



Above: Edouard Vuillard, French, 1868-1940, *K.X. Roussel Reading*, 1904.
17 ¼ x 21 ½ inches, oil on cardboard. Collection of the Saint Louis Art Museum,
Gift of Mr. Richard K. Weil 713:1961



Richard Aldrich and the 19th Century French Painting

Richard Aldrich makes paintings characterized by a sincere and unflinching 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 experiences that exist outside language. Crafting a vocabulary of gestures within each picture, and communicating those idioms from one canvas to the next, Aldrich chronicles an abstract account of the self—picturing the studio, personal relationships, music, poetry, and art that make up his world. For his first solo museum exhibition, the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis presents twenty of Aldrich's large-scale works, foregrounding the breadth of his aesthetic investigations and his ambitious inventions for the medium.

Aldrich often works with a mixture of oil paint, mineral spirits, and wax, regularly shifting from full, tenderly

gestural compositions to thrifty canvases with abutting passages of color. He suspends fragments of cloth to canvas, or painted wood against a bare frame, as with *If I Paint Crowned I've Had It, Got Me* (2008). Paintings feature found text, such as the dually translated pages of Syd Barrett's song, "Words," and poetry takes on formal properties in *Three Layers: Text, Space, Gesture* (2009). Alongside his rendering of disparate techniques, Aldrich's practice also assumes systems of repetition, self-quotation, and translation. There is a persistent correspondence among his works, and with each iteration, one's grasp on the knowable or familiar is loosened in exchange for a heightened awareness of form. The spare and architectural scene in *DVG (Cubism #1)* (2009), for one, reappears as the conceptual starting point for *One Page, Two Pages, Two Paintings* (2009). Bold passages of paint are echoed further in the recent *Two Dancers with Haze in Their Heart Waves atop a Remake of, "One Page, Two Pages, Two Paintings"* (2010).

While certain works might suggest familiar tropes within painting's recent history, Aldrich revels in the vulnerability of assumed certainties, and he actively refuses facile stylizations or predictable forms. Recognized for his engagement with the aesthetics and ideals of twentieth century painting, he often alludes to historical stratagems to explore the relationship of distinct forms and narratives. However, his painting is rooted not to a reiteration of history, but to his own story, and to what he calls "the otherworldliness of experience." His paintings are intimate and decidedly literary, taking personal relationships, routine experience, and reading as his subjects. The works themselves often draw together actual elements of the studio, and the cosmos of canvas scraps and books that fill it. From a color slide, a page of prose, or even a sliver 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 presentation, 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 Eduoard 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* (1922) hangs in the exhibition, as well as K.X. Rousset, pictured in one of Vuillard's two interiors. Standing conspicuously beside this painterly triumvirate is Sir William Orpen's (Irish, 1878-1931) *Self-Portrait* from 1913. The Imperial portraitist stands with brushes in hand, glowering with furrowed brows before one of his own paintings. Eschewing conventions of chronology, academicism, and traditional museum display, here Aldrich offers a short story of friendly rivals, turgid self-portraiture, 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 crux, *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.



Above: Richard Aldrich, *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 x 58 inches. Private collection. Photo courtesy of the artist and Bortolami Gallery, New York.