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Art in Review
By Roberta Smith
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Alessandro Pessoli 'Caligola'

Anton Kern Gallery
532 West 20th Street, Chelsea
Through Jan. 11

Despite the daily deluge of moving images afflicting us, hand-drawn animation retains a great deal of its allure. Its capacity for contrasting breathtaking illusion and visible working parts -- for magic believed and magic laid bare -- is close to the theater's, and it is rarely more seductive than when tackled by an artist with a painterly touch.

The young Italian artist Alessandro Pessoli both extends and leans on this seductiveness in "Caligola," a charming, ultimately decorative 10-minute animation that he cobbled together from luminous watercolors. The culmination of a painstaking three-year process, "Caligola" is the main attraction of Mr. Pessoli's third New York gallery exhibition, where it is accompanied by watercolors.

The film's subject is universal but vague; it concerns a long, event-filled journey or a series of loosely connected vignettes endured by sketchy humans and animals. These figures metamorphose their way through landscapes defined by swaths and plumes of opulent color that shape-shift from swaying trees to coursing rivers to bleached deserts. Death and life, love and strife, political and psychological suffering are among the themes. A cobbled-together soundtrack, harsh but alert to every change, adds to the absurdist mood.

But if moral and political portents hang in the air, so do artistic precedents. Goya, Beckett and Munch come to mind, as do Nancy Spero, Francesco Clemente and Helen Frankenthaler. Conflating all this and then setting it in motion is a start, and the contrast between the spareness of the animated images and the density of the ones on the wall introduces a healthy variety.

While you appreciate Mr. Pessoli's effort and the beauty of his little film, it is like being served a small and elegant but tasty appetizer. You think: that's good. What's next?