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The perfecting of a love? Kai Althoff goes with Bernard Leach

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Article DOI

Not applicable

Url

<https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/reviews/reviews/the-perfecting-of-a-love-kai-althoff-goes-with-bernard-leach>

ISSN

2631-5661

Cite as

Maximiliane Leuschner: 'The perfecting of a love? Kai Althoff goes with Bernard Leach', *Burlington Contemporary* (18th December 2020), <https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/reviews/reviews/the-perfecting-of-a-love-kai-althoff-goes-with-bernard-leach>

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Cover image:

The perfecting of a love? Kai Althoff goes with Bernard Leach

by Maximiliane Leuschner • 18.12.2020

The current exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery pays homage to an unlikely and almost unorthodox pairing: that of the British potter Bernard Leach (1887–1979) and the German artist and musician Kai Althoff (b.1966). Curated by the gallery's Director, Iwona Blazwick, with Emily Butler and Cameron Foote, it is Althoff's first institutional survey in the United Kingdom and includes, alongside his work, a selection of sixty works by his 'Idol' Leach.¹ The exhibition also coincides with the centenary of the Leach Pottery, St Ives, which the ceramicist founded in 1920 with fellow potter Shōji Hamada.

Born in Hong Kong, Leach attended the Slade School of Fine Art and the London School of Art before returning to Japan in 1909 with the intent of passing on Western etching ideas.²

By 1920, after mingling with members of the *Shirakaba-ha* ('White Birch School') – a group of like-minded, English-speaking Japanese intellectuals – and mastering the raku firing process, Leach had become a respected exhibiting potter in Japan. That year he accepted the invitation of his patron and philanthropist Francis Horne to set up a pottery workshop on the outskirts of St Ives. There, together with Hamada, he built the first *noborigama* (a traditional step-climbing kiln) in the West. This second return to England marked a transition for Leach – from private pot-making and decorating to the establishment of a public workshop.

The elusive Althoff, on the other hand, is known for his penchant for the Bohemian attitudes of artists and practitioners such as Leach – influences that frequently appear in his own paintings and drawings. Althoff is arguably the last in a long line of German *enfants terribles*, whose provocations include staging a collector sale in a forest and urinating on the canvases during the install; rejecting exhibition invitations to prestigious venues; opening a temporary bar with fellow artist Cosima von Bonin at Künstlerhaus Stuttgart; and leaving loans in crates during his retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 2016. Included in the exhibition under review is his slightly crumpled drawing *Untitled (Olympic Gestures)* (1985), which shows two confident-looking athletes adorned with olive

wreaths, the paper on which they are drawn smudged with faecal stains.

Althoff is as well-known for his 'rock star' attire as for his immersive installations **FIG. 1**, whereas the name Leach is synonymous with a rather standardised range of pots **FIG. 2** – rooted in repetition and the design principle 'form follows function'. Leach himself was not a great thrower. He preferred the act of mark-making, famously preparing studies for future decoration and integrating engraving, etching and painting into his clay work. He was drawn to the surface qualities of clay, often leaving pots unglazed to reveal the colour and texture of the material. A prolific writer, Leach also produced many seminal writings on pottery – most notably *A Potter's Book* (1940), which introduced his philosophy to a wider British audience. Althoff's practice, on the other hand, is rooted in ambiguity with the artist famously shrouding himself in secrecy. He favours unconventional forms – from concertina-folded record covers to unusual materials, such as lambswool, mounted on canvas. However, despite their differences, Leach and Althoff share an interest in the ideas of somatic experience – proposed through the haptic qualities of clay and the sensuousness of fabric.

The Whitechapel Gallery presents the work of both artists across three galleries, in a non-chronological arrangement. Although ostensibly a coupling, there are in fact three narratives of display present here: the adventurous, unassuming and unusual (Leach); the serious, sterile and institutional (Althoff); and the murky, mysterious and ambiguous (the gallery). The main exhibition space has been converted into an immersive, forest-like environment; a tarpaulin canopy hangs from the ceiling, holding autumnal, withered brown leaves. It is here that the majority of Althoff's work – a varied selection of sixty-four paintings and drawings from the early 1980s onwards – is on display. Across his practice Althoff amalgamates – without directly referencing – a plethora of sources in his work: the memories, feelings and forms of the Vienna Secession; Egon Schiele; Symbolism; Cologne in the eighties and nineties; Stephan Aury; Abel Auer; Joseph Beuys; Michael Buthe; Michaela Eichwald; Jutta Koether; and Sigmar Polke among others.

The atmosphere in this first gallery **FIG. 3** is rather sinister, the collective colour palette of Althoff's paintings is reminiscent of a *Schlachtplatte* – a Southern German meat dish. An arbitrary arrangement of grey, polystyrene walls splits the gallery space in two. Althoff's most recent works demonstrate his Eastern influences, at points referencing

shan shui landscape painting, the Edo period and *Siyah Qalam* iconography.³ Here Althoff uses a more muted palette of mauve, rose and mustard. In the drawing *Untitled* (2018) he depicts an Asian woman giving birth to her child, her exposed body surrounded by gold leaf. Another shows several Asian women in colourful geometric and floral dress lounging on a meadow with blossoming cherry trees. These works are an example of the artist's provocative nature: exploiting colonial or Eastern-inflected subjects and clichés by cloaking them in ambiguity. These are shown in dialogue with earlier, textual canvases that evoke the work of Buthe or Polke. Easy to miss is a 2015 drawing of a person leaning over an assortment of vases adorned with Leach-inspired incised decorations. The earliest reference to Leach is perhaps found in an abstract pink watercolour from 1996 that was first shown at *Hakelhug*, Althoff's 1996 solo exhibition at Galerie Christian Nagel (now Galerie Nagel Draxler), Cologne. The exhibition was named after a fictional persona created by Althoff: a musician, ceramicist and watercolourist who dreams of squatting a house in Cologne with his friends.

The second room, notably smaller than the first, feels less claustrophobic and offers an Althoffian take on a salon hang. This gallery includes the aforementioned *Olympic Gestures*; the watercolour portrait *Norma and Hether* (1983), which was made as a present to his mother; and several works from the installation *Solo für eine befallene Trompete [Solo for an afflicted trumpet]* (2005), such as his curtained drawing with a ribbon **FIG. 4**. The unexpected detail of the room is Bernard Leach's *Sleep in the Hills (My son David)* (1918). Easily overlooked, this ink wash emphasises the potter's aptitude for decoration, silently beckoning the visitor towards the final room, in which his pottery is displayed.

The third gallery is, by contrast, eerily empty with a solitary trail of sixteen steel display cases **FIG. 5**. Designed and made by Althoff, they have a decayed, brown steel patina and are clothed in a colourful fabric by weaver Travis Joseph Meinolf. The works by Leach that are on view here indicate that the potter's innovation lies not in the use of experimental form but in his mark-making and decoration. The imagery that adorns his pots ranges from a tree of life, as seen in *Vase* (c.1955) to lines of fish hanging up to dry in *Square dish* (1950) **FIG. 6** and the slip-decorated circular forms in *Dish* (1920s). The intricate arrangement of Leach's pots on Meinolf's woven fabric **FIG. 7** results in an adventurous exchange between material, decoration and clay work: each vase, tile, necklace or button has a distinct position dictated by colour-coordination. There are also two works by Althoff:

a geometric, felt-tip drawing and a sculpture from 2011. The reclining female head and torso holding an infant, which dangles dangerously from the right hand, oversees the display cases in an almost maternal fashion, as if having just birthed the ceramics before her. Situated here, she seems to act as the climax to this unorthodox show.

The Whitechapel Gallery follows a no-label policy, leaving the visitor alone with their intuitions. A rather obscure caption list represents each exhibited work with a corresponding shape in solid black.⁴ The opaque press release written by Francia Gimbel-Masters, a character who could be either Althoff's alter ego or his assistant, is printed on thin recycled fax paper and handed to the visitor upon entry. This caption list mirrors a distinct style of press releases or exhibition pamphlets that was common in West Germany during Althoff's childhood. Photography is not allowed, and the catalogue is still in the last stages of completion, despite the exhibition having opened in early October. These elements are all an indication of the obstinate Althoff, whose inability to relinquish control over an exhibition's co-ordination has been well-documented in previous exhibition catalogues and press releases.⁵

What appears to be a curious coupling at first glance is in fact 'the perfecting of a love' – to borrow the title of one of Robert Musil's lesser-known novellas. Leach and Althoff's similarities encompass muted colour schemes, a shared interest in Eastern culture, autodidactic appropriations and somatic experiences. Encouraging a return to looking, feeling and experiencing works of art through immersive environments is an honourable undertaking. However in doing so *Kai Althoff goes with Bernard Leach* omits too much information, leaving many visitors in the dark – or rather, a taupe fog – and reinforces the circle of 'those who know' to the bourgeois, erudite and exclusive few.



Fig. 6 *Square Dish*, by Bernard Leach. 1950. Porcelain. 2 x 15.5cm (Image courtesy Crafts Study Centre, University for the Creative Arts, Farnham).



Fig. 7 Installation view of *Kai Althoff goes with Bernard Leach* at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, 2020. (Courtesy the Whitechapel Gallery; photograph Polly Eltes).

**Exhibitions
details**

Kai Althoff goes with Bernard Leach
Whitechapel Gallery, London
7th October 2020–10th January 2021

Footnotes

- 1** See F. Gimbel-Masters: press release for *Kai Althoff goes with Bernard Leach* available at https://www.whitechapelgallery.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Althoff_ExhibitionGuide.pdf, accessed 17th December 2020.
- 2** Frank Brangwyn, one of the three founders of the London School of Art, was inspirational to Leach in teaching him etching techniques. See T. Barrow, ed.: *Bernard Leach: Essays in Appreciation*, Wellington 1960, pp.10, 42 and 62; and E. de Waal: *Bernard Leach*, London 1997, p.7.
- 3** Many of these works were first shown at the exhibition *Hauptling Klapperndes Geschirr (Chief Rattling Dishes)* at Tramps, New York, in 2018, where they were not well received. Leah Pires and Jamie Chan's scathing review went viral, prompting the Director of Tramps, Parinaz Mogadassi, to write an open letter in an attempt to rectify the situation. See J. Chan and L. Pires: 'Kai Althoff', *4Columns* (30th November 2018), available at <http://4columns.org/leah-pires-jamie-chan-and/kai-althoff>, accessed 17th December 2020; and P. Mogadassi: 'Open Letter - Kai Althoff, gentrification, opportunism' (7th December 2018), available at <https://www.trampsltd.com/Open-Letter>, accessed 17th December 2020.
- 4** See *Kai Althoff goes with Bernard Leach* exhibition guide, *op. cit.* (note 1).
- 5** See Glenn D. Lowry's foreword in the catalogue accompanying an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 2016, written in the form of a letter: 'Dear Kai, I have been alternately baffled, bemused, irritated, and transported by your remarkable paintings, drawings, and environments. You have challenged us individually and as an institution to think differently, and it has been no easy feat to accommodate your wishes and expectations'. Quoted in G.D. Lowry, ed.: exh. cat. *Kai Althoff ... and then leave me to the common swifts*, New York (Museum of Modern Art) 2016, p.7.

THE
BURLINGTON
MAGAZINE

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ISSN 2631-5661

The Burlington Magazine
14-16 Duke's Road, London WC1H 9SZ