GLADSTONE GALLERY

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Art in Review

Nick Z. and Kai Althoff

We Are Better Friends for It Gladstone Gallery 515 West 24th Street, Chelsea Through June 16

The artist-trashed gallery space is a familiar convention. It is often seen as rebellion against the white-box market system, yet it seems equally credible when interpreted as a different kind of assault: the assertion of an implicitly male artistic will over a passive, implicitly female receptacle.

The freewheeling collaboration of the German painter/musician/installation artist Kai Althoff and Nick Z., a former graffiti artist from Brooklyn, splits the difference between these two interpretations. Their multimedia environment turns the entire gallery into a kind of warm, fuzzy but trashy space that might have been concocted by overactive teenage boys with contrasting artistic sensibilities. With a startlingly beautiful progression of colors, images, materials and tableaus both large and small, it ruminates on the tensions between art and life, museum and street, and most of all parent and child, with a gritty yet ethereal beauty.

Mr. Althoff alternates between Expressionist grotesques, blood red abstractions and Victorian dandies, mostly on canvas and paper, but also in a dazzling installation involving a towering but sylphlike woman surrounded by a red grid structure.

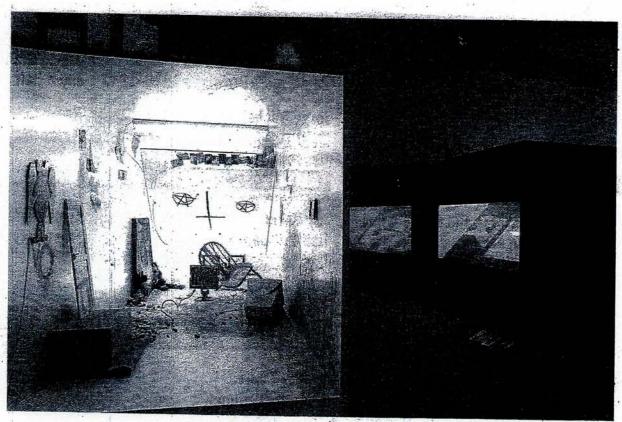
Nick Z. specializes in hieroglyphic figures and faces (some of them printed, if you look closely) and slogans on wall, paper and notepaper. Accompanied by assorted objects (both found and made) and arrangements, the artists' contrasting efforts wend their way through the gallery, where lowered lights and swathings of carpet create the effect of an atmospheric cave.

The dimness is punctuated by three well-lighted containers in which artful messes and improvised furnishings suggest a studio (splattered with makeup, not paint), crash pad and child's bedroom.

But these stark white interiors also stand out from the gloom like canvases, inviting you to consider everything on view in two and three dimensions, as both form and narrative. Vitrines fronted with tinted plexiglass and containing everything from piles of cereal and an Edward Scissorshands hand to drawings, mediate between the light and the dark and parody museum displays.

The suggested domiciles here form a narrative of their own, starting with a little hovel of metal and cinderblock inhabited by a skeleton and ending behind a screen in the back space, where an antique doll sits on a white loveseat attended by an antique male store dummy. The poster on the wall behind them is not reassuring: it advertises a "Muttershulungskurs" or "Mother Training Course."

ROBERTA SMITH



A view of the installation "We Are Better Friends for It," by Kai Althoff and Nick Z., at Gladstone Gallery.