

GAGOSIAN

Los Angeles Times

Review: Gerhard Richter's MOCA show got canceled by COVID, but 'Cage Paintings' live on

Christopher Knight



Gerhard Richter, "Cage Paintings," 2006.(Jeff McLane)

Gerhard Richter's "Cage" suite of large paintings, commissioned for the 2007 Venice Biennale, are almost scenographic in sweep.

The epic paintings are unabashedly theatrical, aggressively setting the stage for acute perceptual negotiation by a viewer. That the canvases are abstract rather than representational, as most painted stage scenery is, reflects just one remarkable feature of Richter's achievement.

The "Cage" series was included in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's recent survey, "Gerhard Richter: Painting After All," which opened and closed in eight days last March as the COVID-19 pandemic exploded in New York. The show, eagerly anticipated, was planned to travel to the Museum of Contemporary Art here late last summer but never made it — a cultural casualty of the ongoing health crisis.

So it is good to have an opportunity to see at least this single body of powerful work — six paintings, amplified by eight recent graphite drawings, on view by appointment (and with masking) through April 3 at Gagosian in Beverly Hills. Except for that brief Met moment, these paintings have not been seen in the United States before.

Richter, 88, is among our greatest living painters. He first gained wide notice for acute figurative images painted from photographs, then blurred with swipes of a dry brush. Some have seen his abstractions, which he began in the 1970s and in which he has dragged and smeared thickly layered paint using a variety of homemade squeegees, as the height (or depths) of bourgeois decadence.

Far from it. A squeegee, after all, is an implement designed for cleaning up a mess.

The “mess” is the history of abstract painting, long touted as the pinnacle of Modern art but, by the 1970s, the focus of widespread doubt. Richter cleaned it up by creating another mess: He began to paint energetic, expressionist abstractions, then squeegeed them into blurry, visually mesmerizing smears.

Innovative tools were always a highly prized experimental element of postwar abstraction. Like Jackson Pollock’s sticks for dripping paint, Helen Frankenthaler’s staining sponges and Sam Francis’ floor mops, he made paintings that devalue the conventional paintbrush. Richter “erased” avant-garde abstraction with a squeegee while simultaneously re-creating it.



Gerhard Richter, “Cage 2,” 2006, oil on canvas(Gagosian)



Gerhard Richter, "Cage 4," 2006, oil on canvas(Gagosian)

The “Cage” paintings are large, a bit less than 10 feet square, each larded with literally pounds of oil paint. The dragged surfaces are shaggy. Gritty textures expose, cover up and fuse dense layers, forming gullies and sticky heaps of pigment.

Gray — the color of ashes and long a staple of Richter’s palette — is prominent. A few paintings are abundantly colored, but more often, bursts of bright or sometimes acidic color work their way through the dense gray fog. Crimson and yellow, orange and lime — color is embedded within the structure of the surface wall.

Occasionally, the dragging marks waver, stop to form a ridge, then start up again. They travel in multiple directions, and some areas along the way also seem to have been poked or gouged. Still, the most prominent movement goes from side to side, left to right, flowing like the language of Western text across a page. The blur is also reminiscent of a transitional wipe in a movie, an editing maneuver where the time and place of one scene shifts into the different time and place of another.

Against that lateral wipe, a viewer is likewise “dragged” back and forth — pushed away to take in the entire big wall of imposing paint, moving in close to luxuriate in perusal of the random accidents on the surface, then crossing the room to check one painting’s passage with another’s. (The six were designed to be hung together.) The action of looking at paintings is italicized as a bodily experience in space; notably, it unfolds in a manner akin to the exertion that the artist put in.

The Cage in the “Cage” series is John Cage (1912-92), the L.A.-born composer and aesthetic philosopher for whom chance, indeterminacy and attentiveness to ambient sound were essential to deep and lively engagement with the world, free from the cluttered noise of human

experience. Cage and Richter never met, but the latter gives the former credit for the profound influence Cage's performances had on the direction of Richter's art.

The show also includes eight modest drawings made in bursts in July, with wispy lines of graphite both architectonic and organic scuttling through gray clouds. Nice enough, but the monumental suite of paintings is the reason not to miss the exhibition.