

ART IN REVIEW

Michael Buthe: 'Secrets'



"The Last Secret of Fatima" (1986), oil and gold leaf on canvas triptych, by Michael Buthe.

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*Alexander and Bonin*  
132 10th Avenue, near West 18th Street, Chelsea  
Through Oct. 12

Distinctive enough to capture major attention, but too diverse to be readily branded, the German artist Michael Buthe had a substantial European career in the 1970s and '80s, but faded from view after his death at 50 in 1994. More recently, interest in him has been increasing abroad, and Alexander and Bonin, who represent a somewhat similar artist, Paul Thek, continue to be Mr. Buthe's New York champions with a third solo show.

Mr. Buthe, like Mr. Thek, was gay, Roman Catholic, and sought sources for art outside his own culture. He was well enough established in his 20s to be included in the legendary 1969 exhibition "When Attitudes Become Forms." A year later he first visited Morocco and in 1972 spent nearly five months there in the beguiling seaside city of Essaouria. Its high-color buildings and cornucopian souks cast a spell that saturated his art, which moved from quasi-Minimalism to Orientalist-hippie environments to small, exuberant pictures that brought Sigmar Polke, a fellow art school student, as well as Paul Klee, to mind.

There's a nice suite of such work upstairs at Alexander and Bonin, though the main show consists primarily of three large pieces. The 1985 "Landscape (Spanish Energy)," a dense assemblage incorporating a pitchfork, brocade and the image of a staring eye, finds Mr. Buthe in a theatrical mode, while a pair of 15-foot-long abstract triptych paintings recall his minimalist roots.

The two triptychs share a title, "The Last Secret of Fatima," a reference to a reported appearance, in Portugal in 1917, of the Virgin Mary to three children, to whom she entrusted three secrets. Two were made public in the 1940s, and the third, after heated speculation, in 2000. Both pictures are composed of two monochromatic panels (blue in one painting, red in the other) covered with all-over patterns of tiny stars and joined by a third, vertical panel in silver and gold. The results suggest blank icons, Yayoi Kusama dot paintings with hinges, and stereoscopic views of intergalactic space. They're lovely. And as to secrets, the power of art (and religion) to let them stay secret is certainly one.