

New Work: Richard Aldrich

November 18, 2011–March 25, 2012

Richard Aldrich

Richard Aldrich reinvents and extends our understanding of painting, a medium and form of art that has often been fundamentally challenged over the past hundred years. Pursuing open-ended exploration, he works with canvas and stretcher bars, wood panels, paint, and found materials, sometimes evoking images and memories, while at other times using the elements of painting to their own ends. Inherent throughout his work are issues of perception and understanding, by turns centered around vision and physical encounter, observation and meaning, or explorations of the immediacy of the present moment grounded in language and past experience. This exhibition focusing on Aldrich’s new paintings is anchored by a selection of earlier pieces in order to show not only the diversity of his work but also the expansive possibilities of painting itself. In preparation for this presentation, Aldrich and I had a series of exchanges about his work. An excerpt from those conversations appears below.

Gary Garrels, Elise S. Haas Senior Curator of Painting and Sculpture

GARY GARRELS: If you had to identify some of your paintings as favorites or particularly significant for you, which ones would you pick?

RICHARD ALDRICH: Probably ones where I learned something. As is often the case in life, the things that were harder to do, harder to resolve, are more meaningful. So this painting was always an important one.

GG: Is that *If I Paint Crowned I’ve Had It, Got Me?*

RA: Yes. The title is a synthesis of what I was working on in my studio and what was happening in my life at the time. The majority of it is cut out because nothing was working, so I just started cutting away at the canvas. I cut more and more until there was almost nothing left. The sticks I had painted before, just as an idea in and of itself, not necessarily to use for anything. But then I thought I could attach them to the painting. The tricky thing was that at first I had them lying flat, so you could see the painted part. But then I ended up directing them outward, which made it more of a sculpture. For me it is often this idea behind a work—this sense of having a real experience. That always draws me to a painting—as an experience, it’s unique. What is a painting? It’s this square or rectangle and some philosophical questions about painting. *[laughs]* There’s this idea of the image versus the real. Seeing an image of *If I Paint Crowned*, you don’t see a lot of the details, you could never actually see “it.” Anyway, I remember talking to a friend of mine and telling her that I was stumped because

I didn’t know which way to glue the painted pieces of wood on. That same person and I had just read an essay together by Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

GG: Which essay was that?

RA: “Cézanne’s Doubt.” There’s this point where Cézanne is talking about how his whole life he tried to paint this passage from a Balzac novel that describes the sun crowning the tops of the rolls on a tablecloth. (Coincidentally, at the Pierre Bonnard show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art a year or two ago, there was a text that quoted the same passage from Balzac.) Cézanne says that his whole life he has wanted to paint that scene, but he has never been able to. Then he realizes that he was trying to paint a feeling, as opposed to just painting what he sees. And if he paints what he sees and the feeling of it is in him, then the thing that he paints will have that feeling. If he tries not to mediate the experience, but just paints the experience, then his painting will have the experience. Basically, he says he can paint what he sees; he can’t paint what he thinks he’s seeing. So he ends with, “If I paint ‘crowned,’ I’ve had it, got me?” We thought that was funny because you can imagine that line was mistranslated. Actually, I read a different translation of it and it’s “Do you understand me?” But my friend and I liked the idea of “You got me?,” like he’s showing how tough he is. “*You got me?*” You know, like he’s this hard Brooklyn guy. So that ended up as the title, as it ran parallel with making it about the experience with the painting, as opposed to, say, the intellectualized idea of the painting. *[laughs]* So that was an important one.

GG: What would be one of the first works you made that you acknowledge as a painting, a work of art, an autonomous object? Can you talk about how it started for you as a finished work—an object that had been made in your studio, and then took on a life of its own and moved out into the world?

RA: I’m not sure. It wasn’t so much about hanging it up on a wall; it was more of a process that happened in my head.

GG: When did you start working on small panels?

RA: Probably in 2003.

GG: They’re the most painterly of your paintings.

RA: Yeah.

GG: I’m not familiar with any panel paintings of yours that have text or collage or where the surface has been disrupted.

RA: There are ones where things are attached or taken away, but it’s true. They are actually more, I don’t want to say like a Sunday painter, but they’re more like journal keeping or something more private like that. That’s how they’ve come to be, anyway. I did them for a couple of years before the first time I had a show, in 2004. Back then I wasn’t thinking about art shows at all.

GG: So how do you think about the small paintings now? It’s something you’ve obviously continued and it seems intrinsic to your work in the studio. I see them in conversation or in relationship with your works on stretched canvases. But they do seem to have their own trajectory.

RA: Maybe in a certain way.

GG: So the small paintings are not done any more quickly than the larger ones?

RA: No, not necessarily.

GG: Maybe it’s because of their scale that they have such a sense of immediacy.

RA: There’s something about them that’s more immediate. It’s a thing I’ve always liked, like the way that you flip through magazines very quickly and you can stop on a whim if you see something interesting. You’ll skip pages, knowing that maybe you are missing something, but it’s a magazine, so you can always go back to it. If it’s sitting in your house, you can always go back to it later. It’s very different than the way you read a book; there’s a flippancy and a sort of immediacy to it. With a painting, it is about working on it and thinking about it, and then, in an instant, totally changing it to see where that goes.

GG: How do you see this in relation to your large paintings?

RA: Well, they have that same flippancy, but lately the trails between the large paintings have become more tangible—or at least if given the time or the energy to find them, you could physically follow them. The connections are there, whether you’re able to see them immediately or not. This also introduces the idea of time: there’s this painting here, and five years later there’s this other painting. They’re connected, or maybe one shows the cause of the other’s effect. It’s not so much a story that I could or couldn’t tell, or that, as a viewer, you could or couldn’t know, it’s more about the process or potential of making the connections.

GG: When you put a title on a painting, like *Reality Painting #1 (My apartment)*, the viewer immediately starts looking for clues. What am I seeing? Is it the couch? Is it the window? Is it wallpaper? We’re looking for references. Whereas if you put a title like *My Walking Stick* on it—

RA: *Ode to Courbet. [they laugh]*

GG: It would turn into a different painting.

RA: Yeah.

GG: It’s very easy in painting—maybe because of its history—to read a figure or landscape or still life or object into a work. Many art movements in the twentieth century were getting rid of that impulse, and we can see this in paintings. I don’t know if you know this, but Robert Ryman doesn’t think of his paintings as abstractions. He thinks that they’re realist, because to understand them you have to interact with them in real time and space.

RA: I think a lot of it is about that sort of experience. I don’t really differentiate between what makes a painting abstract or not, because it’s all part of the art. Ryman was interested in light, or form, or what you see when looking at the paintings head-on or at an angle, or under this light or in lower light. I’m sort of interested in—I’ve always liked this word—machinations. If he’s interested in those sorts of light and space machinations, I’m interested in the machinations of contemporary society, or of information in general and how it moves along. With the Internet, magazines and catalogs, gossip and all of that, I’m interested in how all this information comes to be known, how it moves around and how that movement affects it. It’s like there’s a clock with all these gears moving, but in order to show that you need to have something that’s the subject matter. You can’t just show the gears because there are too many, it’s too complex and overwhelming. It’s like Borges’s Funes. But if you can show how something moves through those gears, you can begin to understand how they work. So you make these paintings and plunk them down into the gears and see the paintings set on this course, from this gear to that gear to that gear, and you witness their interactions, the channels of their movement. There are ways in which I affect that directly, through where they are shown or discussed, or indirectly, by releasing paintings that may add or change the understanding of the other works. Then of course there are the things you don’t think of, which are usually the most interesting.

GG: And about what a painting should be.

RA: Yeah, there’s that basic, ongoing question. The problem I have with a lot of contemporary painting is that so much of it serves a purpose that’s too directly related to the idea. Whereas with my paintings, there are no ideas. *[laughs]* The idea is more a structure or framework. It’s like a slide sheet. You drop the slides in, and the function of the slide sheet is to hold the slides. It doesn’t matter what the slides look like, they’re still going to get held. So for me, there’s this idea of the context, which is like the slide sheet, but then there’s this idea of the autonomous object, which is the individual slides. So both parts become important, and it’s important to understand that the slide sheet isn’t a fixed format, but rather exists in four dimensions, and that the slides aren’t arbitrary in their creation, but arbitrary in that any slide can go in the slide sheet.

GG: So let me ask about painting again. If you call your work a painting and you’re relating to the history of painting, there are obviously parameters to it. It uses a stretcher, it’s on canvas or panel, it’s paint. Since Cubism, you can add in other things to that. *[they laugh]* You can put in wallpaper; stuff from the studio suddenly migrates onto the canvas. But painting has an extraordinary set of built-in limits. Yet I still find painting so open-ended because you can do anything you want within those boundaries. Could you talk about that? Is it something you think about?

GG: Right, and then you see what happens. So it’s a little more intuitive.

RA: I made this sort of joke to someone about being a new media artist. I was joking, but I really do think of myself as a new media artist, because I’m interested in information and how we get to know it.

GG: Maybe the issue is one’s experience: at what point is it mediated and at what point is it direct? Direct experience is what paintings offer. I think that’s part of the reason people want to go to museums, rather than seeing works as reproductions. There is this hunger to have one’s own experience.

RA: I’m working on a press release for this group show. I’m not sure about it just yet, but I wrote that we shouldn’t be talking about a text unless it’s to show how text functions. We shouldn’t be talking about a painting unless it’s about how a painting functions. Except that we need literature and we need—I don’t think I said painting, I think I said something else—we need literature and we need form. But to me, what is interesting is that as much as art is about creating or considering context, we still need an autonomous object. As much as our lives are about multiple relations with different people—someone at a museum or a landlord or someone you run into on the subway—there’s still a point where you need love, there’s still a point where you need something that’s personal and intimate.

GG: Yes. Something direct.

RA: Yeah. That’s what’s important to me, this sort of interaction or contradiction between the autonomous experience and the larger context. I guess that’s maybe why things come from my personal life, because for the autonomous object I think you need to be as honest as possible in what you’re doing.

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RA: A really interesting thing to me is the idea of either innovation or subversiveness, or what’s new. How do you make something new? I’ve always liked the word *locate*. Where in the art do you locate something as being

subversive? Is it in the way it looks or in its size? Or is it in how it functions, or how it relates to the past? It makes me think of this story. I remember in college there was this guy who wasn’t very good. He was kind of lazy. He had generic ideas, but I think he liked the romanticism of the artist. I remember at one point he told me, “I want to make something new.” And I was like, “Hmm?” I felt like there was something intrinsically wrong with thinking that you could set out to make something new. Then he told me his idea—*[chuckles]* This is really funny. He was like, “I’m going to do Pop art of the future. It’s going to be like Andy Warhol, but it’ll be objects that haven’t been invented yet.” And I was like, “Okay, that sounds good!” But I liked that this was his idea of something new. So maybe that’s the thing with painting—it does have so many limitations, but at the same time, maybe because it’s so limited, there are countless ways to make something new with it. But it’s never what you think it will be, because it’s new. You don’t even recognize it when it’s new because it’s new. If you can conceive of something being new, then it’s not new. It’s only when you suddenly see it in a different light and you’re like, whoa, what is this? How is this working? I think this idea of location is important to talk about. Too often people look for the “new” in the way a painting looks, or in some kind of style. They look for something they haven’t seen, like a compositional element or method or material, as opposed to looking at how something functions, which I suppose is more difficult because one, you can’t compare it side by side on a computer screen, and two, how something functions is less quantifiable. For me the way something looks is rarely that interesting, or if I like the way something looks it is usually rooted more in nostalgia, like samurai movies or cyber-punk. What is interesting to me is how two things interact. Mostly this comes from an interest in interactions between people, or groups of people, or between myself and people. This seems more interesting to me in terms of art. Maybe here I should say that I studied psychology and philosophy before I got into art. I’m more interested in a practice full of contradictions and contingencies and lost tangents, and in understanding and accepting that as such. This is always what I liked about Marcel Broodthaers. You get a sense of him as a person, of his striking out at ideas and making and presenting things. This seems more interesting to me than the conceptual tidiness of the mussel shells or his *Department of Eagles*. Or rather all of this is interesting, but what is more interesting is that he let himself shoot off in both directions, and more.

GG: So is what you’re talking about a sense of surprising yourself?

RA: I guess so. I think it comes about through the actual process of painting. Maybe something new happened in this painting, but only because I didn’t do something I normally would have. It also goes back to Proust—because I didn’t do something the way I normally do, I’ve found something new. You have to be able to recognize things. I think a good artist is one that can recognize things. You have to keep a kind of open-mindedness; then you end

up seeing things that you wouldn’t have been able to see before. If something new is going to happen, it will come through working and letting the work take you wherever it’s going to go.

GG: You seem to have limited yourself to working on either large stretched canvases or small wood panels. How did these two scales and ways of working become what you’re most comfortable with?

RA: It probably goes back to the ideas of abstract expressionist painters. They worked in all different sizes and I didn’t want to do that. There’s something too arbitrary about it: okay, I’ll do this size today, and next week that size. I’m consciously not making that decision. That’s not part of the project.

GG: So to make the work in different sizes would introduce another kind of decision-making that really isn’t part of your process.

RA: Yeah.

GG: I do find that the big ones seem to be related to the scale of a body. And the small ones are much more related to the hand or the arm.

RA: Or like a mirror or something. Certainly there’s that. It’s like the body or the face. Which is probably important. There probably is something about that idea of the larger canvases being person-size. But it might be that every painting is the same; it’s like I’m doing the same painting over and over, it’s just that they look really different. Going back to the function of the paintings, it is different than what Robert Motherwell or Franz Kline or Joan Mitchell are doing, as much as I love their work. It is about the works’ function, this idea that they’re all interchangeable and that in the larger context they are all replaceable by one another. If they were the same size, you could change them, and the screws would stay in the same place on the wall. It goes back to the slide sheet analogy. The art is the slide sheet and the actual paintings are like non-sites because the art is about relationships; the slide sheet is the structure that shows the relationships—and that is where the meaning is. It’s not in the paintings themselves, except that, of course, they are so specific.

GG: And then that needs to bridge or be reconciled with the idea of the autonomous object. Which brings it out of just being part of a system.

RA: Yeah, and maybe this goes to the idea of embodying versus illustrating, where you can either be told how something happens or you can be shown how it happens. I think it’s always more interesting to be shown how something happens.

Born in 1975, Richard Aldrich is a native of Virginia. He received a BFA in 1998 from Ohio State University in Columbus and currently lives and works in Brooklyn. Aldrich has explored a wide range of mediums, including music and performance, writing, sculpture, painting, installation art, and works on paper. He began showing his work in 2004 and has since exhibited widely in the United States and Europe. He was included in the Whitney Biennial 2010 and in the recent group show Rational Abstraction at Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea in Santiago de Compostela, Spain. In his first major museum exhibition, presented earlier this year at the Contemporary Art Museum in Saint Louis, he juxtaposed his paintings with work by late nineteenth-century artists such as Pierre Bonnard and Edouard Vuillard.

All works in the exhibition appear on reverse. From left: Double Bed (Two Curtains Together), 2011. Fabric on linen, 84 x 58 in. (213.3 x 147.3 cm). Collection of Lucy Mitchell-Innes

Treib Painting, 2007. Oil and wax on panel, 14 1/2 x 10 1/2 in. (36.8 x 26.7 cm). Collection of the artist

Reality Painting #1 (My apartment), 2009. Oil, wax, and graphite on linen, 84 x 58 in. (213.4 x 147.3 cm). Ovitiz Family Collection

Untitled, 2010. Oil and wax on panel, 14 1/2 x 10 1/2 in. (36.8 x 26.7 cm). Collection of Carlomar Rios

Untitled, 2005. Oil, wax, and graphite on panel, 20 x 15 in. (50.8 x 38.1 cm). Private collection, New York

Large Treib Painting, 2008. Oil, wax, and graphite on linen, 84 x 58 in. (213.4 x 147.3 cm). Collection of the artist

Untitled, 2010. Oil and wax on panel, 15 x 11 in. (38.1 x 28 cm). Collection of Amy and Harris Schwalb

Reality Painting #2 (Patricia's studio), 2009. Oil, wax, and graphite on linen, 84 x 58 in. (213.4 x 147.3 cm). Ovitiz Family Collection

Untitled, 2008. Oil and wax on panel, 11 1/2 x 9 in. (29.2 x 22.9 cm). Private collection, New York

The Wedding, 2011. Oil and wax on panel, 14 1/2 x 11 in. (37.5 x 28.9 cm). Collection of Carlomar Rios

Untitled, 2011. Oil and wax on panel, 14 1/2 x 10 1/4 in. (37.5 x 27.31 cm). Collection of JK Brown and Eric Diefenbach

If I Paint Crowned I've Had It, Got Me, 2008. Oil and wax on wood on cut linen, 84 x 58 in. (213.4 x 147.3 cm). Collection of Carlo Bronzini Vender

Untitled, 2004. Oil and wax on panel, 14 x 9 1/2 in. (35.6 x 24.1 cm). Collection of Chuck Nanney

Untitled, 2010. Oil, wax, graphite, and collage on linen, 84 x 58 in. (213.4 x 147.3 cm). Courtesy Bortolami Gallery, New York

Images courtesy Bortolami Gallery, New York, New York, © Richard Aldrich

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new work

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