

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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Art

The Gallery Crashers

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The big, bubble-strutting graffiti tag just inside the door at Barbara Gladstone is largely illegible. That's cool: Its jangly, neon forms are meant to be seen more than read. And so it goes with the scrappy, sprawling, wildly theatrical basement playhouse environment filling all of the gallery's four rooms: The decidedly literary mind behind this extravaganza invites us to look before trying to read. And as you look, the enigmas multiply. For instance, instead of press releases on the front desk, you'll find a large jar of cigarettes marked "25 cents"—nothing giving away the artist's identity or the show's title. It's a stage without a script.

It took Kai Althoff, the internationally known, Cologne-based German artist, and his Brooklynite collaborator, graffiti artist Nick Z, two weeks to install "We Are Better Friends for It," this ambitious display of painting, video, sculpture, drawing, and assemblage. Many areas and moments within the show live up to that ambition, but it is marred in places by an over-reliance on clichéd, street-art hipsterism. Furthermore, although much of the installation is not attributable, it seems that Nick Z—who does sign his drawings—bears the brunt of responsibility for the show's less engaging aspects.

Opposite the entryway hang two pictures that demonstrate how different these artists are, and what a potentially clunky mind-meld they have attempted. On the left is a shrapnel-shaped painting in Althoff's typically expressionist manner depicting two pink-skinned men fighting, their hands at each other's throats. (An ominous beginning to a collaborative show?) Elements of the yellow room in which the men stand—such as the triangles on the floor and the acute angle of the corner—cannily rhyme with, and accentuate, the painting's eccentric contours. The framed drawing next to it, by Nick Z, features a pillow-shaped, pigeon-toed figure with stubby arms. It's a variation on a character he repeats throughout the installation, one closely related to figures by other "outsiders" come in from the cold, like Barry McGee and Eddie Martinez.

The two men have transformed the gallery into a sort of dystopian clubhouse built around themes from childhood and adolescence. You'll find references to devil worship and the witches' Sabbath; "Devil Be Gone" is scrawled in red ink near the entrance. For the most part, the Satanism here is of the loner death-metal, I'm-going-to-shoot-my-classmates variety, perhaps as interpreted by Hollywood. In an adjacent room, a video montage—by Nick Z—from the horror flick *Children of the Corn* plays on two walls high in the corner, attended by an assortment of diminutive, broken chairs awaiting a grade-school audience.

In the back, the artists have squeezed three huge, nearly shipping-size containers in metallic blue, red, and maroon. They've crashed two of these containers through a wall, as if a train had run off its tracks and into a building; one of the most visually exciting aspects of the installation is the enormous tear in the drywall revealing the entrance to the containers. Unfortunately, their interiors look like idealized children's bedrooms, if the idealizers are skate rats: a clown spray-painted on the white walls; lots of graffiti; pieces of pink fabric; two pairs of yellow Nike high-tops; and Nick Z's

curious egg dude, a pastiche of a child's grade-school doodle, monotonously repeated on taped-up drawings. Slightly more finished versions, in frames, line the wall opposite the containers. A third container—with its pile of smashed bottles, makeup spattered over a destroyed PC, its broken furniture, painted upside-down cross, and five-pointed stars—seems more grown up, perhaps the hideaway of an especially messy glue-huffing teen. These container interiors are the weakest parts of the show, and because so many of Nick Z's puerile drawings cluster in and around them, one tends to ascribe the bad patches to him.

The majority of Althoff's paintings here line the walls of the final room, which is presided over by a tall female puppet in a pink gown standing within an enclosure of red-wire boxes resembling a structure by the late minimalist Sol LeWitt. Elsewhere in the room, an eerie little-girl doll sits on a white couch next to a standing, antique dress manikin, near a toy car on a table between two chairs, and a freestanding, wall-like sculpture draped in red and yellow nylon strips weighted down by painted chocolate eggs. However, all of this—the video room, the containers, the shack, the props from Grandma's attic—would be no more than a lifeless and decaying diorama without the activating force of Althoff's paintings, which are impressively varied, some abstract, some representational in a range of expressionist styles. There is a dynamic interplay between these elements: The environments function as settings for the presentation of the paintings and, crucially, as 3-D extensions of the moods and concerns enacted on the canvas; while conversely, the paintings fill out the overall set design. One canvas depicts doctors and, presumably, family members attending to a child in her sick bed. You're almost led to imagine the phantasmagoria around you as a part of her feverish fantasies. A nearby drawing conjures a sleeper under a blanket dreaming of a birdcage, a soldier smoking, a witch or sorceress, a pirate, and an old sick man in a robe. Unfinished paintings, slashed and ripped and painted over in red, punctuate the spaces between finished works. In this impressive, if uneven, drama, even abandoned ideas have roles to play.