

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Boucher, Brian. "Kai Althoff," *Art in America*, April 2011.



View of Kai Althoff's exhibition "Punkt, Absatz, Blümli (period, paragraph, Blümli)," 2011; at Gladstone.

KAI ALTHOFF GLADSTONE

"Professionalism kills all that I like about art," Kai Althoff told *Flash Art* in 2002. The latest exhibition by this self-taught artist and musician (b. 1966), who recently moved to New York from his native Cologne, demonstrated abundant accomplishment without losing the work's characteristic sprawl and multivalence.

For this show, "Punkt, Absatz, Blümli (period, paragraph, Blümli)" (yes, with the gaps), the gallery's floors were painted canary yellow and the space reconfigured into two rooms with dropped ceilings and fluorescent lights, connected by a crimson-curtained hallway. The mostly untitled paintings, drawings, sculptures and one woven rug on view (all from the last four years) may have related to a story by the artist, available at the front desk. In it, Blümli, a young man, runs into his old friend Ulrike and her new husband, Günter, who makes a clumsy play for Blümli, after which the couple invite themselves to his place, where they have a chaste overnight stay.

The show contained three sculpted figures, all approximately life-size, but if they represented the story's characters, it wasn't obvious—in keeping with the customary ambiguity of Althoff's work. A man and woman, painted figures made of wood, plaster and burlap, stood in the front room against ceiling-high shelves stocked with dozens of brightly colored wax coffee mugs. Her back was to the shelves, as though he'd cornered her in a perhaps menacing, perhaps erotic but definitely sudden approach—behind her back she was rescuing a falling mug, as if she'd bumped into the furniture.

In the back room, meanwhile, a dandyish painted-fabric doll, sporting a striped silk scarf and antique fur-lined jacket, lounged on a chaise. He cast a sidelong glance toward a fabric sculpture of ducting into which was tucked a heart-shaped pink box, like a nominally hidden valentine (Günter's not-so-secret affection?). In the same room hung a 5-by-4-foot oil painting on the ménage-à-trois theme. It offered a hazy, indistinct scene in which a man, his front teeth impossibly long and coiled like serpents, is apparently being offered a spread-legged, supine woman by another man.

On the walls hung a number of Althoff's drawings and paintings, which conjure up historical artists from Klee and Chagall to Ensor and Klimt, and bore no obvious relation to Blümli's tale. Most remarkable was an untitled 4-by-5-foot drawing on collaged sheets. At left, a freakish couple, each of indeterminate gender ("her" housedress reveals a hairy chest and "he" seems to wear lipstick), look askance at a large, actual stain on the paper. From a street scene at right, another figure interrupts his conversation with a smiling Orthodox Jew to reach across and grasp the puckered, tea-colored stain. On another sheet, "his" sleeve ends in a rooster, and from "her" housedress emerges a sheep.

By my second visit, some of the paintings had been replaced with other works. *Untitled (portrait of Nick Z)*, in which Nick's mustached face nestles among rainbows, had been supplanted by a canvas showing a pianist continuing to play despite an elephant's tromping on his instrument. Highly unorthodox, true, but rules are for the professionals, no?

—Brian Boucher