japanese antiquity, ladies from some nineteenth century French park scene, white youths with snapped legs, a World War I soldier sharing beer with a boy. The canvases are all odd shapes, some are abstract constructions of felt, some are draped in lace.

And for the most part, the wafty, incomprehensible mysticism of the exhibition works. It's intoxicating, it sucks you into its weird aggressive atmosphere. But upstairs, things start to fray. The pictures become less coherent, and then there's a room of pots by British studio potter Bernard Leach. They're nice and all, but it's hard to tell why they're here.

At the artist's request, there are no wall texts in the gallery, and the only information available is a short essay written by 'a friend' of Althoff's. That essay is unreadable, opaque, art waffle that makes absolutely no fucking sense. It's so badly written, so full of syntactical errors and grammatical war crimes, that it just pushes you away from the art.

And that's a shame, because a lot of this is good. There's no singular 'Althoff' style; instead, it's like the art collection of an eccentric hermit living in a musty, shady world of anger and oddity, filled with Japanese ukiyo-e, lost German expressionism and the discarded sketches of Odilon Redon and Paul Gauguin. It's grubby, uncomfortable and full of stories you can barely understand, but desperately want to. Althoff opens the door to his visual universe, you just wish he'd be nice enough to invite you in.