

## BORDERCROSSINGS

# Sweetened with Beauty

## An Interview with Kai Althoff

Interview by Robert Enright and Meeka Walsh  
Introduction by Meeka Walsh

**W**e inhabit an ether now in this time of plague, more profoundly than ever. We sleepwalk in a state of semi-consciousness, the sole gift of the pandemic; half awake, half drugged. The future suspended, we can go back to the indeterminate space of memory, we can abide in the present or we can flicker like a lighted wick, bending up and back. My sense is, this is a congenial and familiar state for Kai Althoff.

The interview that follows was prompted by the exhibition at Whitechapel, "Kai Althoff goes with Bernard Leach," in tandem with our own long-standing interest in the artist's work. We reviewed his exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 2008, and in 2016 his exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, "and then leave me to the common swifts," and he figured prominently in my essay titled "Spiritualisme" in 2019. A review of the Whitechapel exhibition is elsewhere in this issue. It is our hope that his presence will hover persistently over our printed pages.

More substantial than the ether-induced state, this conversation began with the firm materiality of pots, the irrefutable nature and quality of Bernard Leach's pots, with the utility and the honest and integral beauty that reside in useful objects well made. Inherent in the hand that produces something of efficacy is the maker's intention to produce exactly what is needed. Its essential quality houses and is the ground on which its beauty resides. If it is useful it is beautiful, brought close and loved. This applies, too, to Kai Althoff's frequent use of textiles. In his reverence for Bernard Leach's pots, he had cloth woven by Travis Josef Meinolf on which the pieces would rest, "the most beautiful fabric woven in colors and textures that I deeply wished Bernard Leach would have cherished as much as I do," he told us. An offering he described as auspicious, produced as it was in an environment of smoke and wildfires.

Asked how his work should be approached, he replied, "Please come as you are, and you will make of it what is You in it anyway." With this response, which is also an invitation offered in an unprepossessing and disarmingly humble manner, the door to enter is opened. In writing about Kai Althoff's work, language is both loosened associatively and limited by its inability to describe or assess in any formal or critical way what it is you are seeing and experiencing. But this is his intention—to obfuscate and confound that kind of occluding, distancing scrim inevitably put up and maybe even sought after by critical writing. Why do that, you have to ask, why write that way? The artist's intention, the work is there in front of or all around you. So, I write, as I did about his exhibition "Haüptling Klapperndes Geschirr" at Tramps in New York in 2018-19, saying the work is like nothing else, is a state, is miasmic and confusing and is a kind of rhapsody. It floats just above the reach of your up-stretched fingertips and descends to engulf you in a chartreuse absinthe cloud of spatial and temporal displacement.

With works identified as *Untitled* you are given licence to drift expansively. In *Untitled*, 2020. Oil on fabric, 73 x 69 cm, a small boat, a rowboat or a skiff for fishing is moored, or maybe not moored but safely close to shore, bumping gently on the water's surface, adrift only a little, moved by the tempo of a slow



*Untitled, 2018. Oil on fabric, 45 x 64.1 cm. Photograph by Mark Woods. All images courtesy the artist.*



incoming or receding tide some distance off—a blissful bobbing you feel when peril is absent—a letting-go we rarely allow ourselves but, here, safe, and we are grateful to find ourselves in that almost amniotic state of suspension where no decisions are required. A boy rests in this small green dun-coloured vessel, lying on its bottom partially obscured but watching as the three women in 19th-century dress with wide, flounced skirts, loose-sleeved blouses and scarves at their neck ascend the shore's incline, carrying round, flat trays on their heads like couturier-designed garden party hats but instead supporting generous gatherings of harvested mussels. I'm certain I hear the chorus of an opera I must have seen, as they happily advance. I could be entirely wrong, but will someone return for the boy in the boat or will he follow after them when he gathers strength to do so or perhaps just rest, adrift? The palette is languorous, spare, slow.

As dreamlike and expansive as are the drawings and paintings, so, too, are the very particular installations Kai Althoff assembles and presents, with each object a part of a continuing narrative, words in a long prose poem. Patrik Scherrer, writing in the book that accompanied the exhibition "Kai Althoff Souffleuse der Isolation" from 2008, describes the artist's use of installations as "the logical progression of his treatment of images and sculpture," adding, "They provide an almost ideal and practically boundless space for the propagation of the many ideas and objets trouvés." He continues, "They are narrative installations, places of happenings and actions."

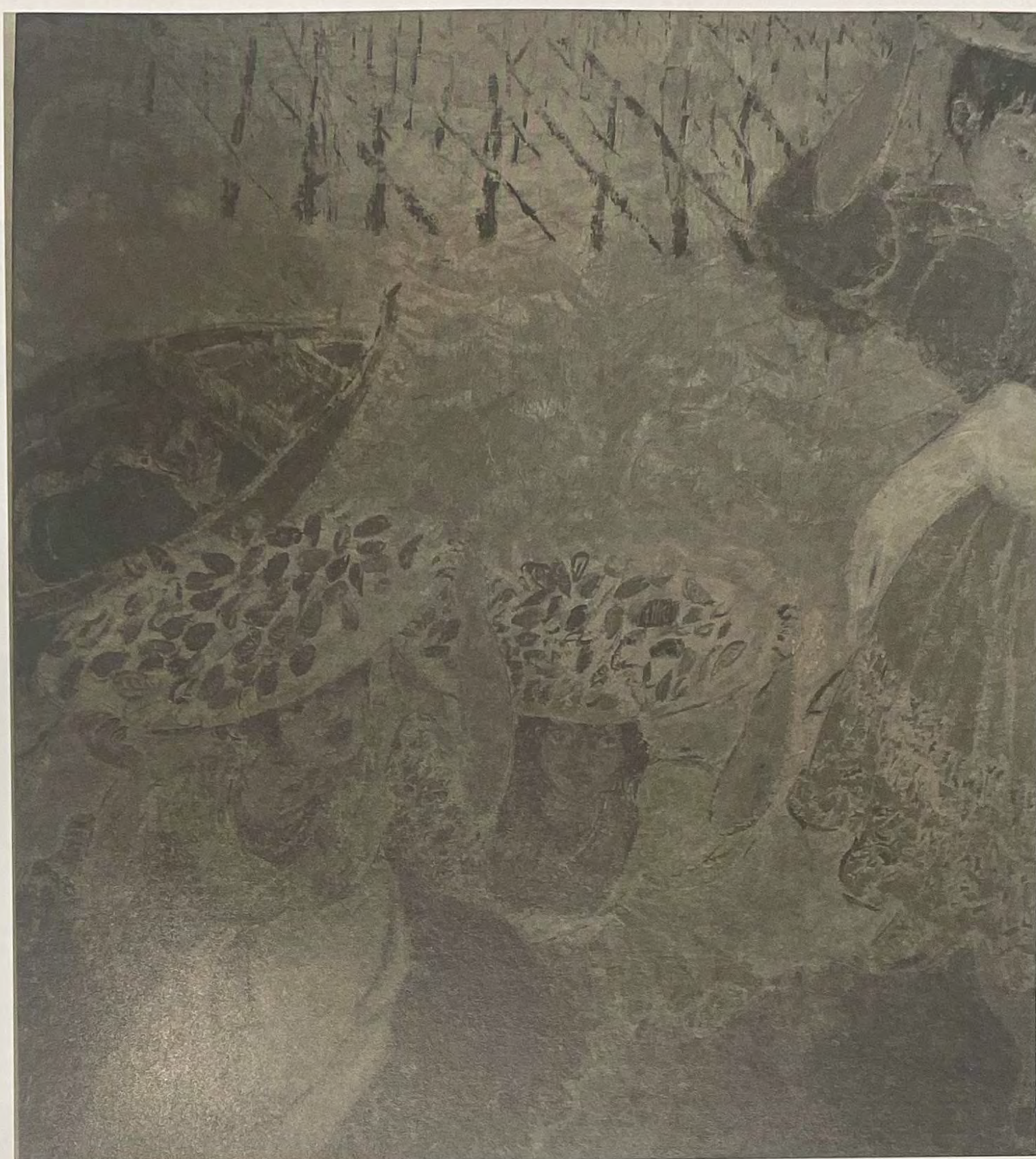
Photographs of the exhibition "and then leave me to the common swifts" at MoMA in 2016 illustrates this. What appears to be a storage space for the exhibition seen beyond is an extended portion of the exhibition itself. The ceilings of all the gallery spaces are tented in a white fabric, to the delight of every child who attended. The mounts or supports for the work are unconventional. In lieu of walls are tiered volumetric shelves on and against which rest paintings, drawings, fabrics, commissioned and beautifully designed sweaters, swags of chiffon drapery, pots, bowls, vessels, toys, drawing books that might have belonged to the artist as a child, and carefully situated mannequins and furniture. In the space that could be misunderstood as a storeroom is a purple velvet sofa, a dolly of some sort on its side, cloths and what might be packing material—all pressed in close adjacency, cozily proximate—one thing to another. On the walls are hung four paintings. In the foreground is the multi-panelled large drawing *Untitled*, 2010. Coloured pencil, gold ink and tea on paper, 39 1/4 x 50 7/8", which depicts, in the catalogue's description by DovBer Naiditch, the transformation of a woman and a man into animals due to their lacking human souls. The transformation is described as painful; the drawing itself is difficult as a depiction. The installations' spaces contain all the components necessary for a child's enchantment. I think of my own: a silk scarf, a shiny necklace glittering with faux jewels, a blanket to throw over two chairs for a tent were transformative. Every kid knows this. The spaces provide in their gaps and absences everything necessary. As in Althoff's installations, they need to be fragmentary and open to elaboration, allusive. The assembled work that is the exhibition remains open-ended: this, also this—an ellipsis.

*Untitled*, 2018. Oil on fabric, 45 x 64.1 cm, is a startle of yellow, a blast of heat, a colour Althoff uses with some frequency, and here as the ground for a vignette framing a tale-telling that is an event isolated from others; see, here; or a tent flap lifted, the fringed tapestry revealing a moment of some intimacy; or a floating world like a large, elaborately painted kite. Two young men absorbed with one another, prone in a flower-strewn field. The man wearing the yellow shirt with red detailing on the cuffs and a blue kerchief at his neck has turned his blond-pouffed head toward the dark-haired man in the foreground. His arms encircle and support the dark-haired figure, his demeanour speaking of care and gently proffered ministrations. He is offering him a scented world to which they both could sail. The dark-haired youth, unmindful of his slender, almost rubbery limbs skewed as though he were a contortionist away from the stage for the day, has turned his head and body toward the blond figure who could promise the possibility of solace and transport. We are watchers but not intrusively so, noting a close moment of connection for which we all long. And how is it, we might ask then, that the apocalyptic yellow sky, which could well be aflame, the trees succumbing and bending to the fire's hot breath, doesn't generate alarm but instead some comfort as we yield to our own desire to be warm and held. Perhaps we are reconciled and achieve a glimmer of wisdom. Giving over is a luxury, almost voluptuous; our existence is always a question.

This conversation concluded with some discussion of Kai Althoff's music and the contradictions with which he persistently engages, addressed, too, in his songs—the contradictions with which we also engage, if we are alive. We are born and move inexorably toward death but in-between—the state of wonder and unknowing: Kai Althoff's work.

This interview was conducted with the artist, who responded to our written questions with his own text, February 2021.





*Untitled, 2020. Oil on fabric, 73 x 69 cm.*



*Untitled, 2020. Detail.*





*Untitled*, 2018. Oil on fabric, 68.6 x 58.4 cm. Photograph by Mark Woods.



**BORDER CROSSINGS:** We want to start with the exhibition at the Whitechapel because it is your most recent, and for slightly personal reasons. In 1971, still in school, I visited The Leach Pottery in St. Ives. I didn't have a lot of money and I was travelling for five months, so it wasn't practical, but I bought a pair of coffee mugs from the pottery. Over 50 years they have moved with me every place I've gone and I still have—and use—them. I was completely captivated by what Leach had done in bringing together the East and the West and it pleases me that I have a functional reminder of that commingling. What it is that attracted you to Leach? Why would you have been interested to bring together your two bodies of work in the Whitechapel exhibition?

**KAI ALTHOFF:** I do admire pottery. If it is good pottery, I know not of much else that would speak to me in such gravity. That indeed is because it merges the useful with the urge in oneself to have beautiful objects. I do assume to many younger people it does not do much. I met potters in the circle of friends my parents had, and they in turn introduced me to the craft and I guess my mother, who had a high sense of beauty and would care about the objects, the few in the beginning of building a household, which were in our home. An apartment in blocks of social housing, built not too long prior to them moving in the early 1960s. They lived there to the end of their lives. So she had a large grey wine-jug she brought from her student trip to Spain, just unglazed grey clay, and pretty large, and a little onion shaped spout and a handle. It was an object that is ingrained in me. And by the way, I would assume as well, that it may have been rather difficult to bring it back with her. They went to Spain by bus then. I would like to add, that all the potters I met were women and men that I was drawn to. They seemed to not have doubts in the purpose of what they were doing. They were beautiful to me, also physically. I noticed their hands. These hands were never too soft when shaken, or of eerie smoothness. Often they seemed quite disciplined, and that I am not.

You chose some 50 works of his. How did you make your selection?

Emily Butler and Cameron Foote made a lot research to find out which institutions and collectors we could approach, and then those provided us with lists of pots and other items they were willing to lend. I went through them many times and put together a selection of pieces. As with so many decisions in my life, it was a very intuitive way of making choices. I realized I preferred work he did earlier in his life, from the 1920s to the 1940s, very roughly, I would say. Some I had seen in publications prior and I also simply longed to touch them or look at them closest. Of course, eventually I was not allowed to touch any. There are things that appear duller and things that make my heart soar. I did not try to give an overview or such. Or to create a display for the initiated. I know some would come to this show not knowing or caring about pottery at all. And I would think that encountering these pots and objects would maybe make some think: Oh, what ugly thing I use instead, and then conclude as well: However ugly, it has become part of my life, for example I return to that plate, this vessel to have my sugar in and so on. And it is therefore never ugly to me, if I am honest. Then, of course to propose the hand-thrown vessel of the kind Bernard Leach favors, simply is not existing anymore in price ranges affordable to those he would want to use them. It inflates to become a matter of class and education! The whole affair is probably a totally fatal longing to merge with ideas of the cultural return to the beauty necessity produced, when means of manufacture would most of the time not allow to muster things of the kind you get nowadays (which I at least am repelled to use), due to the inevitable involvement of the human in each step and development then. Yet, the involvement of an individual in each step does not guard it against all which Bernard Leach criticizes when he speaks in his writings of the quality of pottery he witnesses amongst a younger generation of potters in the United States. and on and on...

For your part of the exhibition you chose works that cover a significant span of your art-making. In the works you chose, were you trying find connections in your career that corresponded to



**what Leach was doing in his? How did you make those choices? How direct is the correspondence?**

I took things I thought would be of significance, and yet I indeed do not know what is of any significance to an audience. The choices I make are mostly done in such manner: I try to disconnect my own existence from the things I have made, and put them together for a show in a way that would make myself wanting to go back once I encountered it. (I say go back, as I probably would be ending up in a show by chance). Of course I cannot really be disjunct from things that sprang from me, but it always gave me a lot of joy to try to experience it from afar, aloofness really, to detach myself. And I can. With this I tried to make GOOD choices, I tried to take some essential work, or so. But little can I know what eventually is essential of what I did, or Bernard Leach did. I think he had much more confidence and could have picked with more ease without trying to distance himself.

**Looking at Leach's work you get an idea that being a potter for him was not a determination to be an artist, but more directly, to live a life. Is that how you think of being an artist?**

Yes. I think so.

**At the Whitechapel you make an interesting decision about how you present his work. You design custom vitrines and then you place the Leach pieces on cloth woven by Travis Josef Meinolf. What was your thinking behind that decision?**

You know, these things are required to be VERY contained, they need to be in vitrines almost bullet proof. So that is why I designed those with much, much help of the wonderful Mr. Chris Aldgate. I wanted tiny legs. The requirements dictate some of the design. I was not too free. But free enough. What can you do to present your Idol's work: I put it in cases just designated to that one and only use for this one show, and have the most beautiful fabric woven in colors and textures that I deeply wished Bernard Leach would have cherished as much as I do. You have a friend to weave—Travis Josef Meinolf, the most awe inducing artist I know to do weaving—all the way far off in The Bay area in California to be used, while the air is full of smoke as these wildfires are all around him and his family. Well, it is: I take the most auspicious things to present them (the works of Bernard Leach), all in austerity. I have never done a thing like that, and I felt I wanted to keep his work apart from mine as well. It is close enough in this show already. I would fear his disapproval, and I think it is an intervention to include the work of an artist who no longer is here to speak in such a show like mine. However even if nothing else, it gave opportunity to me and an audience to see his work by itself in these cases in an almost empty room, with only my sculpture of a godly mother in the state of conquered empathy and a drawing I executed when I was *Really* small, which forebodes so much of the essence of my thought and actions to

come after, bare of all effort and the silly burden that continuous life imbibes into you as you need to go along.

**Your use of cloth raises a question that looks at how many areas your art activity includes. You paint, draw, make installations, you make music, perform in theatre. Is there something in each of these where the medium helps you say what you want to say? Does each medium have its own language?**

I would think each has its own language all right. Certain things are so much better said in languages more suited. But above that each language lends itself to say things differently also, and to say things you may have not said in the other. To me it was never really a question of much consideration as somehow it seemed as if all these opportunities of different languages stood in line, and as my mind would ponder a thought that felt worthy to be expressed, one of them would automatically volunteer and step forward to say: I can do it best! Like in school, or the army. Of course the immediacy of making a sound, of speaking, of moving, to dance, to play and perform is doing things to the body, which are really much more unhinged. Well, this is all common sense. To see a musician play is often much, much more beautiful than to look at a painter painting. It can be the dullest site. Oh, if I can do differently I do not want to be confined to or witness myself in that dullness. I love most to see people moving, with all, how they carry themselves how sound is produced within their bodies to become an entity itself. Ah!, just all of it.

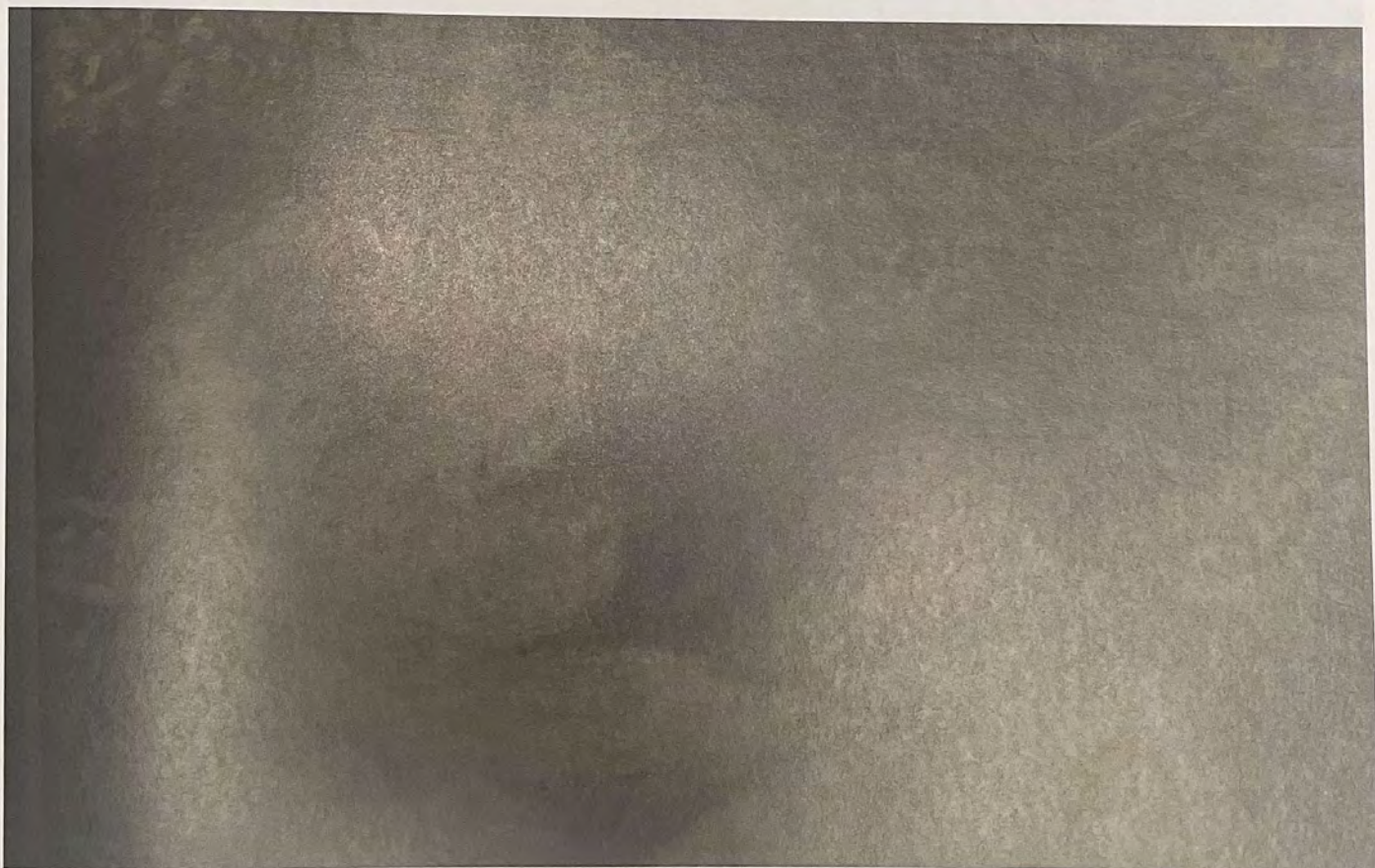
**Whenever I look at an artist's work my head wanders because the work moves in a number of directions, some of which are contradictory. I remind myself of Walt Whitman's position in his great epic poem, *Leaves of Grass*. In the "Song of Myself," he asks, "Do I contradict myself?" and then offers his own answer in the affirmative, "Well, then, I contradict myself." I detect in your attitude toward the work you make a fair amount of that same dimension. Contradictions are fine, and useful. Doors are never closed.**

I am mighty glad to contradict myself. And there is so much of contradiction within, that only some initial sense remaining of what is known as good and evil, seems to prevent me from doing just exactly many things contrary to what I believe in really. I am not convinced of doing right in morals intellectually. But it may also be, that I just entertain the idea of doing the other, contradicting thing, as I want to believe I am free. And I want All to be free. This is not possible without doing wrong onto others. Sometimes it feels so nice—(you feel safe and accepted and hideously humble and the heart seems to be held by a loving God's warm hands)—to be following a path, knowing you do right according to how you were raised, that it makes me nauseous. Maybe because I cannot feel right about myself. I am not at ease with so much I am and how I feel and how I think.





*Untitled, 2020. Oil on fabric, 68.5 x 75 cm.*

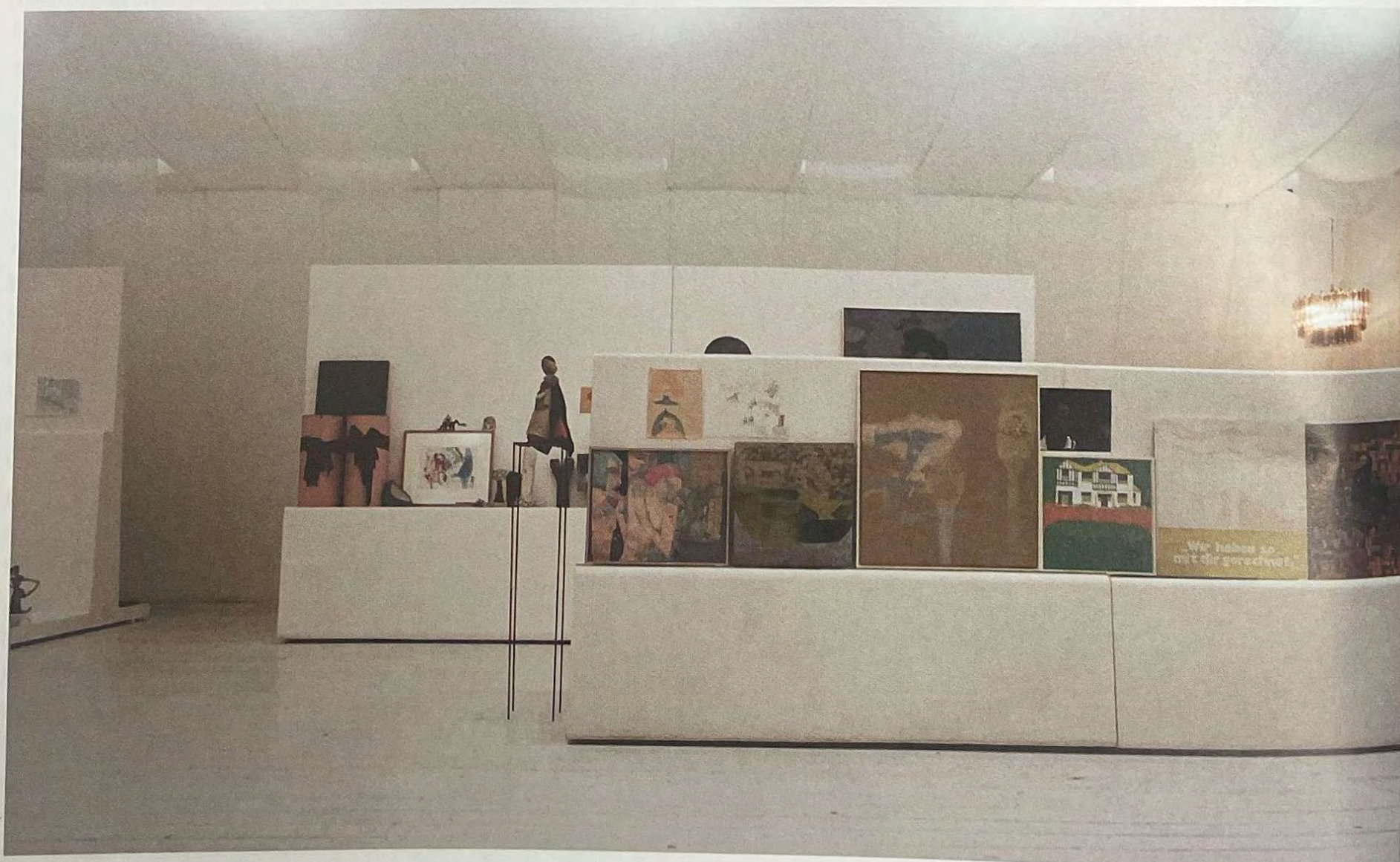


*Untitled, 2020. Detail.*





Above and below: Environmental view of "Und Dann Überlasst Mich Den Mauerseglern," Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2016.





In one of his poems the wonderful West Coast American poet Robert Duncan warned that “if you don’t enter the dance, you mistake the event.” It was a caution to critics that before you can make any assessment of a work of art, you have to be open to what the thing is that you’re writing about, otherwise you’ll get it wrong. With your work, I’m never sure if I’m wearing the right dancing shoes, or if I should even be wearing anything on my feet. As the maker, is that how you want me to come at the work?

You come as you are. I do not expect really to be assessed in the manner I wished most. And there is a lot of different ways to come. I certainly would not ask anyone to prepare only the tiniest bit, however I realize some really are wanting to be much more prepared. The threshold seems so low. There is annoyance surfacing in the unguided. I cannot help it. I would be glad not to be asked to learn, but others seem to feel incomplete without a knowledge of some sort. Please come as you are, and you will make it what is You in it anyway. You will cast away what does not grab your emotions and thought and criticize that which annoys you. I do wish to be understood, maybe, but to be misunderstood is just as intrinsically.

Being off-balance was how we felt in your show called in English “Chief Rattling Dishes” at Tramps in New York in 2018 because of the unstable cardboard flooring you used in all the rooms where the paintings and drawings were installed. You felt the work needed to be seen close up to be properly engaged, but the floor made it difficult to do that. We should add that we liked the instability, like being in a rocking boat.

I must say, I really feel as if I walk on pavement made of eggs all the time, as if the pavement, the city in which this pavement is laid, wants to make it specially hard for me to exist. Or constantly wants to probe my endurance. And this floor feels like that, and as it is quite bothersome you start to make extra firm steps, like HULK to either fall into a abyss underneath the cardboard fatally, or secure a good stand in the rubble.

In the poem in the catalogue for your 2014 exhibition, Peter Doig writes about the need “to get really close to the hardened and dried cloth,” cloth that he says, “has become a thing now/ with so many touchings.” That is such a delicate way to talk about how your pictures ask us to respond. Why, then, do you want to make it difficult for us to do that?

Well as I said above, that is how I feel. If at all, I wanted some who come to see with their (to me) inexplicable confidence, to feel for once they need to walk on some raw eggs too. I think feeling insecure about the self is not bad. I would not want it differently often enough.

Is anything ever fixed? I look at a work of yours, like *Saint Nicholas of Myra* (2002), and every time I come to it, it is a

different piece. And in that way, I become a different ‘reader.’ Do you do that, too?

Though many things appear fixed, I think nothing is fixed. There is a perception of things that one seems to share with other people, but it goes so far that I even doubt my own existence or the existence of others, or that I solely exist in the concept of others or the other way round, all other exists only in my head. Or I do not even have a head or a body. It does not answer your question. No, nothing is fixed for me.

The drawings contain everything and you seem to be able to do anything with the medium. (The untitled drawing on the front cover of the MoMA catalogue is a breath-taker.) The drawings embody beauty and its opposite. Maybe I just mean there are many kinds of beauty. Are there, for you?

I look at the eczema in the corner of my mouth today and when I was 5 years old and there I think: how beautiful this is. Even how it felt then. Even how it feels now. I am not saying this to be VERY poignant. But ahhh, of course, there are as many kinds of beauty that I can never attempt to find out even on broadest scale.

You have always painted right from the beginning, which makes me think you haven’t paid any attention to the place the medium has occupied in the art world.

Certainly as I was deliberately or not taking a part in this world you talk of, it dawned upon me that to paint lightheartedly would not do at all. And I never have ever since. In the beginning when I enjoyed to be amongst some of it, I was incredibly alert and wanting to be fully armed to drop all argumentative bombs regarding why I paint now, or I do not. It seemed also to be of much necessity in some discourse then. But I also realized, people (rather a majority of recipients), in my case, saw the painting itself more than any formality and conceptualization of the idea of painting. I cannot tell if I like that. Often I am startled, happy too.

Rauschenberg said that he wanted to paint in the gap between art and life. But that space doesn’t give you any room to move because there doesn’t seem to be a gap—for you, are art and life the same thing? Is there such a space?

Yes, yes all the same to me. I would call all living rather than art. It needs to be called something though, so you can talk about it, I guess.

I admit to feeling strange in using the term art world because I’m not sure the term applies to you. You don’t seem to care if you’re in the art world. Or you may consciously choose not to be part of it. You just need to do things and where they end up is not the point of making them.

Yes, that is right.





*Untitled, 2018. Oil on fabric, 50.8 x 60 cm. Photograph by Mark Woods.*



*Environmental view of "Hauptling Klapperndes Geschirr," 2018. Photograph by Mark Woods.*





Environmental view of "Hauptling Klapperndes Geschirr," including cotton batting on wall and foam and painted cardboard lined floor. Photograph by Mark Woods, 2018.





Untitled, 2020. Oil on fabric, 140 x 126 cm.





Untitled, 2020, oil on fabric. Detail.



When we interviewed Gedi Sibony for *Border Crossings*, I asked him why he wanted to be an artist and he said, "Sometimes I'm not sure that I want to be one." Do you have sympathy for that position?

Mmhm

One of the other things Gedi said was that the world "forcefully removes him from reverence," but that condition of reverence is one that he seeks through art. In looking at your work, there is evidence of a sense of the spiritual. (In *Border Crossings*, Meeka has written beautifully about it.) Do you want an apprehension of that quality to be in evidence? If there wasn't any of it in it, you may as well burn it all. To myself, if it does not have a spirit that gets me to respond to, it seems worthless to me. The more vehement and heated my response, the better for me. If it shakes me or silences me and forbids me to say ONE more word, I am happiest. Vexed maybe is the word?

There are times when the spiritual locates a religious theme, like in *Doubting Thomas* (2002). What is so moving about that painting are the positions the two bodies hold in space; Thomas is a comma of a figure and Christ's elegant acquiescence to the probing finger that touches the bright wound on his body is remarkable. The image is like a tapestry. Do you feel it carries a sense of the spiritual?

I think there would have been no point in painting this for me, if I had not tried to depict something spiritual and charged with what I then perceived as holy. And as with many paintings, no matter how much there may be an internal unending questioning of how I can even dare to set out to make such painting, in such manner: while I execute it, all that really is within me is the wish to exactly and most penetratingly feel what I am painting and how I am painting it.

You have stayed away from making any connection between your work and autobiographical details. The lyric from "The Hearts" goes, "I wanted to spare us my portrayal." I sense that sparing is a consideration that is more for you as artist than us as viewers?

As my mother's tongue is not English, I need to say, that obviously, the way I say this in German, "To spare you of my portrayal", is of a specific tone and attitude, that may be lost when you take it for the mere content of such line. I most definitely think you do not know anything about me. And yet, I must say what you see and hear from me, is certainly full of my biography, in that it is simply my life. So I need not to elaborate, and the attitude and tone for example is entirely molded by the biography, and its intentional use, is something that of course, if detected by some who are able to relate due to partially equal biographies, is a thing I like quite a lot. That

even may become the content of its own altogether. But as I say it: this is what all communication of peer groups is built on, and where I once thought, such conscious fumbling with the language was the most important, for myself, as I have often none to speak with, all content needs more and more to bear that quality of pressing substance: things like: Can I love anything properly? Selflessly? Can I stop being attached to this world? Please tell me how? as I hate its cloying grip, sweetened with beauty by the likes of a Man doing pottery that holds your food.

We started with a recent exhibition and maybe we can close with your recent album, *Aber mich macht's Traurig* (But It Makes Me Sad). It is an edgy and ethereal album, even an enthralling one. Every cut is mesmerizing, but I was especially taken by two of the songs, "Der kampf mit dem Engel" (The fight with the Angel) and "Weihe und Schau" (Consecration and vision). Both have religious names but what is striking is that wrestling with the angel, which you would expect to be intense, is less that way than consecration and vision, which you would expect to be consoling. The voice in the latter raises the emotional register rather than lowering it. The songs are in a kind of contrary reversal. What did you want to find when you made that album?

So Yaacovs wrestling with the angel took a whole night, it took very long. He got a dislocated thigh. It is a constant wrangle. One is on top, then the other. Someone's smothered, One regains strength and tries to kneel on the other's chest for 20 min or so... There are moments where all freezes. Also both are on a mission! Jaacov and that 'angel, who really is not an angel. Inside of themselves, there are further most complex fights that have to be resolved. So I pictured this to be of an intensity that is fluttering, stagnating, flaying, lashing and I DO think it is very intense. Weihe und Schau is a parading of relics. Pompous, rather like an austere celebratory music, yet fixed in its form by ancient tradition of how such thing is to be conducted and intoned. Where even these yells have turned into formalized utterances of exuberance in the presence of these relics.

Finally, to go back to the idea of contradiction, I take it that the title "Die Sonne verschlingt die Welt in Ruhe," the sun devours the world in peace, is a reconciliation of the irreconcilable? Or is it a statement of a certain kind of inevitable power that we yield to?

In the face of all, I can see this entity having already half way devoured us, while we still think birth is a blessing. Yet this entity may smile in compassion. It may be, but it has sooo much time. Now I like that entity fair enough, and it may eat me and I will only want to have no bitterness in me, so I will be like a candy to it. ■