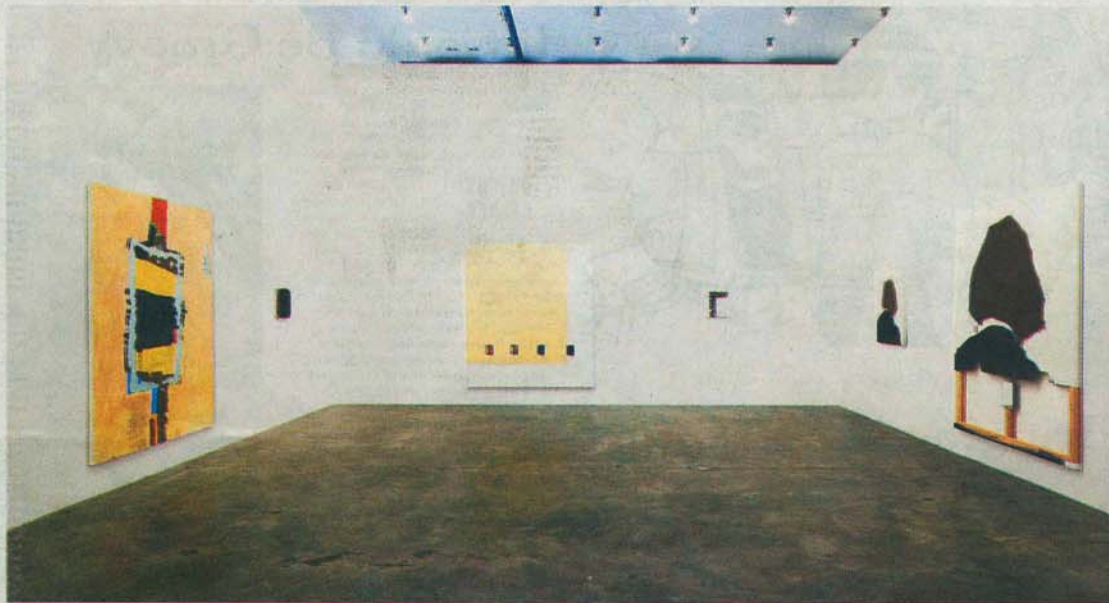


Art in Review



RICHARD ALDRICH/BORTOLAMI GALLERY

Invoking Rauschenberg and Whistler, polar opposites: works by Richard Aldrich at the Bortolami Gallery in Chelsea.

Richard Aldrich

Bortolami
510 West 25th Street, Chelsea
Through Feb. 28

Richard Aldrich's third solo show in New York is his first in one of Chelsea's cavernous spaces. Its 20 paintings vary greatly in size, material and technique. They veer between large and small, abstract and sort of representational, and Romantic and Minimal. They go from thickly painted to nearly bare to excised canvas with exposed stretchers. It is clear that beyond the vertical rectangular format Mr. Aldrich does not intend to limit his options anytime soon.

And yet his work is very much of a piece. Whether severely attenuated or slyly voluptuous, it has its own style — a combination of understated bravado, brinksmanship and delicacy that amounts to a slackerish cosmopolitanism. Each work isolates some aspect of the process of making, looking at or exhibiting painting, or refers to the history of painting. You are invited to think outside the medium, sometimes with poetic input from a work's title.

One work is a legible rendering of a man's head and shoulders seen from the back (despite being mostly a brown blob surmounting a black one) and titled "Looking." A larger version of the same painting, with part of the canvas cut away and a mirror affixed to the exposed stretcher, is titled "Looking With Mirror Apparatus." Across from these hang two versions of a more conventionally decorative work, "Treib Painting" and "Large Treib Painting." The larger copy is a softer, smoothed-out rendition of the smaller original; their images are abstract but suggest an easel.

In another work bare canvas has been cut away to reveal the thick stretcher bars; the gaps are accented with three long, ultra-thin strips of wood daubed with oil and wax that boil down image and support to a fragile, nearly invisible essence. The work's title is "If I Paint Crowned I've Had It Got Me," which conveys a certain fear of the effects of artistic success. An irritatingly sparse painting exposes a different kind of hazard. It features an enormous spindly letter C rendered in striped shirt fabric; tiny letters complete the word, which is echoed in the title, "Coward Painting."

This is a very smart, suave, nerdy show. Rauschenberg and Whistler — possible opposites — are invoked. The surface of "Whistler's Mother" has just four large sheets of buff paper glued to its surface and, near the bottom, four small reproductions of full-length portraits by Whistler that are all in the Frick Collection. Shapes repeat among certain paintings. There's a lot to look at, and sometimes Mr. Aldrich just lets himself go, covering a canvas with thick blocky strokes of color, as in "Untitled (Night Time Sky)," which seems to have cherries for stars.

ROBERTA SMITH