Richard Aldrich and the 19th Century French Painting

Richard Aldrich makes paintings characterized by a sincere and unfailing curiosity in the possibilities for pictorial form. His compositions range from effusive abstractions, spare sculptural workings, text, collage and graphic, often humorous, figuration. The complex disposition of painting is a central concern for the Brooklyn-based artist, who sees its potential to reveal the nuanced disposition of painting is a central concern for the Brooklyn-based artist, who sees its potential to reveal the nuanced experiences that exist outside language. Crafting a vocabulary of gestures within the studio, and the cosmos of canvas scraps and books that fill it. From a color slide, a page of prose, or even a silver from a discarded frame, Aldrich repositions these objects as protagonists on the canvas. His own poetry and meandering fairytales, as well as his interest in music—Aldrich plays solo and participates in the band Hurray with a group of fellow New York artists—also inform his painting, his choice of subject, and gesture.  

A deliberate misnomer, the exhibition title Richard Aldrich and the 19th Century French Painting proposes an immediate false start—a slippage between expectation, and perception. Within his exhibition, Aldrich introduces four works from the collection of the Saint Louis Art Museum. “Nineteenth century French painting”—which in itself might suggest either a distinct work or generalized episode of art making—is here neither exclusively French nor accurately dated. In an exploration of how painterly histories can be reconfigured, and how non-traditional narratives can refocus our encounters with subject and form, Aldrich begins with Edouard Vuillard (French, 1868-1940), an artist he has long admired. In the 1890s, Vuillard began to collaborate closely with a group of young avant-garde artists; calling themselves the Nabis, these painters shared a goal to assimilate daily life into their art. Among the group’s members were Pierre Bonnard (French, 1867-1947), whose The Basket of Fruit (1932) hangs in the exhibition, as well as K.K. Roussel, pictured in one of Vuillard’s two interiors. Standing conspicuously beside this painterly triumvirate is Sir William Orpen’s (Irish, 1878-1931) Self Portrait painted from 1913. The imperial portraitist stands with brushes in hand, glowing with furrowed brows before one of his own paintings. Eschewing conventions of chronology, academicism, and traditional museum display, here Aldrich offers a story of friendship and rivalry, turf self-portrayal, and above all, a space for painting where art and daily life are inextricably linked.  

Aldrich has long maintained that his practice hovers between innocence and understanding. Testing the relationship between art-making and artistic discourse—among historical painting and within his own—he encourages his viewer to consider how a work of art is made, experienced, and how it lives in the world. At its core, Richard Aldrich and the 19th Century French Painting offers a portrait of an artist whose adventurous vision, and will to push the medium forward, offer new possibilities for painting today.