

Gerhard Richter

“Gerhard Richter: Paintings and Drawings”

Marian Goodman Gallery

New York City

May 7–June 25, 2016

“Gerhard Richter: Paintings and Drawings” brings together 79 works of oil on canvas, over-painted photographs, abstract drawings, and underpainted glass, all works made between 2010 and 2015, a period when the artist returned to abstract painting with a new body of work. Just before, Richter had been dedicated to exploring primarily non-painterly and digital means to realize his “Strips” series, which are identified as a “dialectical inquiry into painting from aesthetic engagements at its margins,” according to the exhibition announcement. In fact, this statement could apply to Richter’s entire career. Each diverse group of works diverges from traditional painting in its own way. Although Richter feels a kinship with tradition, often calling himself a classical painter, his works push at the edges of what that classification can mean, making us consider the greater realm of “picture making” in all of its forms.

The emotive quality of Richter’s work becomes more evident if you hear him speak about the work. It’s as if he helps the artworks create themselves, giving a little bit of himself to each until they are content. For the abstract paintings—which he speaks about most frequently—he begins with the brush, streaking color across the canvas in bright swatches. When this base of paint feels complete, often after periods of waiting and reconsidering, he begins working with the squeegee. He applies paint directly to the squeegee and then drags it across the surface of the painting repeatedly, transforming it as different orientations emerge. He layers colors, creating textures until, as he says, he doesn’t know what else to do. The painting has manifested itself, less with an aha moment than a quiet realization.

In the recent exhibition, abstract oil paintings are presented first, the largest of which are visible when you first step off of the elevator, stories above West 57th Street. Arranged rhythmically around the room by size in a way that reminds me of the tactile, block-based, pattern-building exercises of elementary schools, size stands in for color. The rhythmic nature of their organization mimics the rhythmic nature of the works, particularly in the skipping motion exposed by the squeegee. Details here and



913-39 *Aladdin*, 2010. Lacquer behind glass. H 14 ½, W 19 ¾ in.

PHOTO: CATHY CARVER
COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

there reminded me of Eadweard Muybridge’s motion studies and Marcel Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*.

The paintings continue in small format alongside five underpainted-glass works in a second space. These glass works, part of the “Aladdin” series, are made by laying a piece of glass on the floor and dripping lacquer paint onto its surface, urging and helping the colors to swirl, fluidly, with almost hypnotic motion. When the orientation feels right, he places another sheet of glass on top, freezing the lacquer too far away to get close to—literally seeing it through glass.

Richter has explored glass as a material since the earliest years of his career, using it both sculpturally and as a pictorial medium. The connecting thread through his use of glass has been the creation of works that construct a boundary, both emotional and visual, between the onlooker and the artworks. Glass’s reflective quality means that the space around it appears on its surface, interrupting any attempt to truly see the artwork. As viewers move closer, their own reflections become part of the work. Some of the most interesting manifestations of this are in Richter’s gray monochromes on glass, made in the mid- to late 60s. These works beg to be studied closely to discern the different qualities of the grays in question, but this is nearly impossible because of the reflections on the glass.

This affective nature runs through his drawings, placed in the last, spacious, light-filled room, which feel like intimate expressions in pencil on paper. As the exhibition catalogue

states, the drawings were made not as “preparatory studies . . . but rather a kind of finale, which can be understood in relation with the introduction, crescendo, development, and construction of the painting sequence.” And the overpainted photographs, sequestered to a conference room, feel self-protective; moments of Richter’s own experiences that he is not quite ready to let us share.

As a final note, the exhibition’s location is an appropriate one, not just for the architectural space, left white, which feels right for abstract expressionist works rooted in the genre of the midcentury, but also for the relationship between the artist and Marian Goodman, whose career progression parallels that of Richter’s. Goodman began dealing art in 1962, and proceeded to open the storied gallery Multiples and later Marian Goodman Gallery. She worked with Richter as early as 1968, when she introduced his multiples to an American audience. For Richter, who escaped East Germany in 1961, a refugee from Soviet occupation, this was a moment when his work, swathed with the possibilities of the free world, began to flourish.

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