

Richard Aldrich

by Nora Griffin

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Richard Aldrich, "Looking," 2008. Oil and wax on canvas, 36 × 24 inches.; 91.4 × 61 cm; Inv# RA3144

Richard Aldrich's solo exhibit of twenty paintings at Bortolami presents a duel between the artist's heavy sensibility and a selection of light experiments in abstract painting. The show consists of ten large paintings (all 84" x 58") and ten small ones on linen and panel that have the low-key presence of trial studies for the larger works. Aldrich brings together traditional painting materials (linen, oil paint and wax) with an assemblage aesthetic that sufficiently cools the blood of both mediums. The painting that opens the show, "Untitled (Large)" (2008), is a sizeable canvas of loosely realized dark gray shapes

on a molting light gray ground. The overall effect, seen from a distance, resembles Philip Guston's 1950s abstractions, a charged space of grays and pinks. However, a closer inspection of Aldrich's painting flattens the work before the eye. The physicality of the oil paint and gesture is numbed and stabilized. This is a feeling that surfaces in front of many of Aldrich's paintings—an over-washed dullness, as if the paintings were copies made from copies.

In many of Aldrich's paintings, the grand scale of Abstract Expressionism and the ensuing post-modernist takes on the genre come together as awkward bedfellows. If Robert Rauschenberg's "Bed" (1955) is a hot-blooded artwork, radiating the pathos and ebullience that spring from the physical dimension of painting, then Aldrich's "Bed" (2008) is a closed system, cool, detached and wry. Like a remix of a classic rock track, the new "Bed" evokes memories of the past while jolting us firmly into the present. The work is composed of stretched linen with two black cloth rectangles held together by small pieces of wood that function as a kind of primitive, bone-like clasp. The bed looks clean, uninviting and fabricated, coming across as a painting's Halloween costume of Minimalism.

Like painter Josh Smith, Aldrich moves perilously close to a child's play vision of abstraction. But unlike Smith, the palette is never overextended into a muddy common hue. Aldrich's paintings are oddly meticulous, always pushing themselves forward to be blessed with the glow of meaning. In his jive-talk press release for the show, the artist speaks to the unbound dynamic between artist, artwork and viewer. "The mental space of the reconstructing of artworks into meaning is the psychedelic." Aldrich's use of "psychedelic," a word that has now been thoroughly transfigured into a term of fashion, returns it to its metaphysical origins as a 1960s code word. He imagines a form of the psychedelic that is not flamboyant or marked by recognizable motifs, but is about the alchemy of meaning, the trip that we embark on when we enter a gallery. It is a refreshing idea to read in a press release and creates a challenge to see each painting in line with an ad-hoc visionary tract.

The physical aspect of vision is directly addressed by the play of scale and focus in Aldrich's work. "Treib Painting" and "Large Treib Painting" (both 2008) are virtually the same piece, created in scale ratio to one another. A wash of beige closes in on a layered, colorful interior world. A white squiggle marks off the inside from the outside, like a division of cells under a glass slide. Aldrich's small paintings teeter on figuration, almost as if they are not entirely secure in their natural abstract state. "Untitled (Night Time Sky)" (2007-08), a wax and oil panel, coalesces its forms into a cluster of floating cherries in a sea of green and cerulean blue. "Untitled (destijl)" (2006-08) is a green-gray spider shape held against a black background, bringing to mind Georg Baselitz's rabid animal forms.

"If I Paint Crowned I've Had It, Got Me" (2008), is a painting made from stretched linen that has been carefully cut to reveal a smooth stretcher bar skeleton. The action of cutting the linen, a violent gesture in the hands of Lucio Fontana or subversively playful in Dana Schutz's recent paintings, is here an anatomically precise motion. Traces of paint and

wax cover the wood, the visible “blood” from the painting’s operation. Like “Bed,” there is a smooth and stable cleanliness to the artwork that is difficult to shake off. The enigmatic title refers to the painter’s “crown,” a heroic accessory evoked in Aldrich’s “Figure with Cape,” (2008) a shakily painted outline of a caped matador with three wooden sticks attached to the canvas surface. The effect of both works is tremulous and edgily defiant, like a child playing make-believe.

“Looking” (2008) is a lumpy potato-like head and black shoulders in semi-profile that evokes the strange sadness of Guston’s smoking, eyeball-staring heads. In this instance the signature flat paint application seems oddly appropriate to the subject and doesn’t come across as a winking put-on. The parent-sized version of “Looking,” called “Looking with Mirror Apparatus,” recreates the same head and shoulders, but bisects the image with a cut in the canvas. To further add to the mystery, a little mirror has now been attached to the stretcher spine, awkwardly positioned to reflect the legs of the viewer. Just when we thought we had come to terms with the abstract-figurative, formalist agenda of “Looking,” Aldrich throws us into a conversation with the work’s bizarre relative. “Looking with Mirror Apparatus” brings us back to the elusive “psychedelic” question of meaning, pleasure and imagination. The head is now painted a littler rougher, with drips coming off the brown dome suggesting tears or sweat. The quickness of the painting is matched by the careful cutting of the linen to reveal the wooden stretcher bar and the white gallery wall behind. The placement of a mirror into the world of the artwork, a grand gesture for any painter, is for Aldrich tantamount to playing a joker card, asking us to regard his visionary impulse as an afterthought, an apologetics of the studio. And if you attempt to contemplate your reflection, as this viewer did, you will have to be on your knees to do so, a gesture of prayer before a painted deity who keeps his face forever turned away.