

GLADSTONE GALLERY



Kai Althoff's recent work  
by Michael Brucewell

^  
TENSION  
OF  
MOODS

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

The stately white room is quiet, filled with pale sunshine. Two tall windows look down onto the city street below. In front of one is a record player; its charcoal-grey casing is modern and discreet. Although a vinyl album is playing softly, the music – once the visitor becomes accustomed to its delicate patchwork of voices and instrumentation – seems to assert and then withdraw and, in so doing, becomes increasingly entrancing.

How to describe this music (a new album by Kai Althoff, *Fanal 4*, released in September 2014), which is as heavily pervasive as a scent? It's difficult to be precise but the mood and tone bring to mind both improvised rock music and a form more dense and intent, almost liturgical. Jangling, chanting and intoning – in places as though to themselves – the singing voices (one minute high-pitched as if in jubilation, the next in urgent chatter) and instruments weave a compelling yet awkward pattern. The listener hears them as though through the thickness of a wall – the patterns of declamatory dissonance become a remote air, both ambient and distinct. It might bring to mind a relay of folk tales, sung to ease the long hours in a dusty atelier, or the sound of prayer: a lengthy semi-musical ritual, for domestic worship, comprising many parts and repetitions. Psalm 55:17 reflects the mood: 'Evening, morning and noontime I speak and moan, and He harkens to my voice.'

And so the music seeps into the room, tinting its gravity with exotic strangeness. There are big, intricate pictures on the walls and the portal to a darker room (its windows

heavily draped) beyond. On one side of this first room is a large drawing made on three square and six rectangular sheets of paper, fitted together into a single landscape format that is mounted on a pearl-grey fabric-covered background. The composition appears at once geometrical and visionary-realist, implying a mysterious narrative that is being told in hyper-stylized fragments. Its triangle-based geometry (like points broken off a Star of David) enables shifts in scale and perspective, yet remains both malleable and poised. But what's going on?

On the left, against what might be a parkland of low escarpments, dotted with neat, lone trees, two Hasidic Jews in traditional black hats and coats (one holds some kind of ceremonial-looking tool or instrument or weapon) seem to be involved in a ritual assault upon a third, who falls backwards, his upturned face and folded-back hand a bright, pinkish red – the colour of strawberry juice. His assailants (if that is what they are) have cruel, oddly medieval-looking faces – you might think of the set expressions on the faces of Christ's executioners and tormentors in Hieronymus Bosch's *Christ Mocked (The Crowning with Thorns)* (1490–1500) – transplanted to the features of contemporary Satmar Hasids.

The surface of the drawing has a vividly intense softness, meticulously composed from thousands of tiny, intricate marks. It appears as tactile as fur and imbues the temper of the drawing with a tension of moods, between realism and a dream reality, between violent action and impassivity. The centre of the

drawing abuts two further triangular forms and spaces: a bone-coloured emptiness, reminiscent of a white overcast sky, across the upper half; and then, falling in luxuriant folds down the lower two thirds, a blanket-like fabric patterned in vibrant tendrils of white, silver-blue, turquoise and sage green.

In the bottom right-hand corner, a further group of Jews looks upwards, as though to watch some event, half-fascinated, perhaps fearful. Above, giant-sized in comparison, facing the viewer, a simply dressed woman with two pencils between the fingers of her right hand, looks impassively to the right. At shoulder height to her, seen in profile, a curiously asexual, pinch-featured figure, wearing a brightly coloured necklace, eyes closed, is further distinguished by a helmet (with chin strap), hair and eyebrows of strawberry pink. Behind him are two smaller triangular spaces, a delicately leaved tree in each, as though on a hill in the middle distance. The silver-blue-green blanket appears to both screen and connect the figures and activities on either side of the composition – a veil or transformative item, held between them. Meandering around the frequency of its self-absorbed mood, the music accompanies and extends the world created by this large drawing. The whole is as mesmerizing and grave as an altarpiece seen during a choir practice.

Such, in summary, is my experience of encountering a drawing (*Untitled*, 2012–14) in the first room of a recent exhibition of new works by the Cologne-born artist Kai Althoff, who is currently resident in New York. The show comprises paintings in various media (some in several parts, making angled, asymmetrical shapes) and brightly patterned, heavy wool jumpers, displayed across two rooms: one a traditional, cleared white space, the other, larger, furnished by the artist with thick, sand-coloured fabrics that are strewn on the floor, draped over plain, workshop-style tables and chairs, and hung from the walls. In the second, darker space, despite a central overhead light, the atmosphere feels crepuscular and attic-like; wooden mannequins stand here and there – one lies on the floor, reaching up with a single hand as though to right itself. The music – truly, now, a 'distant air' – persists from the adjoining room.

The paintings are figurative yet stylized (some to near abstraction), impressionistic and tonally complex, rich with ambience and character. Many depict – without explanation or clues as to why – subjects and events from

Opening page  
*Untitled*, 2012–14, colour pencil  
and felt-tip pen on paper,  
1.7 × 1.9 m

1  
*Untitled*, 2013,  
oil and enamel on fabric, 1.5 × 1.4 m

2  
*Untitled*, 2014,  
oil paint, oil crayon, enamel and  
acrylic on fabric, 1.7 × 1.3 m

All images  
© the artist; courtesy Michael Werner  
Gallery, New York and London



# GLADSTONE GALLERY



2

*As in life itself, nothing is necessarily  
logical in these paintings, and from this derives  
their richness of atmosphere and the liberation  
of being solely themselves.*

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

quotidian Hasidic Jewish life. As in life itself, nothing is necessarily logical in these paintings, and from this derives their richness of atmosphere and the liberation of being solely themselves. Their palette – like the mood of the draped room – might be said to possess a damp, northern-European darkness and yet they are filled with the urgency of lives being lived; the clamour of transported cultures and community. Dun, ochre, passages of silvery green or charcoal grey, sudden lime-yellow indented with dabs of a stone-coloured desert townscape, brownish-drab, moss; in a corner, an exquisitely turned head of a passer-by, a flash of glamour in a stranger.

All of this combines to place the visitor to these rooms within an aesthetic consciousness that is brought to life by the sum of the scenes depicted by the pictures and evoked by the music, drapes, mannequins and furnishings. Seldom has the seemingly haphazard, or the object residue of a life imagined, exuded such finesse of craft, vision, materials and process. We have entered an enfolding world that seems at once artificial, real, deserted, fictitious, closed, ceremonial and arch, domestic-allegorical, pertaining to possibility. It could be the set of a play, perhaps, or rooms in which a play might be staged – adapting the medium of country-house charades, strolling players, amateur dramatics (so-called low forms) to the telling of sacred or complex ideas, such as fables or parables, their forms in turn adapted to other ends.

In 2011, Althoff and other collaborators, working like a small troupe of strolling players, performed a play by Yair Oelbaum titled *There We Will Be Buried* (2011), at the Palace Theatre in Southend-on-Sea. Combining pre-recorded dialogue (to which the performers mimed) with sound, Oelbaum's play seemed at once Surrealist and semi-improvisational – somewhat like a folk tale being enacted in a village square. As such, it could be seen as part of the same quasi-liturgical, domestic dream world evoked by Althoff's music, artworks and their inter-relating installation. One might think of the 'auto-sacramentales' (theatrical representations of sacred or religious mysteries) rendered intensely modern in the poetry and travelling plays of Federico García Lorca. These, too, were conceived as 'total artworks' – from poems or scripts to sets, posters, music and costume designs; while similarly, at their heart, lay a profound evocation of worlds and situations that were at once commonplace, allegorical and magical. The evasion of specificity, balanced against the intensity of symbol, is paramount to the attainment of such an art.

*We have entered  
an enfolding world  
that seems at once  
artificial, real,  
deserted, fictitious,  
closed, ceremonial  
and arch.*

Where does this leave us? The players enact their strange stories, the music hymns and drones and narrates, the Hasidic figures move in their world, mannequins stand to attention or recline, the sumptuous jumpers lie where they were thrown. The longer one looks at Althoff's art – its world – the clearer it becomes that the secular and the terrestrial, craft, labour, love and friendship, the domestic, the homespun and the daily routine are the tenets upon which he bases the intimation of a visionary, psycho-dynamic narrative. Such is the nature of the modern parable, all around us. ♦♦

*Michael Bracewell is a writer who lives in London, UK. His recent publications include Ian Davenport (with Martin Filler and Damien Hirst) and Xanti Schawinsky: Head Drawings and Faces of War (Drawing Center, New York), both 2014.*

*Kai Althoff is based in New York, USA. In 2014, he had a solo show at Michael Werner Gallery, London. In 2016, he will have an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.*



1 & 2  
Installation views at  
Michael Werner Gallery,  
London, 2014

Both images  
© the artist; courtesy Michael Werner  
Gallery, New York  
and London; photograph:  
Yair Oelbaum