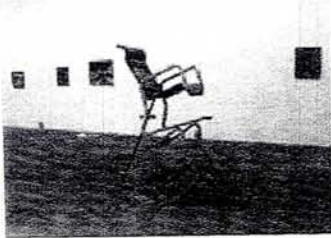


GLADSTONE GALLERY

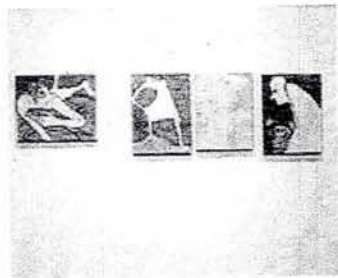
Saltz, Jerry, "History painting", *Village Voice* 69, 4. Dec. 2001

History Painting

by Jerry Saltz



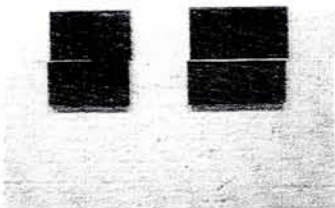
Kai Althoff
installation view with untitled mixed-
medium construction
at Anton Kern



Kai Althoff
Untitled drawings
2001
at Anton Kern



Kai Althoff
Untitled (students talking) and Untitled
(three men and a dog)
2001
at Anton Kern



Kai Althoff
untitled abstractions in watercolor and
lacquer
at Anton Kern

Kai Althoff, Nov. 8-Dec. 22, 2001, at Anton Kern, 532 West 32nd Street, New York, N.Y. 10001.

Unlike his 1997 debut at this gallery -- a generic installation of found objects, postcards, Plexiglas panels, paintings and a maze of gray particleboard -- Kai Althoff's second exhibition is as memorable as it is idiosyncratic. Even so, walking into it is disconcerting. Althoff has no trademark style and takes a lot of visual risks. His work can be ugly to look at. Drawings are encased in tacky plastic; the surface of his paintings are often broken and bumpy. The 30 smallish paintings and drawings -- which alternate between abstraction and figuration, and are hung in clusters -- initially disappear into the looming space of the gallery. Slowly, however, what starts as a fuzzy jumble turns into a tightly woven, if disturbing, exploration of karma and history.

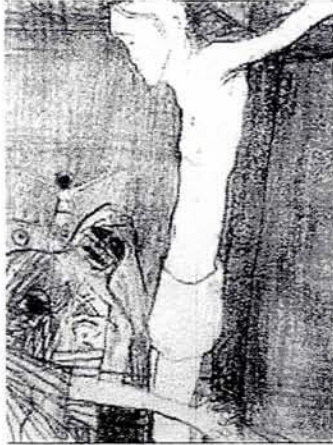
The one sophomoric objet trouvé sculpture (made of two chairs and a sword) doesn't spoil the proceedings. Using diverse materials such as resin, lacquer and varnish, Althoff makes paintings with a pearly, nervous touch. His colors are mostly murky; his outlook, ominous yet tender. A half-dozen abstract pieces function nicely as palate cleansers and mood setters. Among them are two so-so hazy rainbow paintings, a couple of Emile Nolde-ish looking landscapes and one muddy-colored slab I don't know what to make of.

The figurative works -- which are the best part of this show -- are peopled with androgynous, brooding males, who hug, harass and tryst with one another. Some are as cute as sock dolls, others are sinister. Violence erupts, skeletons and spirits appear, and Jesus crops up -- once in the midst of a vision, twice crucified, and once carrying his cross. History is alive in these paintings -- presented, not as Thomas Mann said in *The Magic Mountain*, "covered with historic mold," but in a pensive present tense. While place -- presumably the 35-year-old artist's native Germany -- feels fixed, time shifts incessantly. From canvas to canvas, a flawed but exquisite family tree arises, real and illusory ghosts of the fatherland emerge, and the frightful Nazi motto "Blut und Boden" (Blood and Soil) is given new meaning.

Althoff has a lyrical gift for depicting what Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, director of the 1980 epic *Our Hitler*, speaking of Germanness, called "the monstrosity from which we are made." Dealing in the cultish and something very male, Althoff uses nostalgia, fairy tale, irony and

sentimentality as levers to update the past. Foregoing the clean, urban, German cosmopolitanism of Gursky & Co., Althoff depicts a mysterious, demonic past.

In several works we see what might be the artist's great-great grandparents in Prussian World War I uniforms. In one untitled painting, a dead soldier is preyed upon by hounds and skeletons in a snowy Saxon forest. A young boy hides nearby. In another work, soldiers pry the boots off a dead victim. In essence, they're lost in what Mann called "the epoch when crisis shattered its way through life and consciousness and left a deep chasm behind."



Kai Althoff
Untitled (Jesus figure)
2001
at Anton Kern

In other paintings, we see that chasm in the faces of Althoff's characters, many of whom are being watched, as if the future were already wary of them. In a crimson-and-black stunner, a couple of young men with scars on their faces and dressed in boarding school outfits walk arm in arm under the eerie glare of a street lamp, as a menacing, Ensor-like figure leers at them. In another foreboding canvas, Althoff portrays two starving between-the-war types. One is in Alpine garb; the other cowers under sheets. Something bad is about to happen.

Chillingly, the World War II generation is absent, as if simply swallowed whole by history. But their children are here as '60s hippies, '70s club kids, '80s punks and '90s ravers. Althoff, who is self-taught and also a musician, still lives in his native Cologne. His art emerges from what feels like a very German context, which includes the specter of the Catholic Rhineland, the brothers Grimm, 19th-century German romanticism and sundry 20th-century expressionisms. Judging from the jutting angularity of his skinny figures, he seems to have absorbed much of Egon Schiele. Unlike Beuys, who believed art should "show its wound," or Kiefer, who turns history into myth, Althoff only alludes to feelings and is never operatic.

Nevertheless, Althoff isn't merely a regionalist. It's interesting to compare him to Americans like John Currin, whose show is up at Andrea Rosen, and Elizabeth Peyton, whose exhibition at Gavin Brown just closed. Like Currin, Althoff draws on historical sources. But Currin is more enamored of art history, and, lately, of himself. For the moment, he has veered into some buggy, self-referential, John-and-Yoko territory. Still, he toes a fabulously dangerous line between the conservative and the twisted, the academic and the out-there. Althoff also plays with devalued styles, like illustration and folk art, although he's never overtly autobiographical. For Peyton, history has always been in the air of her work, while love is in its blood. Her art is steeped in a coltish eroticism, something at once personal and pop. Althoff is the exact opposite: Pop is incidental, love is in the air, and history is in the blood. He doesn't separate dominance and submission, barbarism and sex. Which may connect him to someone like Collier Schorr, whose intense photographs of contemporary German youths in Wehrmacht uniforms are on view at 303 Gallery. Both Schorr and Althoff present shadowy images that evoke historic schizophrenia, male fragility and the return of the repressed.