

ARTnews

Sailors, Priests, and Devils

Matthew Benedict: *The Mage's Pantry*

By Charles Beyer, Nayland Blake, and Oliver Zybok

Hatje Cantz, 104 pages, \$45

The spell cast by Matthew Benedict's paintings of sailors and other working-class men is immediate—the viewer slips into a world of 19th-century whaling ships and early-20th-century saloons.

The Mariner's Baptism (2002–3), for instance, entices with a grand *tableau vivant* in which two dozen characters enact the time-honored ritual of baptizing two blindfolded sailors on their first crossing of the equator. The picture's unruly cast includes pirates, priests, devils, corsairs, swashbucklers, and cabin boys. This masquerade is a celebration of the male world ruled by the sea god Neptune and watched

over by Davy Jones, a reminder of the death that awaits many at sea.

While the content brings to mind writers such as H. P. Lovecraft and Herman Melville (except that in Benedict's pictures, the innocence and concentrated action are infused with unmistakable homoerotic tension), the

Fleshing out this richly illustrated volume, the authors place Benedict's vision of a faded New England—an imaginary world he constructs not just in paintings but also in photographs, sculptures, and assemblages—in historical, esthetic, and personal contexts. In his subtle essay, artist Nayland Blake finds narrative power in Benedict's paintings of strangely familiar scenes that seem to be without beginning or sequel, like events excised from otherwise forgotten adventure stories.

Charles Beyer's more personal text focuses on the maritime themes as well as the shift from reality to illusion to myth, as exemplified by the artist's photographs of friends costumed as the subjects of his paintings. The inclusion of these preparatory materials makes it clear that the process of myth making is one of Benedict's central concerns.

Oliver Zybok takes the reader through a detailed analysis of a single work, *The Mage's Pantry* (2005). In this sculptural installation, a wooden cupboard with glass doors is crammed with a wide assortment of utilitarian products, all labeled with the word "magic" in order to lure customers. It exemplifies Benedict's ability to take ordinary found objects, redolent of specific points in time, and use them to summon the occult, the magical, and the dreaded unnamable.

—Charles Ruas



Matthew Benedict's *Shipwreck Annie (Rock of Ages)*, 2002.

artist's mastery of style and versatility conjure such illustrator-artists as Maxfield Parrish and N. C. Wyeth.