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By KAREN ROSENBERG

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Adolf Dietrich Richard Phillips

'Painting and
Misappropriation'

Swiss Institute
495 Broadway, near Broome
Street, SoHo
Through June 26

The Swiss wildlife and landscape painter Adolf Dietrich (1877-1957) has an unlikely ally in Richard Phillips, a contemporary artist given to large canvases and confrontational imagery. Mr. Phillips has been borrowing themes from Dietrich for years and now makes good on his debts in a stirring show at the Swiss Institute.

Organized by Mr. Phillips and Gianni Jetzer, "Painting and Misappropriation" serves two functions: to introduce New Yorkers to Dietrich, and to present Mr. Phillips as a kind of crackpot art historian. (It should be taken together with his other recent curatorial effort, "Your History Is Not Our History" at the Midtown gallery Haunch of Venison, organized with David Salle.)

Dietrich is certainly a discovery. A self-taught, impoverished artist who painted his rural surroundings with an eye to human strife, he could (and did) make a basket of kittens look creepy. The show includes many of his startling pictures of animals in pairs and groups — don't miss the one of dead and strung-up weasels, with a significant date of 1942 (World War II) — as well as landscapes that alternate between frozen and fiery.

In writings and interviews Mr. Phillips fixates on the false marketing of Dietrich as a naïve artist, the Swiss Henri Rousseau. His own paintings try to correct this impression by sheer force, enlarging Dietrich's squirrels and rodents to comically enor-

mous scale. Another of Mr. Phillips's strategies, less effective, is to superimpose faces from different sources — pornography, Marine recruiting ads — on Dietrich's landscapes.

The idea that Dietrich needs to be rescued by Mr. Phillips is another fiction; contemporary viewers know that "self-taught" and "naïve" aren't the same thing. But this show is a genuine, generous demonstration of one artist's esteem for another.

KAREN ROSENBERG