

GAGOSIAN

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Colour Wheel

Something big is about to happen at Sydney's Carriageworks: an installation that works on viewers' unpredictable reactions.

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'It will look beautiful at night. In the daytime it has all the light it needs': Katharina Grosse with her Carriageworks installation in Sydney. Picture: Hollie Adams

Berlin on this winter's night is dark and mizzling, especially on the streets behind Hauptbahnhof, the city's main train station, where streetlights are mostly absent and signposts seem to have disappeared into the gloom. "Just keep walking straight ahead," says an assistant when I call. But I forget to ask which way; by the time I've doubled back and found the concrete-blockish, Bauhaus-style studio owned by Katharina Grosse, the renowned German visual artist could easily have reloaded her spray gun and finished off a work.

Were this all part of a play, a stage direction might read something like: "She wanders, damp and disoriented." Grosse often uses stage directions as titles for her vast site-specific installations, which see her transforming space by painting on to architecture, interiors and landscapes, incorporating everything from mounds of earth and slabs of concrete to latex balloons, fibreglass boulders and — for her forthcoming project for the Sydney Festival — reams and reams of fabric.

The Horse Trotted Another Couple of Metres, Then It Stopped is the third in the Schwartz Carriageworks series of major international visual-art projects, and an installation that will see the public area inside the old Carriageworks building, a former railway workshop complex in inner-city Redfern, enveloped by 8250sq m of suspended fabric — all of it variously draped, knotted and hung in ways that hide, highlight and even fold space.

“I like the idea of something being too big for a space, so you have to cram all this surface in,” Grosse, 56, says once we’ve met in the -studio’s downstairs kitchen, her bright orange hoodie a cheery riposte to the murkiness outside-.

“So it gets lots of wrinkles; you have these folded walls you can step into or see from outside. It is only fabric dividing everything but you get this double volume, an over-the-top feeling of thickness.”

But what will really give the work its kapow! factor is Grosse’s not-so-secret weapon: colour. Kaleid-oscopic, psychedelic, almost hallucinatory, her palette of primary hues is key to her -vision. Sprayed in huge arcs, swirls, dots and mists, the paint going off-frame as a skier goes off-piste, colour is the raw material with which Grosse immerses, charms and disarms. Her -gargantuan installations are environments to be experienced. The sensation of stepping into a painting prompts thought of all sorts of binary goings-on: reality and illusion; order and chaos; the role of the artist and that of the viewer.

“I understand a painting as something that, as we view it, travels through us and realigns our connections with the world,” Grosse has said. It’s as if she applies her paint to the world as well.

Just as crucial is what Grosse doesn’t spray; the hard-to-get-at areas behind the folds, or health and safety essentials such as fire exting-uishers and exit signs. To remind us that her work is not street art (“Graffiti is about making claims and carrying information; my work is about expanding out of an area”) or an adjunct to a funfair (despite its giddy effect on small children), she sprays over strategically placed stencils, the resulting white shapes with their blurry edges reinforcing the fact her work is all a construct.

The names she bestows on her rowdy dreamscapes underline their artificiality while drawing us in, turning us into participants. Take for example *Two Younger Women Come In and Pull Out a Table* at De Pont Museum of Contemporary Art in The Netherlands; *Third Man Begins Digging Through Her Pockets*, which colonised three floors of Cleveland’s Museum of Contemporary Art; or *Hello Little Butterfly I Love You What’s Your Name* (a title that paraphrased song lyrics by New York art rockers Sonic Youth), which transformed the Museum of Modern Art in Copenhagen.

Even *Picture Park*, which took over the Gallery- of Modern Art in Brisbane in 2009, subverted the notion of, well, pictures and parks. It was Grosse’s first major Australian show after turning heads at the 1998 Sydney Biennale with a fledgling spray piece, an untitled green wall painting at Pier 2/3.

Grosse’s titles, then, have nothing to do with what we are seeing. Or at least, only abstractly — and this being modern art, abstraction is the name of the game. “I like using stage directions as names because they are not quotes, plots or even proper titles,” says Grosse, pulling a retro office chair up to the kitchen table and pouring me a reviving shot of vodka. “They’re like a hinge between activities or a negative of a cast. They suggest something could happen but never say what. It is important that feedback for my work includes many different viewpoints.”

Above a sink hangs a silk-screen by Swiss conceptual artist Remy Zaugg, the words “*Schau, ich bin blind, schau*” (“Look, I am blind, look”) emblazoned in canary yellow against lime green. Aside from Grosse’s hoodie and the splatters on her overalls, it is the only bit of colour- in the

room. It's upstairs, in a cavernous space with high ceilings, that she flies her metaphorical freak flag, donning a white Hazchem-style suit to create movable pieces such as the 20m x 50m work she has just completed for the National Gallery in Prague.

A small team of helpers (including her young-er brother, a mechanical engineer) sort the logistics, reloading the paint supply of her spray gun as she blasts her repetitive gestures, the air pressure amplifying her reach, accelerating her movements. They'll be doing the same in Sydney, in situ.

"The team, the machine, the time, the place, the paint, the light: all these things have the same power to define the work." Grosse pauses for a beat. "The glare you have in Australia feels more like radiation," she adds with a grin. "The other thing is your feeling for size. Your landscape is amazing."



Untitled Trumpet (2015). Picture: Carriageworks

She did her first spray work earlier in 1998, at a small gallery in Switzerland. She calls it her eureka moment: "It was just some green in a corner of the space but separate from the architectural set-up. I understood then that painting could behave according to its own rules."

Recognised as one of the most influential -visual artists working today — she has exhibited everywhere from Moscow and Massachusetts to Paris, Toronto and New York — Grosse is also a respected academic. Her teaching posts include a decade at the Berlin Weissensee art academy; since 2010 she has been a professor of painting at the art academy in Dusseldorf, 560km from Berlin, where she keeps another studio and where she was once a student.

Spotting the rising stars isn't easy, she says. "You never know who is going to make it. It could be someone you don't think is terribly excitin-g, someone under the radar, and then lo and behold." A smile: "I was one of those."

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The middle child of an artist mother and a father- who taught linguistics, Grosse grew up in the Ruhr Valley, Germany's former coal-produc-ing region, an industrial hub with a rural, chicken-keeping vibe and a reputation for fiery temperaments. Her earliest memories are artistic ones: her mother's etchings, seeing Shakes-peare in the local theatre and dance pieces by Pina Bausch's Wuppertal company, based nearby. She previously has told of a childhood obsession for mentally painting over the shadows in her bedroom with an invisible paintbrush.

Grosse studied in a faculty led by a clutch of uber-cool professors, including video artist Nam June Paik and painter Gerhard Richter (then teaching photography). But despite the presence of such mavericks the conservatism of art academies, which offered few different and successful role models for female artists and even fewer for female painters, came as a shock.

“When these role models aren’t there for women artists it becomes especially difficult to cultivate independent thinking within institutionalised power structures,” says Grosse.



Wunderblock (2013) at Dallas's Nasher Sculpture Centre. Picture: Carriageworks.

Her dream art show, as featured last year in Claudia Muller’s short film *Women Artists*, would include the likes of Austrian multimedia artist Valie Export, previously overlooked Victorian abstract painter and spiritualist Georg-iana Houghton and Emily Kame Kngwarreye, the indigenous Australian artist from the Utopia community in the Northern Territory, whose work and methods impressed Grosse on sight. (“I have a picture of her sitting under a tree on the canvas and working along, so full of freedom.”)

Fired by the different ideas cruising around the school, Grosse dabbled in film and video but, after going back and forth, decided to -become a painter. “In painting I can compress movement in a different way to video, which uses movement sequentially, or to photography, where there’s a before and after, or to music, where there’s a beginning and end. In painting I can see that the yellow was before the blue and green but I see it all at the time.”

To view past, present and future simultaneously — that is, to fuse sequences — is to -occupy a paradox: “To see something that must have happened earlier, that is going to happen later, all at the same time makes me understand a lot of paradoxical situations.”

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Grosse draws painterly inspiration from a range of sources including cave painting, fresco painting, the European tradition of handpainted textiles and even indigenous Australian art. (“I went to Kakadu and was very attracted to how I think Aboriginal painting relates to land, -location, geography and memory.”)

Colour, however, is what has always bound her work together. But rarely, she says, is anything profound or fundamental written about its use. Art critics tend to expound on ideologies, concepts, what they can see.

Historically — as in, say, the 17th-century French Academy of Art — the use of colour in painting was considered feminine, less stable, less interesting. And where 19th-century and early

20th-century art movements including the fauve painters (Henri Matisse, Andre -Derain) and the pointillists (Georges Seurat and his followers-) were more into colour than concept, they concerned themselves with how one colour- works in relation to another, or examined- the depth of a colour itself — none of which remotely interests Grosse.



Untitled image from Rockaway! (2016). Picture: Carriageworks.

Instead, she takes this heritage and twists it, giving us colour as raw and aggressive as it is captivating and compelling, using her different acrylic paints to distinguish between the movements she creates; to explore the anarchic potential- -of colour; to harness — or to unleash — its energy. Hers is a pre-verbal, even primal, -aesthetic, in which it is impossible to describe what you are seeing, though Grosse has likened the impact of her work to the sensations experienced on her annual bodysurfing holidays to New Zealand: “It’s an amazing feeling to swim through swirling underwater sandstorms while the water shapes the land.”

Visceral reactions, then, are what counts. “I want the work to be coming very close, as if you’re listening to a sound or something you can’t escape from,” says Grosse, who does small paintings in the privacy of her studio. “I want to know how the painted image can live with us today. Can it be made a part of our world? How can it show what noise doesn’t? How can you give painting a quality that will get you?”

But isn’t all art subjective, in an I-know-what-I-like kind of way? When she went off-frame in 1998, spraying that splodge of green in a gallery corner and, for her own amazement, spray painting over her bedroom — bed, books, clothes and all — in her flat in Berlin - (“I wanted to do my own environment”), weren’t there those who got it and those who didn’t?

What, too, of her recent controversy, *Asphalt Hair and Air*, a pink-and-white reworking of waterfront parkland in Aarhus, Denmark, in June — part of a Triennale exhibition and an artistic response to climate change — that saw a concerned local dob her in to authorities for vandalising public property?



Grosse's installation in Moscow's Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, yes no why later (2015). Picture: Carriageworks.

“I can't influence how people will react, which is why art should always be unfinished,” she says. “There are endless possibilities to be docked on.

“Last year I did a big piece in an old military barracks in the Rockaways [on Long Island, New York] where I transformed a house that was in the process of transformation, half-disappearing into sand. It was interesting to mark where it was at that moment, and at a location where water and land meets, an interesting -border that gave it a very specific relationship to painting. Anyway,” she shrugs, “it was my most widely shared work on social media.”



Asphalt Air and Hair (2017), Aarhus, Denmark. Picture: Carriageworks.

With our time running out, and with Grosse due at a private view at the nearby Johann Koenig Galerie, one of several international gallerie-s (including the Gagosian in New York) that represent her work, we venture upstairs to a cavernous space flooded with artificial light. Towering white walls edged with jagged lines of colour speak volumes about what is no longer there: “The work I've been doing for Prague is very crisp and crystalline, the opposite end of the spectrum from Sydney, where the folds are very loose and fluid,” says Grosse, leading me over to where a model of the Carriageworks project sits on a table.

Everywhere inside the tiny building, bulging under its tiny wrought-iron roof, crammed inside- its tiny arched windows, draped and tied, hiding and folding space, is fabric, all of it arranged- in knots festooned with numbers marking areas that require rigging, indicating where the spotlights should go.

“It will look beautiful at night,” says Grosse. “In the day time it has all the light it needs.”

Outside, it is darker, even more mizzling, than when I arrived. Grosse offers to drop me at the Hauptbahnhof in her endearingly ancient cream Volkswagen. After a bit we get stuck in a jam at a red light and I offer to get out and walk.

I'm still walking when the lights change and Grosse zooms past, her hands at 10 and two, her eyes on the road, her tail lights burning amber.

It's not exactly "Exit, pursued by a bear", but it still feels like a hinge between activities, a suggestion- that something — something big — is about to happen.