

# ARTFORUM

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

## Richard Aldrich BORTOLAMI

To judge from the meandering short story, fragmented catalogue essay, and two press releases (both with a distinctly self-penned feel) that accompanied Richard Aldrich's first solo exhibition at Bortolami, his is the kind of art that tends to attract not explication exactly, but rather a variety of more or less experimental attempts at verbal equivalency. Just as Aldrich's work veers from oil-on-canvas painting to mixed-media collage, and from hermetic abstraction to quirky part-figuration (with occasional textual and *objet trouvé* interjections), so the interpretive efforts that shadow it run the stylistic gamut.

While this tendency has its frustrations (sometimes one pines for the surety of *Chicago* style), it also recommends Aldrich to the more active viewer. Don't seek resolution here, it seems to warn, much less clearly definable ideas. The artist himself formulates this elusiveness in terms of, among other things, "the psychedelic," by which he seems to mean that art exists (or should exist) in a unique mental space. (He certainly doesn't intend it in the popular sense of decorative intricacy or high-key color; his compositions can be audaciously bare-bones, while his palette tends toward the autumnal.)

The first painting here, *Untitled (Large)*, 2008, certainly exhibits an introspective cast. Dark, irregular shapes float on a field of muddy gray-brown, vaguely suggesting a primitive map or even a stylized figure. Hung alone and facing Bortolami's storefront window, it made for an arguably rather forbidding introduction: a painting that stubbornly refused to seduce. But, of course,

*Untitled (Large)* is all the more memorable for its initial reticence; Aldrich's work has a cumulative impact, and the picture invited a different kind of attention on the way out of the gallery than it did on the way in, even if its place (or the place of any of the works here) within an overarching aesthetic proved tough to isolate.

It would do Aldrich a disservice to call him a painter's painter—he's too mercurial for that—but homage abounds in these works, even when, thematically speaking, they seem to refer to nothing outside themselves. While it's far from the works' *raison d'être*, this art-historical acknowledgment does serve a purpose, nourishing the project by rooting it in identifiable influence. The titles of *Whistlerian* (a patchwork of translucent browns, reds, yellows, and blues) and *Whistler's Mother* (a perishable collage of museum-store postcards and ivory paper) (both 2008) state their case outright, but elsewhere the nods to Robert

Ryman, Georg Herold, and especially Robert Rauschenberg are inscribed purely within the work itself.

If this mix sounds like a hodgepodge, it doesn't appear that way, such is the lightness of Aldrich's touch. In the paired *Treib Painting* and *Large Treib Painting* (both 2008), for example, he presents an entertaining variation on Rauschenberg's separated-at-birth faux-spontaneous canvases *Factum I* and *Factum II* (both 1957), reproducing the smaller *Treib* at larger scale and flattening its impasto to conjure up a mocking doppelgänger. *Bed*, 2008, meanwhile, riffs on

Rauschenberg's work of the same title from 1955, replacing the multi-colored quilt of the original with two bits of dark green cloth, bound roughly together with four wooden splinters. Really, the work is as close to one of Gedi Sibony's unadorned sculptural offcuts as it is to the reluctant Pop master's decorated Combines. That Aldrich's project evokes such diverse touchstones while occupying a territory all its own is a testament to the preternaturally confident and fundamentally exploratory nature of his practice.

—Michael Wilson

Richard Aldrich, *Untitled (Large)*, 2008, oil, wax, and matte medium on linen, 84 x 58".

