

Galerie Neu

Graham Hamilton, "Kai Althoff 'di costole' nervi delle volpi / Genoa,  
Flash Art, November 2024

# Flash Art

REVIEWS

## Kai Althoff “di costole” *nervi delle volpi* / *Genoa* by Graham Hamilton

November 4, 2024



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Kai Althoff, *Untitled*, 2024. Oil on linen. 64 x 76,5 x 2,6 cm. Photography by Stefan Korte. Courtesy of the artist and n  
volpi, Genoa.

In Kai Althoff’s exhibition “di costole” at Nervi Delle Volpi, a new space in Genoa organized by Berlin’s Galerie Neu, there are nineteen paintings and four drawings. The show also features some nice furniture – some of it custom-made – and a large selection of tall ferns in the hall with two chairs and a desk

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conspiratorially set amongst them. There are even colorful candies in the desk drawer if you care to check, but none of this is on the works list. It is notable because Althoff rarely provides such an unobstructed view of his paintings. I mean, there is the difficulty of getting to Genoa, but...

The last Althoff show I saw in person was at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2016. It was a playground of diffusion and resistance, all of the works and tchotchkes blended together under a literal big top. A large number of the paintings borrowed from collectors and collections were rebelliously exhibited still in their crates. “di costole” is a fitting bookend, or antithesis: the paintings are real windows to look into, real propositional scenes. I keep wanting to describe the work as romantic, but here it’s more French romanticism than German -- more emotional, less ideological. But actually, I think Althoff is doing poetic realism. *Effi Briest*, Theodor Fontaine’s 1895 masterpiece of the genre, about the titular heroine’s ill-fated marriage to an aristocrat, is a good reference.

Often in Althoff’s images, biblical scenes suggest themselves only to be crowded by extra-textual characters and onlookers. “di costole” translates to “of ribs” in English, calling to mind that first divine surgery. One painting alludes to the story of Isaac’s aborted sacrifice, but now, confusingly, the whole family is present, and no one seems particularly relieved to see the rope cut that binds the boy’s hands. There is also an angel pushing through the wallpaper, but no substitute sacrificial ram. These works are then pointedly not allegorical images; these are the lives myths are made of.

I should stop and describe the paintings. You need half an hour to acclimate to their density. Some are so scratched into the effect is almost pointillist, the colors caught in the weft and weave of the fabrics. Others are covered in washes applied out of order, thin over fat, very against painting rules. But still more are painted almost completely dryly. The fabrics are colorful too, not just cotton and linen but fabrics that normally would be used for rich upholstery or shirting. In a few works there is what appears to be a seam running roughly horizontally through the paintings, but it’s not sewn, it’s creased -- did he fold the works? The four drawings, the pieces most like sculpture, are on paper more fit for wrapping fish or flowers and are also all divided in half, one part completely empty the other emphatically full of every type of mark. Everything is overpainted. Bonnard and Vuillard’s rich blacks applied in weighty shapes obscure decipherable interiors into theatrical abstractions.

Most of the canvases in the exhibition are crooked. Someone I asked suggested that it is the heavy emotionality or maybe also the historical weight of capital P painting that causes Althoff to make the frames bowed. I think that life might just be that wobbly. That it is that difficult, not to paint, but to draw a clean

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square around our experience. My favorite painting (or the only one that inspired a question of preference in me) is in the last room between the street sweeper, the lonely soldier, and the birthday boy. It is the only work of Althoff's I can think of in which he seems to allude to another one of his own paintings. In the upper left part of the frame two boys lean together under a tree. The pair reproduce a similar scene of coupled pastoral idyll of an earlier work from 2018, where the boys become part of a motif in what is actually a painting of a yellow handkerchief. In both works, the couple is stuck between being themselves together and a symbol of queer togetherness.

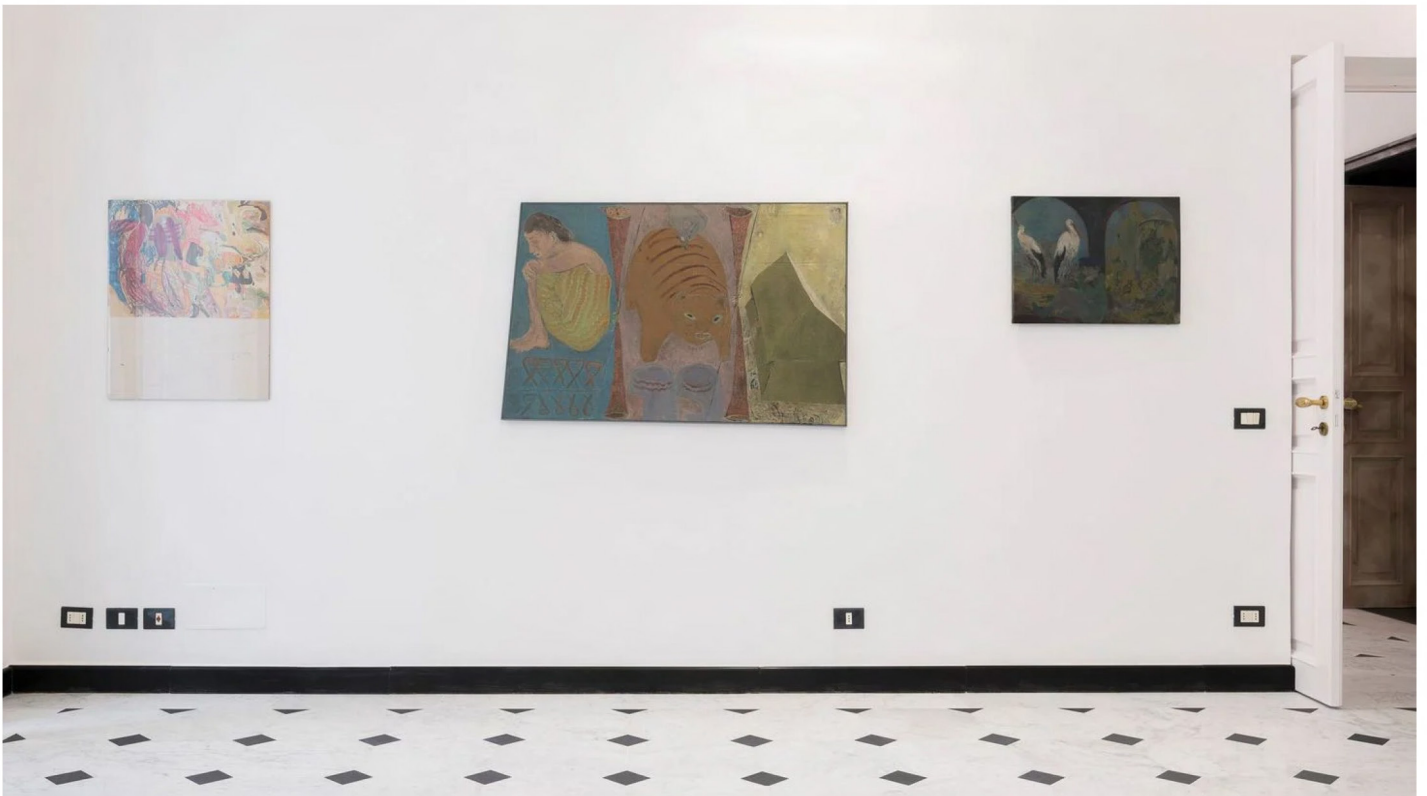
In one painting, a jolly Kilroy is lightly rendered into the scraped surface of the bottom left frame, underneath the boys. He looks like that iconic, ineptly restored messiah. If he is an emissary, then his message is something about sensuality — how beyond, or before, our didactic moral constructions of narrative, there is a whole world of sensual meaning. Painting is an argument for that unquantifiable meaning, an experience beside experience. In Effi Briest, the protagonist's mother describes her as "a child, beautiful and poetic" who wants to paint pictures of the future, "the more colorful they are, the more beautiful and desirable they seem." Althoff is not Effi. He plays with her perspective, but he knows the impositions the world makes on dreamers — conformity, fixity, explication, consistency, value. One critical lesson I have learned from Althoff is to rigidly protect what, as an artist, you are willing to give away. Remember: Adam didn't give his rib — God took it.

What is offered in "di costole" is a sensual set of realities apart from, and rigorously not in need of, an explanation. This isn't the typical refusal we might expect from Althoff. Instead, it feels like a gentle encouragement or allowance to rest in sensual reality, and to test the abundant meaningfulness of that type of enjoyment against the urge to metaphorize, evaluate, and illustrate.

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Ben Broome, "Unmissable: Kai Althoff at nervi delle volpi in Genoa",  
Ocula Magazine, December 2024

# Ocula Magazine



## Unmissable: Kai Althoff at nervi delle volpi in Genoa

LATEST INSIGHT

By Ben Broome  
Genoa  
4 December 2024

Ben Broome reviews Kai Althoff's latest offering at nervi delle volpi, set within a 15th-century Genovese palazzo.



Exhibition view: Kai Althoff, *di costole, nervi delle volpi*, Genoa (5 October–14 December 2024). Courtesy the artist and nervi delle volpi. Photo: Stefan Korte.

Kai Althoff's latest exhibition, *di costole* (Of Ribs) at nervi delle volpi, offers up a generous collection of oil paintings—many disjointed in shape, as is typical for Althoff—alongside a series of felt-tip works on paper, all of which are split into laboured portions and empty slices before being framed (inexpensively, but not without care).

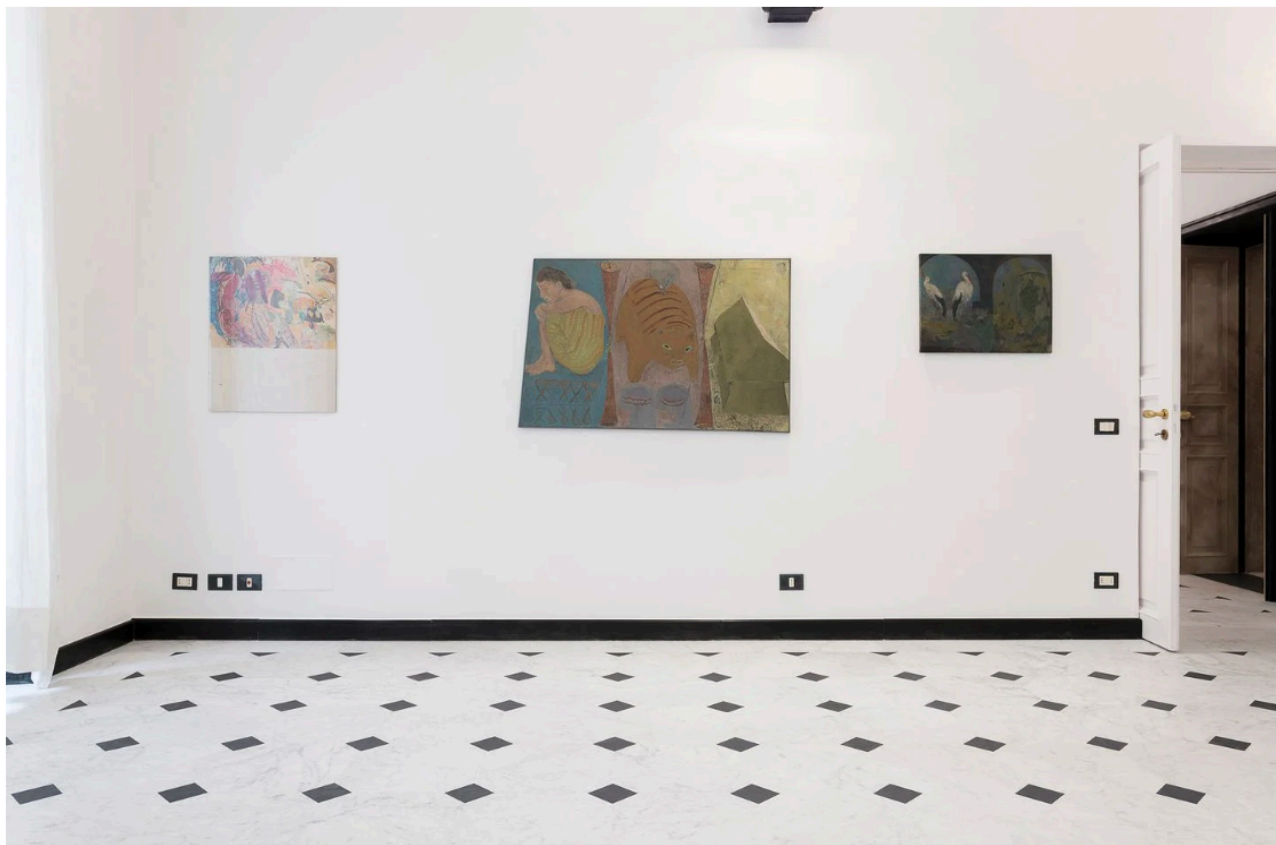
The show lives on the first floor of a 15th-century palazzo, originally erected in the city centre for the 75th Doge of the Republic of Genoa. Formerly municipal offices, the space was chosen by Berlin's Galerie Neu specifically for Althoff's presentation and inconspicuously altered to the artist's specifications.



Kai Althoff, *Untitled* (2024). Oil on linen. 101 x 117 x 3 cm. Courtesy the artist and nervi delle volpi. Photo: Stefan Korte.

Althoff's palette is more muted here than in much of his past work. Yellows turn to browns and whites to greys, as if the paintings have been dirtied by a century of candle smoke in a nearby Baroque church. One work is an exception: a crisp cream clergyman's robe extends from the whitewashed walls on which the work is hung to illuminate the congregation gathered around him.

As ever nameless, the works in *di costole* are also, at least per the accompanying publication, undated. Whilst we might assume the paintings are recently birthed, the impossibility to pin them to a date renders them temporally nomadic; placed by each viewer into their own epoch. There is, in fact, no subject matter that I could see that assigns Althoff's output to the last 50 years. The most contemporary piece of technology rendered, a record player, is tended by an unkempt-looking and ageless character, who might as easily be a young girl on the verge of adolescence as a woman well into her 50s.



Exhibition view: Kai Althoff, *di costole*, *nervi delle volpi*, Genoa (5 October–14 December 2024). Courtesy the artist and *nervi delle volpi*. Photo: Stefan Korte.

The reason for Althoff's attraction to Genoa is unclear but Elina, the custodian of the space, recounts a hazy story from the artist's youth in which he and his brother became separated whilst holidaying in the city. Althoff spent the day wandering the Italian port searching for his sibling's familiar face, only reuniting with him near Piazza Principe station as night fell. Could this traumatic memory inform the exhibition? The paintings in *di costole* do feel rooted in youth and loss.

Few of Althoff's characters seem to eclipse adolescence, but their loosely rendered faces often carry expressions mismatched with the naivety of childhood. In one work a young boy, aged 11 or 12, sits forlornly against a cloister pillar. A pair of white storks and a conical tiled roof place the scene more in the artist's native Rheinland than in the Italian Riviera, but it's easy to imagine the young Althoff, lost and demoralised, in a similar pose.



Kai Althoff, *Untitled* (2024). Oil on linen. 48.5 x 63.7 x 2.5 cm. Courtesy the artist and nervi delle volpi. Photo: Stefan Korte.

Time spent with the works comes with the realisation that the often-joyful characters which populate Althoff's paintings live alongside the sinister. In one image, a kneeling boy has his hands and ankles bound. The faces of his captors (or possible saviours?) seem placid at first glance but reveal a morbid blankness on closer inspection. The fate of the boy is ours to imagine, but the scene is decidedly unsettling.

Another work felt particularly pertinent when I visited, on 5 November 2024: the day of the U.S. election. A young girl, flanked by her mother, lifts a rifle from a counter littered with an array of firearms. A not-much-older shopkeeper dotingly supervises in a painting that could reference the lax American gun laws with which Althoff may well be forced to contend at his home in upstate New York.





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In the gallery, Althoff's spacial interventions are subtle but omnipresent: antiquated uplighters—original to the former office—cast shadows across the works. A lone Fratelli Levaggi-designed 'Tre Archi' chair with a woven cane seat nestles in the corner of one room. In another, a 1950s day bed by Kazuhide Takahama—bought by Althoff in Milan and reupholstered—holds court.

The furnishings are intended for utility and lend *di costole* a homely domesticity. Althoff is an impeccable host and, alongside these resting places, every visitor is offered a candied fruit from a famed Genovese pasticceria: a reward for long journeys made to Genoa by Althoff's loyal disciples.



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On the day of my visit, the glazed french doors populating the space were largely open and the sounds of the city floated in, past the aged linen curtains—a hangover from the space's past life—that Althoff specified must be kept original and unwashed. The exhibition feels like an appendage of the street below, as if it's always been there. If Genoa is a body and its passages ribs, then *di costole* (translating literally to 'of the ribs') could be a vestigial organ; a remnant of times past.

The tales Althoff's works tell me are no-doubt different from those they would tell the busker in the square below or the proprietor of the flower shop opposite, but that's what I love most about them. These may be intensely narrativised works but the stories are as much our own as they are Althoff's. —[O]