

Nicholas Hatfull, "In Defence of Discomfort: Kai Althoff's Whitechapel Show is a Dreamscape,"
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Frieze

In Defence of Discomfort: Kai Althoff's Whitechapel Show is a Dreamscape

The provocative artist's major survey with British potter and 'courier between East and West' Bernard Leach invites the question: who has license to be so nonchalant?



As if its full intensity would be too much to bear, Kai Althoff's smouldering art comes damped down as standard. Whether in the sapped colour of his paintings or the dour jumble of his environments, there is a latency to the forms he articulates. Greeting you in the lower gallery of the artist's survey at London's Whitechapel Gallery is a ceiling of plastic sheeting, strewn with decomposing leaves. The swathe of more than 60 works nestled beneath is resolutely diffuse in tone – magical realism, preciousness, mischief and diffidence make themselves variously known. Its aftereffect recalls 'that strange, charmed, slightly frightening feeling' left by dreams, as described by Brian Eno in a 2020 BBC interview.

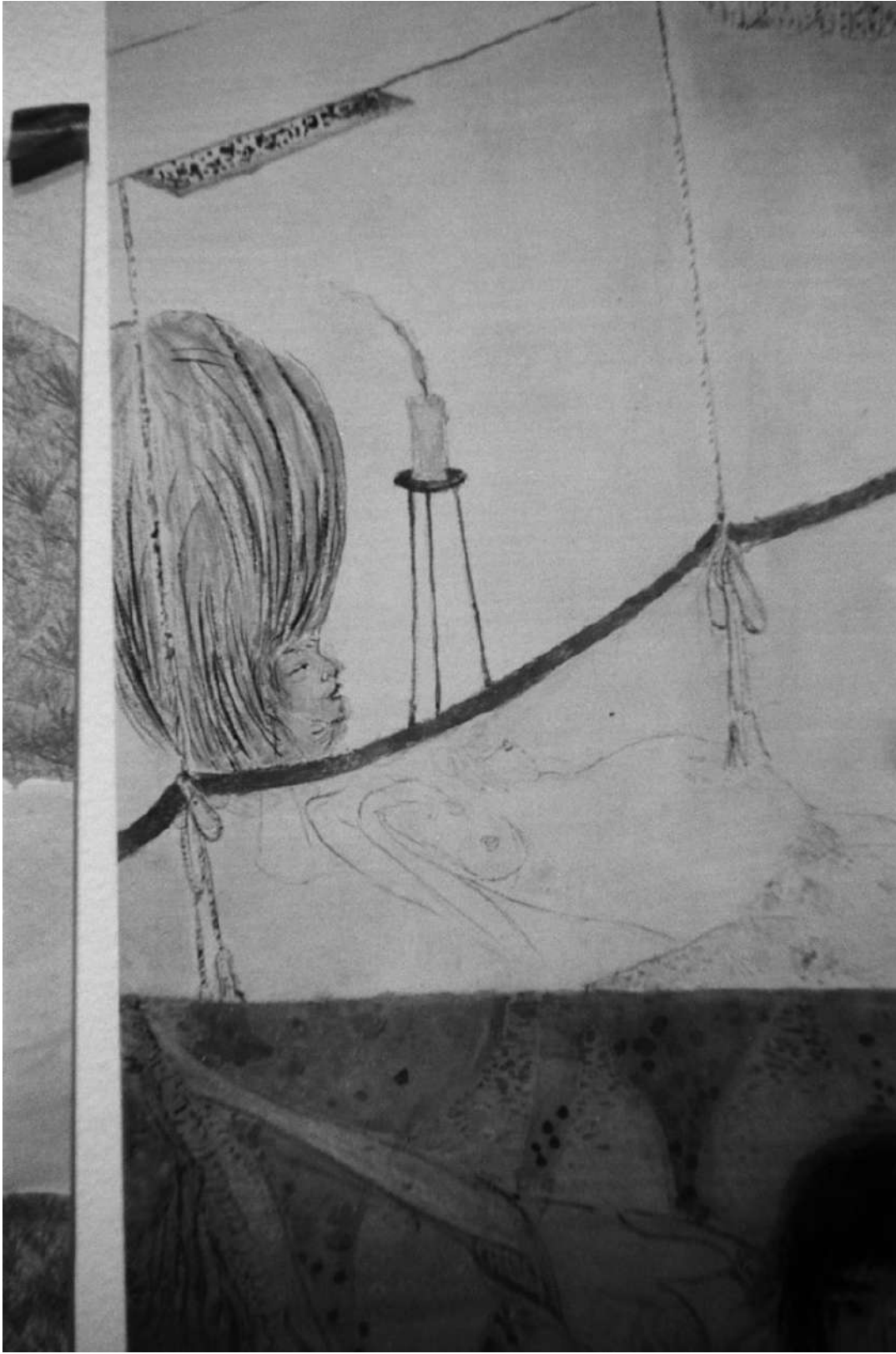
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'Kai Althoff goes with Bernard Leach', installation view, 2020. Courtesy: the artist and Whitechapel Gallery, London; photograph: Polly Eltes

The first pictures you may encounter are works on paper in gouache, oil and ink (all *Untitled*, 2017–18), inspired by the Japanese art of *Ukiyo-e*. Dainty flecks, spindly lines and sparing washes describe an anthology of unsettled scenes – eerie settlements, blood moons, intimations of supernatural threat. As much as woodblock prints, the works call to mind Masaki Kobayashi's 1964 film *Kwaidan*. Nearby, on trapezoid canvases, pigs are portrayed snuffling through close-toned striations. Something pungent eludes unearthing.

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Kai Althoff, *Untitled*, 2017, oil paint, oil crayon, ink, gouache and metallic pigment on paper, 42 × 59 cm. Courtesy: the artist, Michael Werner Gallery, London and Gladstone Gallery, New York/ Brussels

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On a snaking divider screen, furtive elfin figures bring a haul of shellfish ashore (*Untitled*, 2020), or take a wheelchair-using friend for a restorative turn round a garden (*Untitled*, 2018). Where narrative sense is obscure, meaning seems more likely to reside in haptic details. Paper stained by a spilled beverage crumples as if grasped by a hand (*Untitled*, 2010), canvas sags morosely, lambswool becomes haunting curtains (*Untitled*, 2002). Impish collage – children’s stickers, chuckling men in hard hats – disrupts your germinating response (*Untitled*, 2010, and *Der Beste Ausweg*, *The Best Way Out*, 2002). Irreducibility is a central tenet.



'Kai Althoff goes with Bernard Leach', installation view, 2020. Courtesy: the artist and Whitechapel Gallery, London; photograph: Polly Eltes

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Althoff's cultish status rests in part on the unfolding intrigue of his installations. Upstairs, the final room pulls the whole exhibition into a different focus, like looking through the wrong end of a telescope. Arranged on Alpaca wool fabric, woven by Travis Meinolf, are vessels, dishes, brooches and buttons in *raku*, earthenware and stoneware by Bernard Leach – who picked up techniques from Japan before fusing them with British ceramic traditions. The discreet organic colour and sensuous presence of the pottery is complemented by the gentle arpeggios of the textile. Riffing on Althoff's own meditations on the natural world and exotic roving, the display calls the ethics of both artists' work into question. Leach has not escaped detection of Orientalism, and the alliance may be a sideways rejoinder to critical discussion of Althoff's 2018 exhibition at Tramps in New York for which he was accused of perpetuating othering stereotypes. Hanging opposite, a childhood felt-tip scrawl by Althoff (*Untitled*, c.1969) complicates the equation, the artist perhaps identifying with an oblivious innocence.



Kai Althoff, *Hakelzug*, 1994, clay sculptures on sisal rug, two antique wooden beams from a loom, glass panel, wool, green wooden bucket, installation view, Galerie Christian Nagel, Cologne, 1994. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Christian Nagel, Cologne; photograph: the artist

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This final *mise en scène* might equally be a defence of insouciant licence, or contextualizing provocation. Despite the discomfiting ambiguities, it is dizzyingly seductive. The works I had just seen reappeared and commingled in a mirage, with Leach's forms, colours and liquified boundaries revealing a more timeless aspect of Althoff's production, without relieving it of complication. The colours of the paintings became less downbeat, a renewed beauty apparent – pilsener, amber, various shades of olive, soba noodle and black muscat grape. Althoff's wish (cited in the exhibition pamphlet), for his painting to 'ideally function like one of Bernard Leach's pots', now floated in the air as a possibility.

Perhaps, on reflection, the muffled light of the lower gallery, speckled with soft-focus leaf mulch, was more therapeutic than dank – something like the shrouded retreat described in W.H. Auden's 1973 poem 'Thank You, Fog'. The charms of Althoff's fog are laced, like dreams, with disquiet.

Main image: 'Kai Althoff goes with Bernard Leach', installation view, 2020. Courtesy: the artist and Whitechapel Gallery, London; photograph: Polly Eltes