

GAGOSIAN

 BROOKLYN RAIL

KATHARINA GROSSE with Phong Bui

Phong Bui



Katharina Grosse, Untitled, 2016. Acrylic on canvas. 114 3/16 × 76 inches. © Katharina Grosse und VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2016. Photo: Jens Ziehe. Courtesy Gagolian

The first time I encountered Katharina Grosse's work was when she created her site-specific, spray-painted wall installation for the Drawing Center's Selections Fall 1999 (September 10 – October 14, 1999), which also included the works of Steve Roden, Honda Takeshi, Barbara Cemilla Tucholski, and Paul Zawisha. I've steadily followed her work ever since. In spite of our busy schedules, we finally had a chance for an extended conversation over Skype about her life and work a few days after her recent debut at Gagolian Gallery (January 19 – March 11, 2017). Katharina was in New Zealand relishing a brief period of revitalization.

Phong Bui (Rail): I was struck by your response to the artist Ati Maier in an interview in BOMB Magazine's Spring 2011 issue. When she asked whether you invaded space in some way, you said, "I do not invade space. I take it for granted." This particular response to spatial surroundings reminds me of a wonderful Vietnamese proverb: "If you live in a long tube, be

thin; if you live in a barrel, be round.” [Laughter.] When, where, and how did this spatial responsiveness come into being? I assume it took root before you went to study at the legendary Kunstakademie Düsseldorf.

Katharina Grosse: I think it’s always been there. As a kid I painted images like volcanoes and wanted more space for them, so I added more paper on all sides, creating larger sheets for more volcanoes. I also played music in front of them with great pleasure. Like most children, this sense of invincibility and problem-solving was a given. I didn’t think there was anything I couldn’t do. And I think it goes away when we come of age or become educated, which restricts us. I was always interested in the distance between where I stood and the place I was pointing to. I remember on a hiking trip with my parents, I pointed to the mountaintop that we were hiking towards. It took us several hours to reach. I felt it was a natural materialization. The idea that you can beam your possibilities into the place you’re looking towards, at any distance, has always interested me.

Rail: That’s amazing. Do you think that having grown up with your mother Barbara Grosse, a printmaker who often makes large black-and-white prints with free-flowing forms, might have had some considerable effect on your restless nature, or your natural desire for constant movement? If so, was it further amplified at art school? Perhaps you were there at the time when Markus Lüpertz and Gerhard Richter were teaching?

Grosse: Yes. They, Nam June Paik, and many others were among the teachers there. Even though it was a very conservative environment it was very competitive. I learned a lot about painting, but not much about other subjects. I think that after having studied languages, literature, philosophy, history, and theater, among other things, it took a little while for all that to come together to form a conceptual framework for the work. But while I was there, photography was considered more theory driven than painting. Andreas Gursky and Monika Baer, among others, were also there as students. The teachers that I had, like Gotthard Graubner, were still quoting Courbet, who had a famous saying, “as stupid as a painter.” [Laughter.] Which was funny because Courbet was very cunning, very intelligent and conceptual in his own paintings, so it was taken out of context.

Rail: It’s similar to painters I know who cite Matisse: “He who wants to dedicate himself to painting should start by cutting out his tongue.” Easy for them to say, right? [Laughter.] What sort of work were you making in school at the time?

Grosse: I did all sorts of things, from figure painting to still-life and landscape painting, as well as video and photography and so on, partly because I really wanted to see whether painting would matter enough in the end for me to dedicate my life to it.

Rail: What year did you graduate?

Grosse: 1989.

Rail: Having read many texts about your work, and having looked on your website at the various permutations in your work’s evolution, I noticed a significant shift that began at the end of 1991 and 1992: the heavily painted, broken forms that previously floated in space became more uniform in their geometric simplicity, filling the frontal planes from top to bottom. They’re often painted with two or three layers of one color. This shift also involves this change in scale.

Grosse: That's a good observation. The energy streams through in either case. I discovered after I left art school that I could actually work from one painting to the next, so I could see the progression of what I would like to work on and let go of certain things. One of the things I noticed was that at the edge of the canvas, between what I painted and where the canvas ended, there was a residue from all these layers of paint. You get all these different grades of filth or muddiness and I decided I didn't want them anymore. I thought they were too noticeable, too present. So I started looking at my materials. I would reduce everything to two or three colors and one brush size, starting very simply, just putting color on a surface. And then I began to apply them so that the first color and the second would kind of interfere. It was actually very vibrant. Compared to the American idea of the two dimensional plane it was more like a multi-dimensional plane.

Rail: Like your wall installation at the Art Gallery of New South Wales as part of the Biennale of Sydney.

Grosse: Yes. I painted with one brush size, going from top to bottom and up and down. I like this repetitiveness of the brushstroke, like combing hair.

Rail: I'm sure you must have felt the soothing, meditative effect during the act of painting.

Grosse: I did. But the painting is neither fully abstract, nor figurative. It's somewhere in between. I also like the movement that working on a large scale requires: you walk up and down the ladder or use an electric lift, you paint, you walk around, you paint and then all of a sudden it's ninety feet long. I like this idea of painting that doesn't end, even though in some cases I just cover certain architectural features with the painting surface. Whether it is a painting or not, it doesn't matter. It's a phenomenon, or it's a space being opened up to a new dimension beyond what was previously determined by its architecture.

Rail: Is your repetitive gesture similar to that of a house-painter painting a wall with a roller up and down?

Grosse: Yes, but I am probably doing a very manneristic version of house painting. [Laughter.] I actually stay in line with a certain rhythm and I have two or three colors on top of one another that have to be painted in a specific way.

Rail: Were you aware of the slogan "painting is dead"? It was very popular, especially in New York City during the late 1960s and early 1970s when, in fact, experimental abstract painting was thriving and very much alive in spite of the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, the women's movement, and other forms of social unrest at the time. The reason I'm asking is that many artists like Jane Kaufman, Kenneth Showell, Al Loving, Dan Christensen and others were trying to expand upon what the color-field and Minimalist painters achieved in their all-over fields and relatively thin colored surfaces, which tended to be more optical than tactile. These artists rejected things like hard edges and the pronouncement of absolute flatness in favor of personal or intuitive uses of colors that could evoke unpredictable spatial perceptions which, in a sense, allowed for space and time to coexist simultaneously. I bring this up because I feel your use of color and scale isn't restrictive. From 1998 onward, you adopted a way of making work that was responsive to each specific spatial condition, large or small.

Grosse: Yes. I was aware, of course, of the notion of the “death of painting.” It was reiterated continually and still comes up frequently even now. I was educating myself with the full knowledge of the long history of painting. I’d travel to see rock paintings in Australia, thresholds in Florence, countless paintings in many museums around the world. Information in the broadest sense is so rich and, culturally, the story that is told by painting is so interesting that you can’t possibly say that you understand its influence in its entirety. What you do as a painter is wonder “Could that be part of our lives? Could that be part of our society? And what other roles did painting play twenty years ago or fifty years ago?”

And that’s where you start before you reach the question of how to move forward. What can you do that the color-field painters and modernists haven’t already done? For me, it was about the possibility in everyday situations and escaping the authoritative space that determines how the world is perceived, which is what the modern painters did.

That’s where I wanted to expand outward to find out how a painted image could be implemented in our social webs, and what the simplest way to do that was. I thought, “O.K., I’ll do something simple like painting with up and down vertical brushstrokes, covering all the walls in the Gallery of New South Wales.” Then for the piece on the piers, it was spray-painted but set awkwardly in the corner, quite independent of its surroundings. And all of a sudden I had two different versions for how to be in the space and how to simply be empowered by what I’d learned. And I think this way of discovering the empowerment of what you think, what you do, and what you want to propose for others is the basis of our political life.

Rail: I couldn’t agree more. What prompted you to use spray paint in 1998 at the Kunsthalle Bern? Do you recall the excitement you felt using this new tool or technique for the first time?

Grosse: I think there were moments long before that led to these changes. I don’t think the change really takes place when you actually make it. I spent some time in Marseille, France before I did that piece. I had a friend there, named Frédéric Clavère, who had a compressor and a spray gun and he said, “Hey, you’ve got to use this. This is amazing.” There was a huge graffiti scene. And these French artists were totally into comic drawings and interesting vulgar erotic things, etc., all sprayed. I thought I’d try it and I didn’t like it at all, partly because I had to wear a mask and a disposable suit for painting in. But I remembered how the spray would sit on the surface. It was like many little dots, little particles like sanding paper in different grades. Then when I came back to Germany, while I was teaching at the Kunsthochschule Karlsruhe. There was an air outlet in my studio, where I could plug in a spray gun. I bought really good equipment and started to spray with oil paint without knowing how to do it properly. I wasn’t wearing a mask or suit, and after I sprayed there was a film of oil everywhere. Everything was coated with a little bit of oil spritz. And it impressed me, how it could expand. It wasn’t just taking place on the wall, it was also in front of you and everywhere, in all its multidimensionality. At the same time the invitation for Bern arrived and I was very fed up with my painting technique with the brush which felt too restrictive to my growth as an artist. So when the curator said, “You can do what you want,” I jumped at the chance.

Rail: It’s an act of rebellion against your previous method-based process, no?

Grosse: Yes, I was very nervous about it. That was why I spray-painted with one color, green, and kept it very simple. It took me a couple of days to slowly enlarge the work to the scale it reached in the end. The director at the Kunsthalle at the time, Bernhard Fibicher, was very

against it. He saw it and said, “You should have painted over the fluorescent tubes, for example.” And I said, “No, I don’t want to do that.” And he said, “You should make a real hole in the wall, rather than paint something like it.” And that’s when it hit me. I understood that he was talking about something completely different. I was talking about painting while he was talking about sculpture. And that assured me to proceed in what I was I was doing.

Rail: His misreading of your situation reaffirmed your purpose. What about your residency at the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, in 1999, during which time you spray-painted the piece *Cheese Gone Bad* in the building that Prada Marfa has occupied as a permanent installation by Elmgreen and Dragset since 2005?

Grosse: The interesting thing with Marfa was that I had a studio in the backyard, and the front yard was this old shop. I painted in the daytime and when I went home at night I would switch off the lights so I never saw the work in relation to the building. My friends took me out for a beer one night and the lights were still on and they said, “This is really amazing, you should see it.” And that’s when I understood that the painting was not only a wall painting, but a painting with a relationship to the whole building. That changed my whole understanding of what I was doing.

Rail: The following year you went back to the canvas. And instead of the brush, you deployed spray paint with greater confidence. How did one inform the other? And what did you learn from this transition?

Grosse: In the beginning I didn’t really know how they informed one another, even though I was always painting in the studio parallel to my installation work. From 2000 until 2008 I did a lot of works in situ. I wanted to explore and understand how far I could go: how I could work on site without relying too much on my preliminary thoughts; how I could be independent on the site even though I had budget and time restrictions in some cases; how I could develop a concept where nothing could go wrong, to be fearless to make a lot of decisions, to go as far as possible. My decision-making process totally changed through the in situ work, which I could then bring into the studio. I realized that the studio work brings me another time frame, which is very challenging and exciting. I can come back to a painting over five or six weeks and re-work it. The in situ works on the other hand are painted very fast, in just five to eight days. I don’t answer or make phone calls. I don’t go out at night. I don’t see people. I just paint the whole time. And then I’m done. There is a certain moment where all the decisions have been explored and you go away, knowing that the work will eventually disappear afterwards.

Rail: So the relationship between making the painting in the studio and the site-specific commissions can be compared to the difference between a musician practicing his or her scales and a live performance?

Grosse: One difference is that the in situ work requires thorough preparation and strategic planning regarding equipment, and then a phase of experimentation for exploring the work’s potential. Another difference is that each space offers a different scale, whereas I compress as much into my studio work as I can.

Rail: That’s one of the reasons that you use a lot of stencils to create the space in the paintings whereas, in the site-specific works, there’s no need for them!

Grosse: Exactly, like those paintings that you saw in the show. You try to suck up all the activities into the size of each canvas so that together as a group they hold a strong relationship to the exhibition space.

Rail: You described the surrounding vapor generated from your first spray painting in your studio as three-dimensional—like a sculptural experience. Did you think that in 2004 when you spray painted your bedroom, from the wall to the floor, with various objects in between such as the bed, the pillow, boxes, bookcase, and whatnot, may have unfastened your sculptural impulse?

Grosse: Yes. That was also a moment of a real significant shift. Because with the earlier works I was trying to be very controlled; I was excluding a lot of things that I would classify as narrative.

Rail: In what sense?

Grosse: Narrative in the sense of elements that tell a story that distract from the power, let's say, of color which has such a strong appeal to your body's responses. To tell you the truth, up to that point I was angry and bored. I felt that I wasn't going far enough. And the only way to find out if I could go further was to punch through the invisible glass plane. I had been doing big installations, travelling a lot, and I thought I'd do something in a space that wasn't given to me by a museum. I had two apartments at the time, one in Berlin and one in Düsseldorf. I had bought a bed for the latter, which was the first piece of furniture I had ever bought. It was a Jasper Morrison, and I thought, "Okay, maybe if I paint this design object that would create a feeling of loss." I wanted to test my feelings in relationship to my own work, because I knew the work was aggressive. And I thought my bedroom, being not only an intimate physical space where I sleep, where I'm horizontal and have a different relationship to gravity, but also a psychological space, the space of the imagination. It's loaded with things you don't really know about yourself. So yes, I started including three-dimensional elements in my site work ever since.

Rail: I remember the Austrian filmmaker Peter Kubelka once argued that cave painting should be considered as sculpture, or at the very least painted sculpture, because the maker of the images must have felt the irregularities in the cave's walls, especially in certain projected and rounded, smooth areas that might proffer the body of the bison to be painted right on top. How do you mediate between the two different functions of painting and sculpture in your site-specific interventions, be they indoor or outdoor? For example, the Mass MoCA installation in the shape of an eye or the spray painted sites between downtown's 30th Street Station and North Philadelphia's Amtrak Station, including abandoned buildings and landscapes that can be seen from the moving train. And how do you mediate when they are deployed independently or when they both function simultaneously?

Grosse: From the point of view of a sculptor, I don't think about things that are usually very important to sculptors such as gravity, materiality, and so on. Not to mention that to paint on a multidimensional surface is a no-go in postwar period. The materiality has to be truthful, like a Richard Serra. They're never painted. The discussion that Judd fired up was about anti-pictorial space. It was very much for the object or for the reality of the given. I'm more linked to an old tradition of painting on surfaces, like Ancient Greek and Egyptian painted sculptures. But what I'm interested in regarding painting, or color therefore, has no locations or subjects. Yellow is not the color of the lemon. It is totally independent.

Rail: Are you referring to Goethe's theory of color, which explores its psychological and emotional impact rather than focusing on the physical properties of light as Newton did?

Grosse: Not specifically. It has to do with my own experience. I think color is such an interesting analytical aspect of painting. It can sit anywhere. It can fit into anything. It can unify or break up the hierarchical orderliness of how we see the world. The coincidence of the painted image and the existing image field is very interesting. It is not synchronicity that makes them appear the way they do. They are basic forms. Otherwise you wouldn't see them. You wouldn't see them as painted images.

Rail: True. Your sense of color is at times optically restless, chromatically opulent. Other times it's undomesticated, toxic, acidic, and psychedelic. Very disorienting. [Laughter.]

Grosse: There's a level of unpredictability for sure. The orientation really depends on your relationship to the work. There is no orientation that you should follow or that is set in stone. That's a big difference from the concepts of Serra or Judd, or Kelly. There's a diagrammatic instructiveness about their work that doesn't exist in my work.

Rail: So what determines or shapes your sense of color?

Grosse: It has a lot to do with the time I make them—the different light of the day and season. They're constantly shifting.

Rail: And do you often mix colors together or use them out of the can?

Grosse: I always prefer colors out of the can for their rawness. I don't, in fact, work with many colors. I use between thirty and forty that are, in the end, a couple of yellows, a couple of greens, a couple of blues, couple of reds—transparent and opaque, cold and warm. What I use the color for—apart from responding to my moods, to my sense of absurdity and lushness and exuberance—is being able to see my thinking. I paint a blue into a yellow. I can clearly see what I am doing. I can see how I move in the space. It is the trace of my thoughts and my strategic moves for myself. It therefore has a lot of different functions.

Rail: Another thing I noticed about this group of paintings in the show was that they were painted on beautiful primed linen, the opposite of the raw cotton duck canvas which allows for the natural absorption of the paint's liquidity as it often is associated with color field paintings by Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Lewis, and Kenneth Noland, among others. Can you elaborate on this rather technical aspect?

Grosse: Sure. I went through a lot of different priming techniques throughout my life. I was trying to find out the most effective way to get this quality of the painting coming towards you instead of withdrawing or retreating into the space. How can I hold the paint and color frontally on the surface? There were experiments where the color was really thick and the next day I would come into the studio and everything had slipped on the canvas. There was a moment that was crucial for understanding that color is the most exposed and visual to you when it is really thick. That's when its brilliance and its ability to shine, to glow, is the strongest, and you need a very well primed canvas. I'm a very proactive painter. I really paint and magnify certain things that I want to do so that they come towards you and there's no doubt, no hesitation. I really admire Frankenthaler's paintings and find them very interesting because they show a lot what

painting can do, what the qualities of paint are, what paint brings to the painted surface in terms of running, setting in, connecting with other colors. But that's not at all what I do. I don't show the physicality of paint as such. For me it's always very interesting that paint and therefore color opens up a space of possibilities, a "what if I did that?" kind of space.

Rail: Were all the paintings in the show made at the same time?

Grosse: Yes, the whole show was made in one year.

Rail: When did the use of stencil become such a significant part of your paintings?

Grosse: I've been interested in stencils for a long time, since 2012. They come in many shapes and materials such as cardboard, foam, and so on. Mostly materials that I can tear or rip apart in order to create different shapes at will.

Rail: Yes. I notice that the residue of stencil marks in your paintings is more prominent in some than in others. I also notice that you seem to explore occasional pockets of unpainted area, of white canvas that carries a certain amount of air that creates a rhythm of painting. In most cases, the paintings seem to be painted in diagonal formations, from bottom left to upper right. How do you maintain the balance of opacity and transparency? If you apply too many layers the painting becomes opaque as opposed to transparent, which requires more restraint. The biggest painting is painted opaquely, except for a sliver of white, which was painted white, not the white of the primed canvas.

Grosse: I painted over the opaque paintings with white areas quite often in order to get a little light before repainting them with different colors as you've observed. It's true that when I put too many layers on the painting it often falls apart into pieces even though every layer is carved into the painting rather than superimposed over the existing layers. This is precisely when light is even more important. It's not like the next layer is added on, but you take something from underneath. I find dealing with all these visibilities and invisibilities very interesting. That's a brain function we have: we don't just see what we see, we also take into account what we don't see. Painting deals with that.

Rail: Was there a relationship between your work in your early career and the work of the Viennese Actionists like Günter Brus, Otto Muehl, and Hermann Nitsch?

Grosse: Yes, particularly when I first became aware of using my body as tool. But I'm also a painter who paints paintings. It's not that I have an action that results in something visual. That's not what I do. But from them, I got the idea that it was a technique that I could use. You can invent an activity that results in a painting, rather than having an idea about a painting and then executing it. That's one reason why my paintings aren't documentary results of what I do. The Austrians invented activities that resulted in images, whereas I'm trying to invent crystalized forms of thinking that make the paintings.