

GLADSTONE GALLERY

"Kai Althoff", Modern Painters, April 2011.

NEW YORK

Kai Althoff

Gladstone Gallery // January 15–March 5

IN THE 1988 film *Big*, a young boy is accelerated into adulthood thanks to a coin-operated boardwalk genie. It's not a horror movie, of course, but there's something horrific about the setup: such a cheap machine performing real-world voodoo. Popular entertainment has long reflected our fascination with that unnerving collision of childhood, evil, and shoddy gewgaws (various malevolent ventriloquist dummies; the Chuckie franchise). This brings us, in a generously roundabout way, to Kai Althoff's "Punkt, Absatz, Blümli (period, paragraph, Blümli)," at Gladstone Gallery, which left me feeling sad and a bit worn out, much like the materials that the artist employs. This is a compliment, actually. The space Althoff has created here—and it is a unified space, I'd say, not a collection of discrete objects—is part adolescent nightmare, part musty junk shop, part salon of detailed draftsmanship. It's less like entering the mind of a single artist than like stumbling upon a forgotten eccentric's attic. Each individual piece, in its occasional ugliness, calls out to the ugliness of the others; together they achieve a cancellation, a weird unity without an underlying narrative, as if Althoff is hosting an estate sale for a haunted house.

The low-ceilinged main gallery contains most of the paintings, drawings, and sculptures. (At the time of my visit, Althoff hadn't provided the gallery with a final checklist. He did later, with the caveat that certain works would be swapped out for others over the course of the exhibition.) The artist has painted the floor in industrial yellow, a color you'd find in a parking garage. A drawing, reflecting the same wide-awake yellow-and-orange template, depicts hippy kibbutz residents. Next to this is an unnerving painting in acrylic, tempera, and varnish on wool, *Untitled (a portrait of Nick Z)*, 2010. The titular man stares out at the viewer, his body obscured by rainbow swirls. The picture appears purposefully bedraggled, with its outmoded psychedelia and choice of materials. Ditto a pair of satanic-seeming dolls, an enormous rug installed in the center of the room, and another dark-hued painting that looks as if it had been rescued from the beginning of the 20th century and improperly restored.

These pieces are in stark contrast to Althoff's more detailed, finely rendered drawings, two of which depict Hasidic families. Maybe it's the influence of the room's overall Day-Glo hysteria, but the men in these look a bit satanic too, as do their children. Everything is infused with a certain dread. A simple colored-pencil drawing of a clerk and a woman in the midst of a commercial transaction in a store is drenched in foreboding. The unidentified assemblage on the floor below it—a few boxes, a plastic strawberry—loses its innocence in these surroundings. (When I returned for a second visit, that strawberry had mysteriously disappeared.) Althoff makes a virtue of cheapness, of wear, of decrepitude: plush hearts, brightly colored cups arranged on a shelf. For lack of another term, let's call this the handmade demonic. It's all a bit heartbreaking, like seeing a child's stuffed animal with its head ripped off. —S.I.

