

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Everitt Howe, David, "Kai Althoff," *Flash Art*, July-September 2011

## KAI ALTHOFF GLADSTONE - NEW YORK



Kai Althoff's disorienting first New York solo exhibition at Gladstone rids the gallery of its crisp white walls and cavernous rooms. In their place is a small side space marked by a dramatically lowered ceiling. Both it and the floor are painted in a sharp mustard yellow, emphasizing just how close it is to your head. Moreover, as its edges are lined by very bright, traditional gallery lighting, the almost cluttered hanging of drawings, paintings, sculpture and tufted rug are all tinted a sickly hue.

This seems very appropriate for Althoff's eclectic two-dimensional work, which depicts somewhat grotesque, figurative permutations of man and animal similar to primitivist painting;

or conversely, manic crowd scenes evocative of Edvard Munch or Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. In Althoff's intensely red and yellow drawing *Untitled (Kibbutzim)* (2008-09), a vehicle overloaded with luggage is so surrounded by accumulations of people and animals it slips into abstraction. In *Untitled* (2010), a Hasidic man smiles disconcertingly, while behind him a tangled mass of pedestrians and shopping carts create a scene not so unlike Kirchner's *Strassenbilder* Berlin streetscapes pre-World War I. This was a time when rapid modernization began its steady urban assault on the human sensorium. As Susan Buck-Morss insightfully put it, "In industrial production [is] no less than modern warfare, in street crowds and erotic encounters... shock is the very essence of modern experience."

It's no surprise then that Althoff makes such sensations — as well as the commodity culture that carries it — absurdly literal. While the two-dimensional works tend to pastiche German Expressionism and other styles, the installation's almost D.I.Y. craftsmanship is bizarre and affective. For *Untitled* (2010), two thin, life-size figures stand beside a tall shelf containing

dozens of painted plaster coffee mugs. And most delightfully rude is the installation at the end of a red-curtained passageway, which features a cushioned figure — seemingly spit out or deflated by a bendy air conditioning vent — flattened into a pile of tacky fabric and fur clothing. Rude indeed, is the way Althoff's "Punkt, Absatz, Blüml!" metastasizes its decor into trippy cartoonishness.

David Everitt Howe



KAI ALTHOFF, "Punkt, Absatz, Blüml! (period, paragraph, Blüml!)," installation views at Gladstone, New York, 2011. © Kai Althoff. Courtesy Gladstone, New York/Brussels.