

OPENINGS

Richard Aldrich

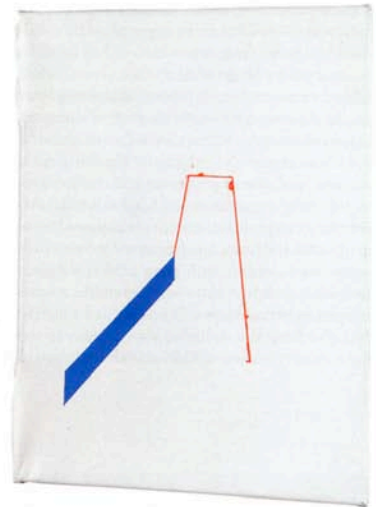
SCOTT ROTHKOPF

RICHARD ALDRICH hates being called ironic or a slacker. The fact that critics have lately called him both, without any air of opprobrium, may say more about the critical winds encircling recent abstract painting than it does about his disparate and disarming canvases—most “nonobjective” in the old-fashioned sense, some scrawled with graffiti or collaged with media scavengings, a few overtly depictive. Such modest multifariousness invites us to imagine that Aldrich is involved in a kind of authorial gamesmanship, and it is comforting to read jokey gestures like gluing almonds to a painting or turning a canvas into a face as cunning ploys. He can’t really be *serious* or, worse, trying too hard. Irony and insouciance are easy critical hedges against charges of unfashionable earnestness or latter-day formal fiddling. Such poses make paintings (or their beholders) seem canny or “relevant,” as can the computer, the silk screen, and the photograph, to say nothing of bold-faced ineptitude. Yet by now a winking abstraction can be just as academic as a sincere one can, and Aldrich insistently resists the former path. He recasts jaded feints as quizzical discoveries, finding in shopworn signs of ending a place from which to begin.

Aldrich arrived at his ambling painterly practice in an appropriately roundabout way. After studying art and philosophy in college, he moved to New York in 1999 and spent several years making text-based drawings and penning Calvinesque poems and essays, which he sometimes published pseudonymously in ads in *Zing* magazine. Experiments in electronic music soon followed with Hurray, a quartet that included Peter Mandradjjeff, Zak Prekop, and Josh Brand. Although the group comprised fellow artists and even exhibited works collectively in a couple of galleries, Aldrich insists it was not an art-band but a band-band, which released a few records and gained cred on the music scene. The alternately jarring and meandering sounds of mishandled guitars and amplifiers suggest a Cagean bent that would inform, though grow more disciplined in, the paintings Aldrich began making around 2003 in a dirt-floored basement studio. They were small by necessity, since he could just barely stand up in the space, and he had to paint them flat on a table or resting on his lap—a not insignificant detail given their intimate tabular surfaces and the sense they convey of having been physically handled.

Aldrich often works on gessoed panels with a mixture of oil paint, mineral spirits, and wax, which he lays on with a brush or palette knife. The combination of the resistant ground and viscous alloy registers his short hesitant strokes with tender congealed precision. His larger and breezier canvases have been compared to Philip Guston’s transitional pictures from the mid-1960s (and also sometimes evoke Per

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Opposite page: Richard Aldrich, *Looking with Mirror Apparatus*, 2008, oil, wax, Plexiglas, mirror on cut linen, 84 x 58". This page, from left: Richard Aldrich, *Futuristic Painting*, 2005, flashe paint on panel, 16 x 12". Richard Aldrich, *Untitled (Night Time Sky)*, 2007-2008, oil, wax, crayon on panel, 13 1/2 x 10 1/2". Richard Aldrich, *Untitled*, 2006, oil and wax on shaped canvas, 16 1/2 x 12 1/2".

Kirkeby or Joan Mitchell), but Aldrich's touch is generally closer to Guston's nervous accretions of the previous decade. There is more curiosity than certainty in Aldrich's hand, which manages to coax a kind of quivering elegance from otherwise irresolute daubings. Almost paradoxically, however, his tentative marks unspool within broader campaigns of greater risk and gusto. He digs and scratches into his surfaces, builds them up and wipes them down. *Untitled (Night Time Sky)*, 2007-2008, for example, is a perplexing palimpsest of starchy strata, gaps, and occlusions. In many paintings, color reverberates not through the layering of transparent veils but via delicate scumbling or tremulous fissures between abutting and overlapping opaque passages, a quality strangely reminiscent of the Nabis, and of Vuillard in particular. The muted tertiary palette calls to mind color names from a mail-order fashion catalogue—charcoal and sage, bisque and butter—but the mix feels vaguely out of season. Aldrich's compositional sensibility draws him toward the margins or center of a painting—but rarely both at once—often leaving broad expanses of naked canvas

in between. The uninflected emptiness is surprising and a little unnerving, forcing an awkward disconnect between real and pictorial space. The disposition of activity at the perimeter can make it seem that Aldrich is grasping to get ahold of a painting by its edges, but when he's dithering around the middle, he seems to forget the rest of the canvas is even there.

Although mostly abstract, Aldrich's paintings betray a distinctly literary sensibility, even as he targets what he has called the essential "unwordliness of experience." Snippets of text and random words—UFO, the numeral 4—appear as decals or pencil scrawls, while lines incised with the back of a brush suggest writing once removed. Taciturn pictures carry evocative and ungainly verbal appendages in the form of elliptical press releases or titles like *Large Obsessed with Hector Guimard*, 2008, a nod to the architect of Paris's Art Nouveau metro stations, or *If I Paint Crowned I've Had It, Got Me*, 2008, a telling paraphrase of Cézanne explaining he would be ruined if he tried to paint the "crowned" effect of a still life rather than the thing itself. Many of Aldrich's pictures draw on a personal backstory,

sometimes alluded to directly in titles, as in *Treib Painting*, 2007 (named for his friend the artist Patricia Treib), and sometimes only halfway hinted at, as in *Whistler's Mother*, 2008 (which contains postcards of the Frick's Whistlers, as well as an unsigned doodle by Treib). Yet even when language is held at bay, as most of the time it is, Aldrich pursues a below-the-radar semiotic play. *Stripe Painting on a Stripe Painting*, 2007-2008, is covered with evenly spaced green and white stripes, except for an extremely narrow band of alternating yellow and blue at the left edge. These additional stripes may be the painting on top, or it could be the other way around, just as the phrase *stripe painting* could name an object or an action. Aldrich's kinky conceptual bracketing of his activity in relation to its support is emphasized by all those yawning margins, which either disappear or assert themselves depending on whether we're looking at the painting as an image or a thing.

Aldrich's inquisitive approach to his paintings extends both to the way they come to occupy a space and to the space from which they come. His work does not depict the life of the studio but

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embodies it directly, reconstituting the books, postcards, records, and junk he happens to have lying around. A failed attempt at a jury-rigged curtain or a page of poetry might wind up on a canvas, while a collaged element might get ripped off, leaving behind a frayed paper scar. He builds his small Masonite supports from scratch and has their edges trimmed by a guy in Brooklyn with a table saw. The leftover slats may turn up slathered with paint and stuck to a canvas; the triangular remnants of hand-mitered corners become toothy protuberances or get jammed between the stretcher and linen, creating a new geometry to be diagrammed and explored. These off-kilter supports don't seem designed and constructed like so many examples from the '60s and '70s, whether by Elizabeth Murray or Peter Young. Rather, they evince a scrappy, improvisatory intensity. Aldrich is closer in spirit to

Robert Rauschenberg and Dieter Roth, who let little go to waste, or to the country butcher who uses every last piece of the pig. Even an old red strip of fabric can get glued to the bottom of a canvas, turning the whole into an expressionless face. There should be something embarrassing about such goofy gambits, like calling a colorful painting *Pretty* or embellishing a cartoonish caped figure with three painted slats, but Aldrich nimbly navigates the line between coy and guileless, smart-alecky and dumb.

The blithe élan of some of these canvases is, of course, what has led critics to applaud Aldrich's "slack virtuosity" or "slackerish cosmopolitanism," but in both cases the noun is more apt than its modifier. Aldrich may approach the debonair nonchalance of a Sergej Jensen or Michael Krebber, yet he tends more toward optimistic diligence than languid refusal.

His work's slipshod, lackadaisical vibe is clearly something of a bluff. He is a master of *sprezzatura*. Indeed, close attention reveals that even Aldrich's most apparently offhand pictures are rarely done *alla prima*. Wan pencil lines lurk behind casual strokes, betraying a level of premeditation at odds with such nondescript noodling. More serial than aleatory, the frequent reevaluation of motifs from one canvas to the next incites a painterly telephone game of zooming, cropping, and translation wherein abstract forms become conventionalized signs that feel both invented and observed. A given work's material history is often quite different from what we initially suppose, though counterarguments are left hiding in plain sight. A suite of black daubs may look haphazard, for instance, yet their beguiling impasto suggests that they were first painted on a different support and then pressed



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while still wet against the surface in question. Standing before *Looking with Mirror Apparatus*, 2008, one imagines that Aldrich excised a large swath of canvas from a simple figure painting, but the streaks and drips on the exposed stretcher bars reveal that the figure was actually painted after Aldrich's assault. Sometimes a hole can improve an unsatisfactory passage of painting, and sometimes a passage of painting can improve an unsatisfactory hole.

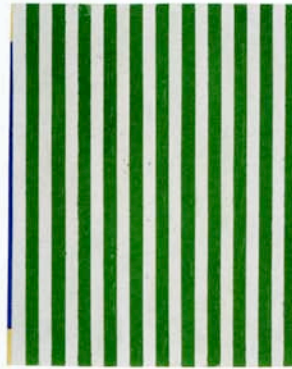
When I first saw a group of Aldrich's canvases I was a bit resistant to—and even annoyed by—what he gamely called this “funny business,” the parts of his paintings that were removed or added to or otherwise tarted up. I worried that they were a conceptual crutch, a brainy cloak to cover an unmistakable painterly talent, which has hardly been the most prized artistic attribute of the past fifty years. Such gestures,

after all, no longer retain the radical charge they had when Lucio Fontana first took a knife to a painting and Jasper Johns wedged two balls inside one, or when legions of artists from the '60s through the '90s further assailed the picture plane's once taut, orthogonal bounds. By now, we all know how little paint it takes to make a painting, and that there are stretcher bars (and, *gasp*, a wall!) lurking behind the canvas. A young artist could be vaguely disappointed that somebody beat him to the undiscovered country unfolding behind—and sometimes before—the picture window, or he could roll on in and pitch a makeshift tent.

In Aldrich's hands, all the cutting, stretching, and collaging are not so much operations or strategies or ends unto themselves. Rather, they are yet more tools in the resourceful painter's arsenal, just like the different kinds of paint he uses, and the instruments

with which he applies them, and the gunk he mixes in. Aldrich's paintings wear their disfigurement easily, without a feeling of brainy exposition or true bodily harm. Their sense of humble panache lies precisely in the way aggressive acts can cohabit with milder ones while still retaining a lively renegade charge. Indeed, Aldrich's most radical proposition may be his commitment to nudging painting forward via a combination of inquisitive tinkering and truculent gestures that would otherwise have left it undone. This does not make for an ahistorical, reactionary enterprise or for an unsophisticated one. If anything, his paintings abrade the false dichotomy between innocence and understanding. The possibilities for painting lie all around us, he suggests; the trick is knowing how to frame the choice. □

SCOTT ROTHKOPF IS A SENIOR EDITOR OF ARTFORUM.



Opposite page, from left: Richard Aldrich, *Untitled (Wouldn't You Miss Me?)*, 2006, collage on linen, 84 x 58". Richard Aldrich, *Untitled (P)*, 2007–2008, oil and wax on panel, 13 1/2 x 10 1/2". Richard Aldrich, *Untitled*, 2008, oil and wax on panel, 14 x 10 1/2". This page, from left: Richard Aldrich, *Figure with Cape*, 2008, oil, wax, wood on linen, 84 x 58". Richard Aldrich, *Stripe Painting on a Stripe Painting*, 2007–2008, oil and wax on panel, 14 x 11". Richard Aldrich, *Pretty*, 2007, oil and wax on panel, 14 1/2 x 11 1/2".