

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Kimmelman, Michael, "Kai Althoff", *The New York Times*, Nov. 23, 2001.

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## ART IN REVIEW; Kai Althoff

By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

Anton Kern Gallery  
532 West 20th Street, Chelsea  
Through Dec. 22

To judge by his second solo show in New York, Kai Althoff is a peculiarly gifted artist with a wide imagination. He is 35, from Cologne, Germany. His show consists of 30 pictures and a sculpture made of stacked chairs and a metal sword. The sculpture is not interesting, but the pictures are. Some are paintings on paper mounted on canvas. Some are photographs of drawings. Some are drawings and photographs in resin. They are generally modestly sized, elaborately made but not fussy and purely abstract or with figures.

Several works began as colored drawings, artfully rough, which Mr. Althoff photographed. Then he encased the photographs in plastic. No signature is visible. There is an intentionally anonymous, unpolished, once-removed quality to much of the work, which simulates different sorts of touch. Various pictures look as if they might have come from thrift shops. (One of them did.) A few are cartoonish, like one of a wide-eyed boy with green hair lying down.

Another work, a faint drawing of Jesus carrying the cross, swims in a block of resin into which Mr. Althoff mixed seeds, which stud the surface. Elsewhere he poured paint into resin, making viscous clouds of bright color. The style of drawing shifts from Biedermeier delicacy to Die Brücke, with occasional nods toward early Hockney and Richard Hamilton.

Eclectic, in other words, not to mention the abstractions: thin pools of wavy colors, and Tinker Toy constructions of nervous lines. There is a vague implication of narrative. The images, interspersed with abstractions, include students in a restaurant; two soldiers beating a man; a young man, who seems to be dying in bed, attended by another man; two men and a woman with a bicycle. The era shifts from early 19th century to the 1960's. The mood shifts widely. The place seems to be Germany and the overtone sometimes spiritual. Different works thus have a quaint, nostalgic quality, again suggesting the secondhand.

What they all mean is mysterious. But the touch is deft, the use of materials clever and the attitude duly obsessive and darkly humorous. The best of these works are unconventionally eloquent, and the sum is greater than the parts. Sigmar Polke comes to mind, above all. MICHAEL KIMMELMAN