

GLADSTONE

Lucy Davies, "Kai Althoff goes with Bernard Leach review, Whitechapel Gallery: never mind what it all means – just go with it," *The Telegraph*, January 8, 2020

The Telegraph

Kai Althoff goes with Bernard Leach review, Whitechapel Gallery: never mind what it all means – just go with it

The Whitechapel reopens with a show that's a triumph of misdirection - this art will forever be wriggling away from you, just out of reach

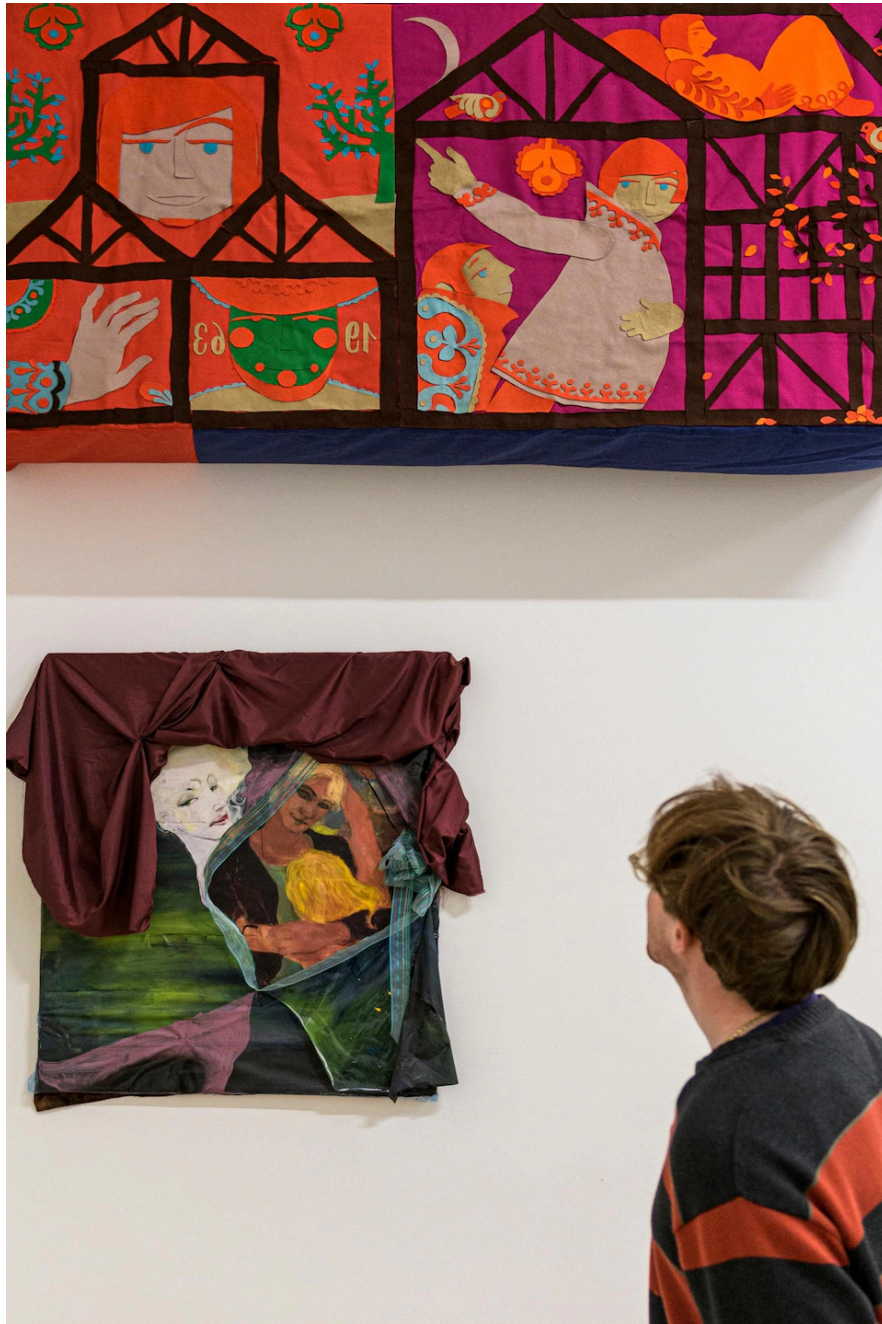


One doesn't so much walk, as lower oneself into a Kai Althoff exhibition – as you might submerge your body into an unknown and not altogether friendly sea. The German artist, who lives in New York, likes to create rich, strange and precisely honed environments in which to display his work. To step inside one is to be transported to a world in which only his rules apply, and it is as dreamlike as it is disarming.

For his new exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery in London's East End (the gallery's first new show since reopening in the summer), Althoff has paired paintings and drawings he has made over the past 50 years with works by the Edwardian ceramicist Bernard Leach, considered the progenitor of British studio pottery, and a figure for whom the 54-year-old Althoff says he nurtures a "deeply rooted love".

The opportunity to reflect on possible harmonies or a likemindedness between the two artists is an interesting, intentionally provocative one. Though Althoff has previously suggested that his pictures are vessels of a sort, the link between the two men is better understood in terms of their joint interest in folklore and decoration, though, to be honest, it is hard to see even that in the Whitechapel presentation, because Leach is kept wholly out of sight until you reach the final, chancel-like room.

We begin with max-Althoff, in a large gallery containing an “intuitively arranged” selection of his paintings and drawings. Dominating it all is a vast membrane of transparent plastic sheeting, suspended just above head height, which feels – I imagine – like being trapped underwater in a frozen lake. It is beautiful though. Look up, and you’ll see that the scratched and muddy surface is covered with leaves, winged sycamore fruit and other woody detritus acquired during the sheeting’s months-long gestation in Broxbourne Woods, Hertfordshire. (The drowning scene in the film *Don’t Look Now* was filmed there, which only adds to the generally threatening air.)



Kai Althoff goes with Bernard Leach at the Whitechapel Gallery, London

Althoff’s work resists description, not least because he works in a dizzying array of styles and mediums. The pictures rustle with folklore, religion (particularly Catholicism), fairy-tales (of the darker variety), death, invalidism, bogeymen, pigs, birds, lost children, jackbooted thugs, but also tower blocks and corduroy trousers and Tudor-bethan houses. It’s life, but life filtered through memory, or dreams: dangerous-seeming and tasty and exuberant all at the same time.

At first, I found the lack of titles or dates for any of the pictures incredibly frustrating. Althoff is famously disdainful of interpretations of his work, and purposely curbs, where he can, anything that might prompt you to try. But once you simply submit to the whole, understanding it as a triumph of misdirection that will forever be wriggling away from you, forever just out of reach, its colour and pattern and exquisite draughtsmanship offer something else: a chance to lose yourself in another world entirely, and a glorious one at that.

From October 7 until Jan 10. Details: whitechapelgallery.org