

GAGOSIAN

theguardian

Katharina Grosse torpedoes painting: This Drove My Mother Up the Wall
review

From plumes of lava orange to ribbons of speckled colour bleeding down the walls, the German artist wields her spray-gun like a weapon in this gallery takeover

Skye Sherwin



'Whereas painting once depicted the world, she applies paint to the world itself' ... Katharina Grosse's exhibition This Drove My Mother Up the Wall. Photograph: Andy Keate

The landscapes that have succumbed to the brilliant, blaring colours of Katharina Grosse's spray-paint gun include abandoned buildings, public gardens and seashores: a spectacular blend of painting and land art that has made the German a major player on the international art circuit. In the Rockaways, New York, she once coated part of the old army base and its surrounding sands in too-red polluted sunset hues. Earlier this year in Denmark she splurged the lurid pink and white of seaside sticks of rock across the undulating grass banks that flanked a busy road. Within galleries, meanwhile, her experiments in taking paint beyond the bounds of the canvas have seen huge felled trees, piles of dirt and fibreglass boulders become the base for psychedelic abstractions.

All of which means This Drove My Mother Up the Wall, her installation at the South London Gallery, seems in comparison somewhat quieter – if quiet is a word you can apply to a work that touches every surface of the emptied exhibition space with rainbow paint. In the Victorian building's central gallery, it begins at the edges, dissolving the boundaries where the skirting boards meet the floor in swaths of colour, which roll upwards like rising waves. Much remains brilliant white, and here and there pale voids, left behind by stencils, jut out from the paint.

Grosse has described her art as aggressive and it is easy to see why. Not only is it an effective takeover of the environment, it torpedoes, one by one, the assumed limits of painting. The

picture frame, obviously, is out the window: whereas painting once depicted the world, she applies paint to the world itself. Inevitably, she has been likened to graffiti artists – but while the tagger makes a distinct mark, this is an art that flirts with the idea it might coat anything, without bounds.

Just as the divide between art and life starts to dissolve, however, Grosse takes steps not to let us be seduced wholeheartedly by her new colour-saturated world. Artists have painted directly on to building interiors for centuries. Yet unlike trompe l'oeil architectural features, for instance, her abstractions are deliberately at odds with their 3D ground. Then there are those bare white stencilled absences with their fuzzy edges, a reminder that this is all a construct.

What is striking here is the sensation of walking on to an empty stage, one bereft of its main player: the artist with her gun. (This oft-repeated description suggests a Lara Croft figure, but in documentation of Grosse's process she looks more like pest control, in a white head-to-toe protective suit and wielding a long spray-paint pipe.) Unlike theatre, however, we can drop in when we feel like it, picking up her path at any point.

Here is a plume of lava orange erupting up the wall. There, a single bruise of mauve blooms on the ceiling. At either end of the gallery, layers of colour resemble gauzy fabric decking walls and the original doors with their blocky pediments. The spray paint does a lot of different things. It can be dense and concealing, luring us into the illusory depths of overlain ribbons of colour, or airy and speckled against white. Occasionally it bleeds down the wall.

Like the artist, we must walk through space, rubber-necking to take in her painting's collisions and collusions with what is real. There are lovely moments, like discovering the shadowed undersides of the ceiling's square mouldings. These have been emphasised with blue and orange, riffing on the play of light and shade that is one of 2D art's oldest tools when it comes to depicting the 3D world. It also recalls an origins story Grosse has told, a childhood obsession for mentally painting over the shadows in her bedroom with an invisible paintbrush.

Two films she has selected to screen alongside the installation shed more light on her thinking. In Claudia Müller's *Women Artists*, Grosse curates her virtual dream show, featuring artists who both channel the everyday world and push art's limits, including the Indigenous Australian painter Emily Kame Kngwarreye and the rising star Camille Henrot. Then there's French new wave legend Agnès Varda, whose *The Gleaners and I* is her personable, freewheeling documentary exploring how people put to new use what society normally casts off, be that foraging for food or street junk repurposed as art. As she drives along, Varda's thumb and finger repeatedly frame the backs of lorries on the road, like a temporary viewfinder.

It is a slight, revealing gesture concerning art's sticky, slippery grip on the real world that chimed loudly for me with the contradictions Grosse courts by fusing painting and its support, the artifice of pigment and the stony empiricism of the gallery wall. Above the venue's spray-painted doors I notice that the exit signs are untouched. Health and safety, presumably, but they provide a harsh flash of ordinary life that she would surely appreciate.