

Deep Fields

Freedom and self-limitation always operate in tandem in Katharina Grosse's works, regardless of whether she is painting on a canvas or in a space. The shift to a different *modus operandi* accordingly changes not her attitude toward the production and conception of painting but toward the notion of the image.

With the intransigence that in many ways distinguishes Grosse's painting—the lack of inhibition with which she ignores the material, functional, and symbolic limits of the medium—she destroys habits of seeing that assign a functional place to things in space. Nothing is safe from her will to paint, which gives rise to obsession, passion, and concupiscence—always with a disregard for established conventions.

In the group of works presented here, which date from the past three years, a complex of themes is formulated that—like Grosse's art in general—defies all attempts at literal translation. The autonomous pictorial language prohibits any notion of an illustrative and representative or metaphorical and interpretive context. On the contrary, taking up a theme means being forced to describe what one sees or the act of seeing itself. The content of the images is ultimately accessible only through a visual reconstruction retracing the painterly process. In this radical act, the artist manifests a retreat to the primary and elemental conditions of creating paintings as the function of painting itself.

The means Grosse employs serve to present color and paint on a canvas that is not stretched on a frame but simply tacked to the wall or spread out on the floor. However, this technique is not an aesthetic end in itself. Rather, it allows the painter to avoid a situation in which the decision regarding the image would directly depend on the dimensions and proportions she has chosen, and to move instead within an *open* frame. Here, the chosen limitation is understood, literally and figuratively, as a limit and also as room for maneuver, that is, for play. Grosse decides on an initial format within which she then allows the image to evolve. The format of the raw, frameless canvas on the wall or the floor outlines an indirect boundary with which the painter works. It constitutes, as it were, a fragile schema that grants the painting whatever space it needs. If necessary, these borders can be extended by adding the required pieces of canvas. The support does not arrest the painting's development in advance but rather makes it possible to extend and complete it at the end of the painting process. That process, in other words, is not designed around executing a concept. On the contrary, the decision regarding the object is not finalized until the process ends. The painter acts from a sense of trust in, and certainty regarding, the inherently purposeful nature of her activity. In this way, the fictional, illusionistic space of the picture is opened up. It is withdrawn from the purview of geometric construction and instead defined as a physically generated mental space, subject only to the conditions of the paint in its expressive power and its more or less transient continuous forms.

In these paintings—her most recent—Grosse relies on a set of tools serving to distribute and stimulate the colors she uses in various combinations:

- *Soft* stencils are superimposed on the current state of the image in order to cover it partially and *protect* pictorial elements.
- Coverings of soil exclude uncovered zones that are then available for overpainting (inversion of the negative-positive relationship of figure and ground).

- Hatchings consisting of wide, semitransparent bands or swaths, produced by means of the stencils or coverings, constitute a ground for overpainting. Sprayed-on linear or two-dimensional formations respond to or potentiate the bends and curves of the stencils.
- The material and physical attributes of runny paints are accepted and exploited using procedures in which chance plays a dominant role.

The paintings are developed from the use and combination of these elements and parameters and thus come together into a *nonhierarchical form*. They are hence the product of a formal construction that does not proceed from a spontaneous, automatic process but from a series of *open decisions*. The physical and psychological conditions of these processes lead to a vivid pictorial form. The act of painting thus produces *pseudo-narrative* structures that turn the surface of the painting into a *speechless* pictorial space.

From Grosse's single-layered *figurations* to her multilayered sedimentations, which are virtually opaque, the properties of the materials and their idiosyncratic makeup are not merely accepted as part of the process of production but consciously invited and provoked: mixtures and smearings resulting from the overlapping of transparent lines and swaths of paint as well as the *bleeding* of the paint in rivulets that trickle down the canvas. These rivulets may form inside a shape or may run down from the edges of the stencils, where the paint collects, once they are removed. Other techniques result in the appearance of residues of soil formations that were distributed across the horizontal canvas.

In their most open form, colorful structures are placed on the white ground. They are reduced sketches that set off and accentuate the excluded negative shapes. It is important to recognize that the boundaries of the image are neither static barriers nor seams that point to a hidden larger context of any kind. The colorful fragments are inserted into the painting and thus stand in dialogue with the *open spaces* to which this process gives rise.

Grosse develops the structure of these paintings by veiling or covering up the given support. In order to do so, she first attaches thick, felt-like material to the canvas. By cutting out shapes, she produces soft stencils, which then accompany various phases of the painting until it is done. The pictorial elements are partially covered to shield them from overpainting, whereas others are decomposed. These are free creations that develop on different levels of the support. In some paintings, the deepest layers appear to be “fenced in” by wide swaths of paint that run parallel to each other or else cross in different colors at regular intervals. Within this fence of paint, windows open that offer a view of the stream of color or islands floating on it.

Within these forms that arise from the movement of painting, various traces of the painter’s action on the canvas can be seen that contain inclusions or interpolations that seem to emerge from transparent mists of color. Often, they are associated with distinctive colorful structures that visually divide them from one another. These formations made up of reappearing interventions contain no superfluous allusions or instructions. Even tiny splinters of color seem to take their place quite naturally within a train of thought and insert themselves into the field as hooks or barbs that stand in the way of any attempt to scan the painting superficially.

The same may be said of the paints that run down the canvas in rivulets. Their physically guided vertical flow aligns the shapes relative to the pictorial field. The rivulets evade the deliberate creative intention of the painting by pursuing their own secret trajectory underneath the stencil. They contain a moment of randomness that introduces a graphic component into the free train of thought of the formal construction. Within the open space of the image, however, they do not develop any constructive potential. Their style is determined by the vertical surface of the painting and the speed with which the material coagulates. The resulting patterns sometimes generate shapes. However, any illusionistic effects are undermined by the suspension of all negative-positive relationships. The individual shapes are not hierarchically differentiated from or subordinated to one another, with some being positive and designed and others negative and excluded. The intention of the formal process is not exclusively to constitute a form; on the contrary, the notion of a form may also be articulated by “open spaces.”

By enriching her work with multilayered overlappings in this way, Grosse develops more and more complex formations that seem to implode within the image. That is, the conquest of the pictorial space takes place from the outside in—from all sides, shapes and forms invade the pictorial field. The painterly vocabulary of interpenetrating deposits sets the individual formal typologies in more or less powerful dynamic motion. The largely open relationship of ground and painterly form is distinguished by *oscillating*, almost *floating* contours that interpret the dynamic impulse of the sprayed paint. Grosse's approach necessarily results in a polysemy of visual form. Curves, loops, streaks, hatchings, swaths, tracks, trails, knots, bundles, tangles, etc. take turns describing and citing the gesture of painting. They spin off rhythms that appear as stretchings and compressions, flections and repetitions. The bent and bowed, oscillating tracks and traces of the painter's activity pervade one another in these pictures to create a surging, turbulent, bursting swirl of colors.

The paintings have their origin in a kind of *blind seeing*, or create a formation made of *blind shapes* that secretly find and recognize each other. They arise from a type of sight in which we forget the names of the things we see. In an interview (*Der Tagesspiegel*, Berlin, April 5, 2009), Katharina Grosse explicitly confirmed that this is indeed her approach: "I probably paint blindly ... My work does not involve aesthetic decisions." She explained this statement—a disconcerting one coming from a painter—by observing that painting has no need for a "transmitter" that would transfer an object or material to another reality. In painting, she said, there is "this extremely close connection between seeing and producing," which naturally takes a different form for her than it does for the beholder who subsequently approaches her paintings.

There are natural limits to seeing and hence to everything we see, limits that can be pushed out and expanded ever further, in macro- and microcosmic dimensions, by using technological aids. Overcoming the physically visible is at once one of the deepest aspirations of autonomous art, which confronts us, beyond all subjective and objective references, with spaces of experience that increase our knowledge in ways that, for the artist as well as the viewer, are impossible to anticipate, much less quantify.

Grosse's approach to painting and the paintings to which it gives rise produce a multilayered series of formulations that are subject to a specific vocabulary and an individual syntax. It literally takes a special language to read her paintings, and this for two reasons. They cannot be grasped by purely abstract, formal description, but they are also inaccessible to metaphorical interpretation. Neither an overview that remains on their surface nor an attempt to lift the pictorial signs onto the plane of some meaningful content is capable of overcoming the visual muteness of these extraordinary phenomena. In these paintings, we encounter visually existing fictions that defy all attempts to decipher them. Meaning can only be derived from this process itself, which is potentially endless, that is, practically interminable. With/in each of her works, Grosse uses a finite set of formal means and devices to redefine the genesis of the image as an aesthetic process. To experience her works is to have the impression of plunging into a *Deep Field* that leads our eye beyond the outermost limits of the intelligible. The paintings, in their expansiveness, seem both homogeneous and eccentric.

Grosse's painting thus represents the paradoxical translation of the idea of obtaining an image as a painterly synthesis of the fragments of a space that is often hidden and buried. In their radically accelerated form, the elements and fragments are sucked into the field of the image by the centrifugal forces of the painter's activity, in order to vanish through the space of the painting into another painterly dimension altogether.

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