

NYTIMES.COM

14 MARCH 2003

ART IN REVIEW; MATHEW CERLETTY

By Holland Cotter

Rivington Arms

102 Rivington Street, Lower East Side

Through April 4

Mathew Cerletty, 23, makes an impressive solo debut with this show of crisply executed figure paintings and drawings. Many of the figures are of pensive young men, often in self-reflective pairs, like Narcissus at his pool. Two of them, identically dressed but differently posed, occupy a bedroom in "Interior, the Rape (After Degas)." In a pastel and colored pencil piece titled "Trying to Live Beside the Point," a man stands at a bathroom sink, toothbrush poised, his image in the facing mirror.

The fact that figure and reflection are possibly an inexact match nicely undercuts the confident realism of Mr. Cerletty's style. So does the insistent patterning -- stripes on wallpaper, bedsheets and neckties -- that runs through much of the work, flattening and destabilizing pictorial space. Within this virtually abstract context, most of the figures appear surreally weightless. The exception is a middle-aged man -- Narcissus 40 years on -- who sits, glum and heavy, in a bathtub against a background of what might be the flower-power patterns of his youth.

Not all Mr. Cerletty's pictures are equally gripping, though all are highly accomplished. Like many young artists at present, he is technically polished and knows his way around art history and popular culture, past and present. He also has a cool, light instinct for weirdness and when that's in play, it sets him apart.