

# Art in America

# RICHARD ALDRICH

Richard Aldrich:  
Untitled, 2012, oil,  
wax, enamel and  
oil bar on linen,  
84 by 58 inches.

All images this  
article courtesy  
Bortolami Gallery,  
New York.

**Interview by Ross Simonini**  
**Studio photography by Jonathan Dennis**

**CURRENTLY  
ON VIEW**  
Works by Richard  
Aldrich in "The  
Forever Now:  
Contemporary  
Painting in an  
Atemporal World"  
at the Museum of  
Modern Art, New  
York, through Apr. 5.

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See Contributors  
page.

# IN THE STUDIO



*The Story of Tuk Tuk*, 2013, oil, wax, Polaroid photograph, book cover and book page on linen, 84 by 68 inches.



OVER THE LAST few years, I made frequent visits to the Williamsburg studio of Richard Aldrich to record our conversations on art, music, writing and psychotherapy. Through our talks, I've come to know him as a curatorially minded artist whose primary interest lies not necessarily in painting, as it might seem, but in exploring a vast network of idiosyncratic ideas through a conceptually unified set of projects in a variety of mediums. His most recent show at New York's Bortolami Gallery, "Forget Your Dreams, All You Need Is Love/A Day in the Life" (2013), included the following: a small Buddhist statue taken from his therapist's office, Polaroids of Aldrich's early exhibitions, a portrait of the legendary musician Syd Barrett he drew in 2003, a stack of novels based on a role-playing board game called "Shadowrun," a canvas silkscreened with lyrics Aldrich composed for one of his early musical projects, a potted plant and an assortment of the striking abstract paintings for which he is best known. From Aldrich's perspective, these artworks and found objects are linked by an intuitive web of references, many grounded in autobiography.

Aldrich often works outside of visual mediums. He records music with the experimental, genre-shifting band Hurray, which includes several visual artists. Previously, he performed under the name Tuck Tuck Tuck. The lyrics of the hypnotic ballads he wrote as part of that solo guitar-and-voice project have since been published by the New York press Karma as *The Words of Tuck Tuck Tuck*, a volume that also features various reviews, lyrics and press releases.

Aldrich writes often, publishing poems in finely printed editions and regularly authoring his own press releases in

heady, hallucinatory prose. As sundry as these forms seem to be, Aldrich maintains a consistent, deeply personal sensibility in all of his output. There's a controlled intensity that seems to tremble beneath the surface of everything he does.

Over the course of our conversations, Aldrich toured me through the paintings in his studio, citing specific images and painted marks to illustrate his process. He flipped through books, reading relevant passages aloud, and played clips from his recorded music. He often searched for sharp, specific ways of discussing broad philosophical questions, and usually arrived at his answers through fragments of language, skipping across phrases until he had surrounded his conclusion from all sides. Since our talks, he has left his studio of seven years and found a workplace closer to his home.

**ROSS SIMONINI** This painting here, *The Story of Tuk Tuk* [2013], has some text in it: the letters "C" and "A" are written on a book cover affixed to the canvas.

**RICHARD ALDRICH** Those are the initials of my therapist.

**SIMONINI** Is the painting related to your therapist?

**ALDRICH** Maybe it is, but it's all in my own head. It's more for myself. The painting is just about therapy in general, or therapy as an attempt at some sort of self-actualization, or the process of self-actualization, which is what art is for as well. That's a photograph of me at the top with all of these pieces of paper stuck to my face. There's this weird white mass blocking my face, clouding my vision. The picture was taken in 2001 or so. There is another book attached to the painting; there is also an abstract painted gesture.

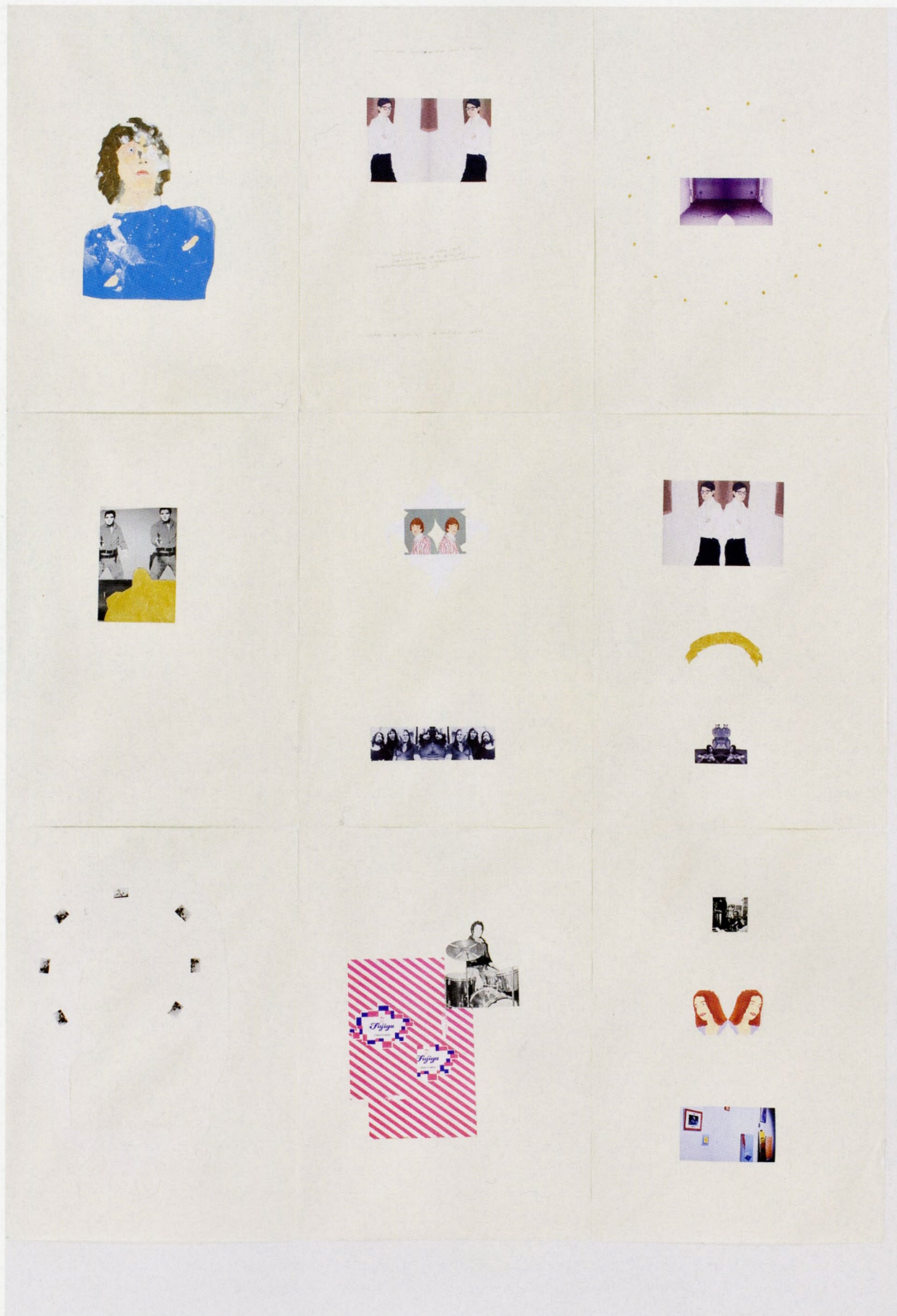
But really, as a painting, it's about visualizing an experience. Or rather, it's a collection of signifiers that refer to experiences, all of which fit under this umbrella of "therapist," which, for me, is just a stand-in for "art." I think, though, there is also in this work a certain notion of playing with ostentatious subject matter—you know, psychotherapy.

**SIMONINI** Your paintings often dip into your past.

**ALDRICH** Sculptures, too.

**SIMONINI** You got your BFA from the Ohio State University in 1998. A book of your college work called *Oh Spider Man To Be So Fair* came out at the beginning of 2014. Why release it now?

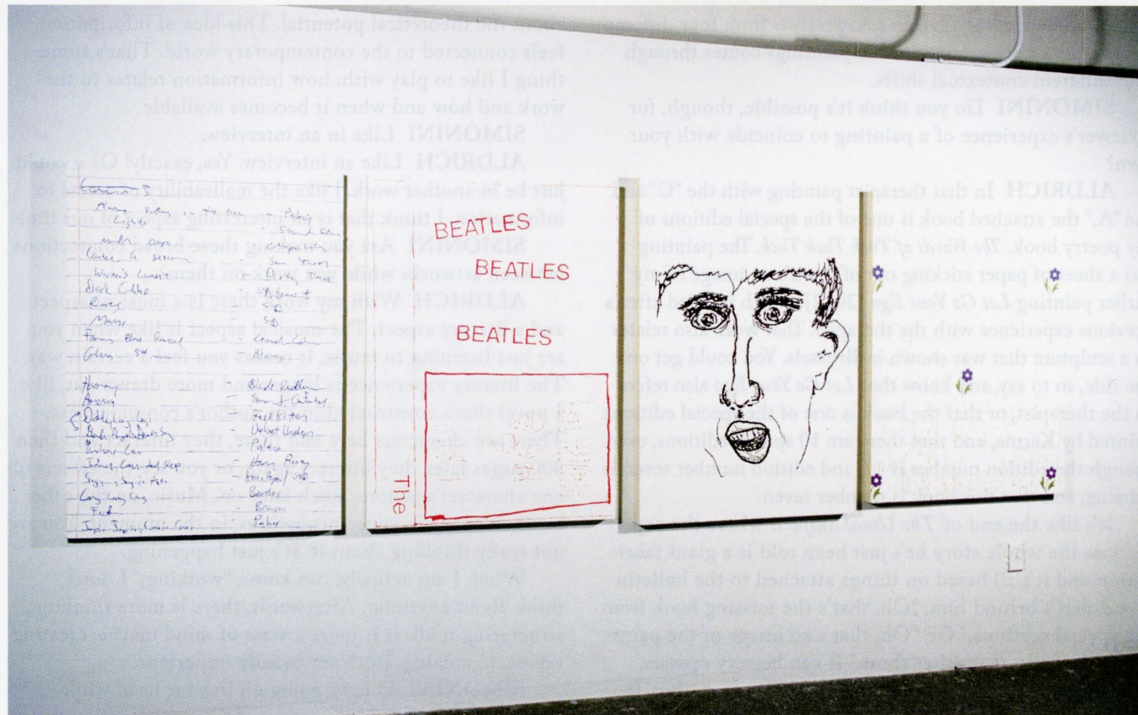
**ALDRICH** For seven or eight years, I've been using old works in my new work. For instance, the painting *Narrative with Syd Barrett, Robert Smithson, John Cale, Patty Waters, Daan van Golden, Richard Aldrich and Can* has collages that I did in, like, 2002 attached to it, though it was done in 2008. I was sort of rethinking or recontextualizing this older work, and thinking about who I was when I made the collages, who I was when I attached them, what it means to present things this way, that sort of thing. So the book is a logical extension of that thinking. One thing I like about this college art book is that there isn't that



*Narrative with Syd Barrett, Robert Smithson, John Cale, Patty Waters, Daan van Golden, Richard Aldrich and Can, 2003-08, collage on linen, 84 by 58 inches.*

*Two Dancers with  
Haze in Their  
Heart Waves Atop  
a Remake of "One  
Page, Two Pages,  
Two Paintings,"*  
2010, oil and  
wax on linen,  
84 by 58 inches.  
Private collection,  
New York.





Left to right: *Mix Tape List*; *Beatles Beatles Beatles*; *Portrait of Me* by Elizabeth Czeckner; and *My Mom's Kitchen Wallpaper*, all 1998, oil on canvas on board, 48 by 36 inches.

much difference between what I was doing then, around 1999, and what I'm doing now. There is this weird time-shift thing: the first work I exhibited was in 2003 or so. That five-year difference isn't very much in the grand scheme of things. Maybe right now it's "college work," but in 10 or 20 years there will be more of a smooth continuum between it and the rest of my work.

**SIMONINI** Do you care about the notion of progression as an artist?

**ALDRICH** I like how, in the book Bortolami published in 2013 [*Richard Aldrich*], the paintings are from 2003 through 2012 but they look as if they could've been done at the same time. So in many ways, I've prided myself on this stylistic non-progression, which isn't the way history normally determines how "artistic progress" should look. For instance, the Mondrian room at MoMA. The museum presents a chronological walkthrough of his art: trees, trees that are really straight, trees that form a grid. Then there's this aha moment: it's just an abstract form, it's not a tree anymore, and we have "Mondrian." I mean, I like Mondrian, but if the progress is not in formal development, then where do you locate it?

There's a way that my art always looks the same, 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. And that is the point of the college book. Like these four paintings

here [*Mix Tape List*, *Beatles Beatles Beatles*, *Portrait of me* by Elizabeth Czeckner and *My Mom's Kitchen Wallpaper*], which I either made in college or which incorporate images from that time. Each of the four comes from a separate place that's very personal. One place is the songs from a mixtape I made for a girlfriend, one is another mixtape for the same girlfriend, one is a drawing from a different girlfriend and one is my mom's wallpaper. They all come from important women in my life. When we see them all together, the experience is less about the individual paintings and more about the presentation of different images and the psychological states these images imply.

**SIMONINI** Imply for you, or for someone looking at it?

**ALDRICH** Either one.

**SIMONINI** You think the two views are the same?

**ALDRICH** They're different things, but they're both important. For me, painting is a way of working out my thoughts. For a viewer, it is a way of understanding different methods of organizing information. All information: visual, historical, everything.

There is a certain kind of extrapolation that happens. Initially, the point is the painting itself, the image that is on it; then the point becomes more about the four paintings together as a group; now, with this book, the point is understanding them in relation to this gesture of "a book of work from when I was in college." It's about a way of understanding how an experience can shift and have different meanings when seen through different contextual lenses and temporal lenses. It's like the movie *Rashomon*, except

instead of depending on four perspectives from four different people, the understanding of the paintings comes through four different contextual shifts.

**SIMONINI** Do you think it's possible, though, for a viewer's experience of a painting to coincide with your own?

**ALDRICH** In that therapist painting with the "C" and the "A," the attached book is one of the special editions of my poetry book, *The Words of Tuck Tuck Tuck*. The painting has a sheet of paper sticking out of it with an image of my earlier painting *Let Go Your Ego* [2012], which is titled after a previous experience with the therapist. That work also relates to a sculpture that was shown in Brussels. You could get on the ride, so to say, and know that *Let Go Your Ego* also refers to the therapist, or that the book is one of the special editions printed by Karma, and that there are 10 special editions, even though the edition number is 11, and edition number seven is missing, and that this book is number seven.

It's like the end of *The Usual Suspects* where the cop realizes the whole story he's just been told is a giant fabrication and it's all based on things attached to the bulletin board that's behind him. "Oh, that's the missing book from the special editions." Or, "Oh, that's an image of the painting that was in that other show." It can be very opaque, but there's this potential for things to be put together. It can actually be quite easy to do so in some cases, but it's certainly not essential for these links to be made. It's more

about the theoretical potential. This idea of information feels connected to the contemporary world. That's something I like to play with: how information relates to the work and how and when it becomes available.

**SIMONINI** Like in an interview.

**ALDRICH** Like an interview. Yes, exactly! Or it could just be in another work. I like the malleability of access to information. I think that is an interesting aspect of our time.

**SIMONINI** Are you making these broad connections between artworks while you work on them?

**ALDRICH** With my work there is a musical aspect and a literary aspect. The musical aspect is like when you are just listening to music, it makes you feel a certain way. The literary experience is longer and more drawn out, like a novel that's constructed in the author's consciousness. There are characters here and there, they interact and then 400 pages later they interact again, or you see the effects of one character's actions much later on. Music, on the other hand, happens in your unconscious, in the moment. You are not really thinking about it. It's just happening.

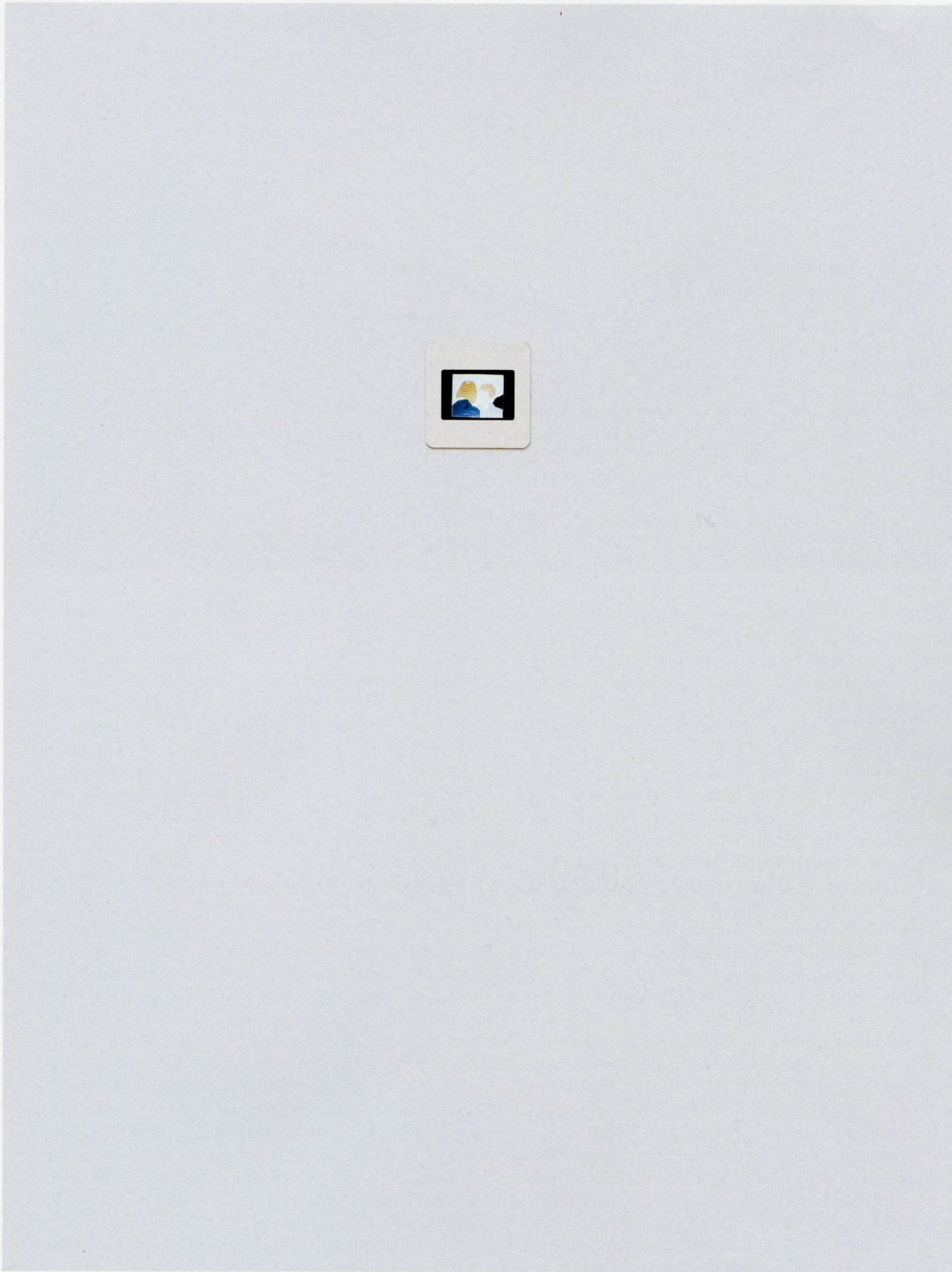
When I am actually, you know, "working," I don't think about anything. Afterwards, there is more thinking, structuring it all. It is more a state of mind maybe, creating versus organizing. Both are equally important.

**SIMONINI** What's going on in your head while you're painting?

**ALDRICH** Well, you can imagine this one [Untitled

Two views of Aldrich's former studio in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.





*Slide Painting #3  
(looking origin),  
2010, photographic  
slide on linen  
with electrical  
component and  
battery, 30 by 20  
inches. Lorrin  
and Deane Wong  
Family Trust.*



*Shadowrun* ed. 1-5,  
2013, books,  
dimensions  
variable.



(2014)] without the orange on it. It was completed up until that point, but I was thinking, “What would I never do to this? I know: I would never paint bright orange that has a weird gradation in it!” So that’s a good reason to do it. Sometimes that’s the impetus.

**SIMONINI** Are you generally trying to push against what you are comfortable with?

**ALDRICH** I guess so, kind of always. But at the same time, it’s not like that is the main idea. It’s more just a way of working. It’s like, you talk to all these people and you have different relationships: with your friend, or the guy in the subway, or this person or that person. Each relationship has rules and levels of comfort or trust or intimacy. So, my paintings end up being like that. How do you treat this one? How do you deal with that one? How do these relationships all coexist? How does it all come together and inform who you are as a person?

**SIMONINI** So, in your mind, you begin with nothing?

**ALDRICH** Concerning individual paintings, for the most part, I can’t really say that I had an idea, no. Sometimes it’s more like jokes: “Wouldn’t it be funny if I stuck these books on a canvas?” For instance, I had this weird bookshelf that was just below the ceiling, more decorative than anything, and there were these books on there, just kind of floating. I liked it so I tried to replicate the effect in a painting, but then the larger idea started to fall into place. I have an ongoing relationship to books in my work, in particular these “Shadowrun” novels, which were narratives based on the ’90s role-playing game, sort of a cyberpunk “Dungeons

& Dragons.” There was a book sculpture in my last show at Bortolami, basically a stack of hardcover “Shadowrun” books. I thought the titles were good advice to artists: *Find Your Own Truth, Choose Your Enemies Carefully, Never Deal with a Dragon*. So the process is more of a back-and-forth between me and my environment. And by “environment” I mean things that I am thinking about or that are affecting me, but also simply things that are around me. When I’m painting there’s a back-and-forth between me and the painting itself. And, I should say, paintings will start a certain way, but they don’t always actually work out. Sometimes they just sit in my studio forever.

**SIMONINI** You often speak in psychological terms about your relationship with painting.

**ALDRICH** It’s like this acceptance thing, the idea of understanding, this idea of perfection being an acceptance of one’s intuition. Like Japanese scrolls or Chinese scrolls or calligraphy. That’s what I’m most into: the idea of the perfect gesture. And what makes it perfect is just an acceptance of it for what it is. It’s like when you stop trying you can actually do it; it’s that understanding of one’s state of mind. I could rip out a page of this book and that’s the gesture, it’s done. But it has to be meaningful to me, and that is something you can’t fake. It’s like Matisse. His paintings are so pure. It’s all about the painting itself and nothing else. Sometimes they are loose and sometimes fussy, but even when Matisse is fussy, he is utterly and purely fussy. So, I think that is perfection; it’s not based on photorealism or getting something right, but rather on just being what it is. ○



Untitled, 2003, oil  
and wax on panel,  
20 by 16 inches.