

Natalie Haddad, "Richard Aldrich's Elliptical Paths Through Language," Hyperallergic, April 13, 2018

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Richard Aldrich's Elliptical Paths Through Language

Aldrich brings a rich sense of materiality to a practice founded on the gap between images and language.



Installation view of *Enter the Mirror* at Bortolami Gallery (all images courtesy of the artist and Bortolami, New York, photos by Ron Amstutz)

Enter the Mirror, Richard Aldrich's fourth solo exhibition at Bortolami, opens with two works in the gallery's front hallway.

The first is a small collage from 2002, "'Tuck Tuck Tuck' with Cut Out Shapes from Time Life Book Series on Blue Construction Paper." Though the title

ostensibly describes the work, it offers little in the way of visualizing the powder blue paper, adorned with squiggly cutouts and the handwritten words, “tuck tuck tuck.” Nor does it explain that “Tuck Tuck Tuck” refers to Aldrich’s solo music project from 1999 to 2001 and the subsequent related publication, *The Words of Tuck Tuck Tuck* (Karma, 2012).

The other work, “Sci-Fi Short Story from 2007” (2017-2018), is all text. Silkscreened on a 72 by 49-inch white Dibond panel, it relays a science-fiction story (with the internal title “The Unsuccessful Ambush of Phil in Johnson’s Park”) that begins with a writer discussing his progress on his own sci-fi short story.



Richard Aldrich, “‘Tuck Tuck Tuck’ with Cut Out Shapes from Time Life Book Series on Blue Construction Paper” (2002), acrylic and collage on paper

Together, the two works introduce themes that dominate the exhibition and, to a great extent, Aldrich’s practice: The gap between the aesthetic and semiotic registers of art, and the unexpected connections that emerge in

interactions between these two registers. In a 2015 *Art in America* interview conducted by Ross Simonini, Aldrich stated, “There’s a way that my art always looks the same [temporally], but what’s progressing is an understanding of how paintings can exist or interact, how they relate to each other and to our understanding of history and how history is determined. To me, that interaction was always the thing. It’s about seeing things not in a linear way, but in an elliptical way.”

Elliptical interactions are key to Aldrich’s approach to image- and meaning-making. “In Search Of ...” (2017/2012, 2010, 2000) features a re-creation of a portrait sketch of the artist made by an ex-girlfriend above a hand-written classified ad for a “drummer/percussionist for a kind of rock band,” whose influences include early Pink Floyd, Can, Velvet Underground, Low, Patty Waters, and Neutral Milk Hotel.

The original portrait sketch of Aldrich served as source material for an earlier painting (“Portrait of Me by Elizabeth Czeckner,” 1998), while the band list is reflected in a nearby 2002 found-object sculpture — an open metal box containing the CD cover of “Monster Movie” (1969) by the German avant-garde rock band Can.



Richard Aldrich, "In Search Of ..." 2017 (2012, 2010, 2000), oil, wax, paper, wood and Plexiglas on linen

Music is key as well to Aldrich's practice (he doubles as a musician). In particular, Pink Floyd co-founder Syd Barrett, who is believed to have suffered from schizophrenia, has been a touchstone for the artist. Barrett is the subject of several portraits and collages by Aldrich, and appears indirectly (or immaterially) in works such as 2005's abstract "Syd Stripe Split" and the three-panel silkscreen "Interview with Syd Barrett, Nick Mason & Roger Waters discussing the early musical development of Pink Floyd, or what would later be known as: Psychedelic Rock" (2016).

Barrett, whose enigmatic music was coupled with his erratic behavior and, later, reclusive existence, embodies the tension between presence and

absence — both formal and symbolic — that activates Aldrich’s work. Like public perceptions of Barrett, Aldrich’s artworks are aglow with the promise of meaning, of unconscious or hidden truths, that are accessible, if at all, only by looking elsewhere.



Richard Aldrich “Untitled” (2002), found object, metal box, soap

One senses that Barrett is also a conceptual double for the artist, whose self-portraits are more often displacements of the elusive concept of “self” than they are representations. Despite Aldrich’s portrait in “In Search Of ...” the name and phone number on the band flyer belong to someone

called Jonathan, and the ellipsis in title leaves the identity open of whom is being sought. Another elliptical work, “RRRs” (2017), is a white-on-white bas-relief composed of three raised, white sign letters, all Rs, each with a minuscule eye painted above it, mounted on a large white canvas, with a small ceramic disk near its center top. The relationship between the clearly handmade ceramic object, which serves as a kind of talisman, the industrial-looking Rs, and the schematically painted eyes amounts to a kind of splintered self-portrait that implicates the viewer as well, with its triple gaze.

Aldrich similarly invokes and displaces a human presence in the anthropomorphic installation “Portrait of Olivia in Three Colors, All Olivia” (2017), a moss green cardigan draped on an indented white pedestal, and a

mystical presence in “Box” (2018/2005), a natural plywood box, atop a white pedestal, emitting a glimmer of light at its base.



Installation view of *Enter the Mirror* at Bortolami Gallery

He initiates a significantly more layered (and potentially problematic) chain of associations with the 72 by 49-inch silkscreen “Wizard” (2015-2018). The flatly rendered white-on-black robed wizard, complete with wand and pointed hat, reflects the triangular peaks in two similarly sized untitled abstract paintings in the exhibition. “Wizard”’s straightforward figuration coaxes out the figurative leanings of Aldrich abstractions and calls forth varied interpretations. Given Aldrich’s interests, as evidenced in past works such as “Hobbit Painting” (2006-2008), a wizard could be a detour into Tolkien’s lore. In the United States, however, the notion of a “white wizard” is inextricable from a shameful history of bigotry and murder. Whatever the artist’s intention, this level of meaning casts a shadow across Middle Earth.

Aldrich brings a rich sense of materiality to a practice founded on the gap between images and language. His understated palette of muted earth tones and pastels can evoke the haziness of early morning sun or fog. The textured surface (rendered in oil, wax, and enamel) of one of the two abstract paintings mentioned above, the 64 by 42-inch “Untitled” (2016-2017), is divided into zones of chalky color: White pigment, muddied by reddish streaks and limned by two shades of gray, consumes the majority of the canvas, with a pea green zone on the left and lemon yellow on the right, while a chocolate-brown diamond floats near the center, invading the white and gray territories. The opaque, craggy, Clyfford Still-like color zones edge up to one another in meandering lines resembling the irregular borders on a map, determined by geography and shifting powers.



Richard Aldrich, “Wizard” (2015-2018),
enamel silk screen on Dibond panel

The composition, like many of Aldrich’s abstracts, seems to draw from the natural world, though shapes are loosely articulated and sometimes seem to flicker and change, like shadows or dream images. The other of the exhibition’s two large-scale abstract paintings (“Untitled,” 2017, 72 by 50 inches) is a darker counterpart. The combination of oil, wax, and enamel is thinner and the application is more haphazard. A pale yellow peak, against a dark gray backdrop, extends the height of the canvas and creates a sense of reciprocity between the

two abstract paintings. Two orange squares in the top left and right quadrants suggest blazing fires up close or demonic eyes from afar.

The surprising inclusion of two small works on paper by Edouard Vuillard (1868-1940) establishes the temporal and art historical expanses of Aldrich's practice. A genealogical link between Aldrich's scumbled paint and muted palette and Vuillard's trembling tones and application, as well as the latter's moody, psychologically loaded scenes, is evident. In Vuillard's "*Une galerie au Gymnase*" ("A Gallery at the Gymnasium," 1899, distemper on paper), olive green, violet, and maroon are illuminated by bursts of golden yellow; the painting's subject matter is barely discernible, like much of Aldrich's figuration.



Edouard Vuillard, "Deux personnages de théâtre (Berthe Bady et Lugné-Poe)" (1890-1891), pen and ink with wash and white gouache on paper

Yet formal affinities are only one level of interaction. A delicate Vuillard ink and gouache drawing, “*Deux personnages de théâtre (Berthe Bady et Lugné-Poe)*” (“Two Theater Actors (Berthe Bady and Lugné-Poe)),” 1890-1891) portrays the French actors and companions Berthe Bady (1872-1921) and Lugné-Poe (1869-1940) in conversation. Lugné-Poe raises his hands in front of his pale, upturned head, animating his speech, while Bady’s hands are folded, her downcast face veiled by shadows. It is an image about speaking and listening, about performing and visualizing language. In a way, its companion piece in *Enter the Mirror* is the all-text silkscreen, “Sci-Fi Short Story from 2007.” In Vuillard’s work, the image becomes discursive; in Aldrich’s, the text is aestheticized. In both works, image and language veer ever closer, overlapping, finally collapsing into one another.

Enter the Mirror continues at Bortolami Gallery (39 Walker Street, Manhattan) through April 21.