

# The New York Times

## Matthew Monahan

*Anton Kern Gallery  
532 West 20th Street, Chelsea  
Through July 30*

For his second solo show in New York and at this gallery, the American artist Matthew Monahan has found his inner German while recycling nearly a decade's worth of sculpture and drawings into a decrepit, labyrinthine cabinet of curiosities. The work makes a knockout first impression. It also brings to mind the efforts of German artists like Joseph Beuys as well as Dieter Roth (a Swiss-German); Georg Herold (Mr. Monahan's teacher, with whom he had a two-man show at Kern in 2002); Isa Genzken; and even the moody 19th-century dandies of Kai Althoff, a younger painter whom Mr. Monahan could conceivably have influenced.

Among a sprawl of drywall pedestals and plinths, glass reliquaries hold fragmentary heads and torsos made of wax, floral foam and wood. Large graphite drawings of faces crumpled into enigmatic expressions loom overhead like discarded portraits or banners. (They also evoke Tony Oursler's talking-head video projections, minus the electronics.) The artist's early transfer drawings are put to assorted uses.

The effect is that of a ramble through the dustbin of several histories, including Mr. Monahan's, humanity's and art's. Multiple references flit through the mind: dethroned kings, fallen dictators and poets in existential crisis; stoically beautiful peasant women; St. Sebastian punctured with arrows. Titles like "Former Republic," "Dictator Equator," "Army of One" and "Most Isolated Human Being" add a certain weight. Sometimes you feel like you've happened upon a vast royal tomb, or museum storage for the relics of a lost Rheinisch tribe; elsewhere, you might be in a connoisseur's home, looking at a bit of antiquity displayed on a mantle.

But even while you may gawk in amazement at this show, it starts to wear thin. For one thing, it becomes a bit monotonous. For another — in addition to the on-purpose patina of age — the sculptural ideas themselves feel old-fashioned. It is not clear where Mr. Monahan will take his considerable talent after such a cathartic show, but he may have to consider somewhere completely different. ROBERTA SMITH