

ABOUT

From left: *Flowers (Blumen)* 1992; *Self-Portrait (Selbstportrait)* 1996

A Vision without Interruption

Blair Schulman

Gerhard Richter, *Forty Years of Painting* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York is a tour de force in simplicity. Richter paints for the sake of painting. So often, art loving laymen expect to be confronted with brain twisters or mired in over-elucidation. For one wishing to view pictures and immediately grasp meaning, Richter's show, on view through May 21, is deeply satisfying. "To believe, one must lose God; to paint, one must lose art." Guided by this freedom, Richter exhibits a body of work of breathtaking clarity.

Richter's work often unmasks the core of any ideology, which might be to say, above all else, oblivion is imminent. However, before death there is life and in it there is much beauty. Imagine finding yourself within the settings of *Iceberg in Fog* (1982) or *Seascape* (1970) and seeing with crystalline brilliance the heart of nature, captured with stopwatch timing. In *Seascape* you are transported to a patch of ocean, alone and unprotected. Water fills the canvas, leaving nothing to contemplate except the crest of each wave — a movement with no beginning or end. *Iceberg in Fog* emerges like a spectre on the horizon — a silent giant, immovable, inevitable. Experience this moment of utter stillness and then, *la deluge*. It is nature's way and Richter does not interfere with that.

Beckoning the viewer from a distance and commanding the first moment of the exhibition is *Stag* (1963), a concise synthesis of many of Richter's styles and concerns. The photo-like quality of the stag itself, blurred to force a closer look, stands amidst a forest of outlined, uncolored trees. Down the center of the canvas, a large slash disrupts the utter complacency of the subject and suggests that there are no sides at all — view the work

for what it is.

Feeling like a sort of War Room, the first main gallery is staffed with a tall, glaring portrait of the artists' *Uncle Rudi* (1965), smiling in his Nazi uniform — a haunting piece reflective of Richter's wrestling with Germany's past and his relation to it. Compounding its effect are other works including *Mustang Squadron* (1964), shades of a bloody history. Immediately one feels the weight of a tainted culture bearing down upon them; Richter captures this heaviness with fierce subject matter and subtle coloring. Fighter planes in formation are poised to attack. Below the jets is a soft green landscape, soon to be punctured with black, brown and, eventually, red. With these scenes of destruction, Richter responds to the Nazi war culture very much a part of his childhood with a powerful directness. Born in Dresden one year before Hitler came to power, Richter was raised in rural Saxony. He remembers as he grew up a bit " . . . We had pistols and cigarettes and there were big guns around, and you know, for a boy, society breaking down is a big adventure."

To view as a group these works from the 1960's through the present, one is able to discern relationships among seemingly disparate paintings and to follow the path of Richter's career — a path that diverges from the expected. Journeying through the show, one hears collective giggles at the pedestrian iconography of modern times, *Toilet Paper* (1965), or at the mock seriousness of capitalism — that difficult child — *Ferrari* (1964). Richter deftly disrupts the creature comforts one comprehends with the mundane and chases the irony right out. Unlike Warhol, who embraces the cliché, Richter appears uninterested. He merely shows us another perspective,

one we never guessed existed. *256 Colors* (1974) is a painting not unlike those color charts found in paint stores, but, rendered large-scale and out of order, it occupies an in-between space — neither Pop nor Minimalism nor Conceptualism.

To understand Richter, one must disengage from the -isms of art and their qualifying rules, for Richter ignores them all. At least he hopes to; people who find comfort in attaching rules and imposing limits will find categories for his work nevertheless. He comes from a place where narrow ideals and political cannibalism stifled free thinking. However, he and other artists of his era took full advantage of a new post-war freedom to expand cultural horizons. It isn't Richter's style that changes. Rather, his technique seeks, and finds, constant re-evolution. A new idea is discovered, applied, and completed on canvas.

After exploring the popular schools, Richter understood the photograph as a perfect element to work from. Rather than impressing the viewer with technique, he sought to enable a comprehension of the image itself. As part of the process, he might crop the image, add, and/or cover up details, while still seeking a composition that would look as if derived from a photograph. First tracing the photograph by projecting it onto a canvas, then using a ruler and charcoal to copy every minuscule detail, he finally paints the image and blurs it, eliminating its illusionistic capacity while deepening its resonance.

Richter began drawing at 15 in a Germany destroyed by war. Though he loved to paint, to be an independent painter was not an accepted occupation, so he hoped to be a stage painter. The lines of conflict between innate



Abstract Picture (Abstraktes Bild) 1992; Betty 1988

calling and cultural obedience were drawn early.

Richter entered the art academy in Dresden in 1951. The only acceptable style was Socialist Realism, with nods to Picasso and Diego Rivera, as they were Communists. In 1961, before the Berlin Wall went up, he made his move to escape. He and his first wife Ema returned to Dresden one last time, sold their car, then had someone drive them to Berlin as if it on a day trip. Richter took nothing, including all the work he made up until that point, knowing it was too dangerous.

The Richter's settled in Dusseldorf. He enrolled at the Kunstakademie, where he met Joseph Beuys. Advocating an elimination of the distinctions between art and life, Beuys exerted tremendous influence on art circles just forming, including artists Sigmar Polke, Konrad Leug and Blinky Palermo. Discovering a world of art and ideas beyond that of his then-demigod Picasso, and particularly inspired by Neo-Dada and Fluxus artists, Richter joined Leug to create a "Happening" in a Dusseldorf department store, parodying the -isms critics were attaching to these emerging artists.

Ready to begin again, Richter destroyed his paintings, which ran the gamut from figurative to abstract, in an unceremonious bonfire on school grounds. Wanting to break away from contemporary schools, and particularly disdainful of Beuys' cult of celebrity, he reacted against them, instead looking to the photograph as a starting point and means of moving forward. His antipathy to the celebration of persona as opposed to work in itself is reflected again and again in Richter's career.

This wariness of celebrity underlies the funereal beauty of *Woman Descending the Staircase* (1965). In this sensual tour de force, the seams of the figure's gown glow — a haze of beauty and then it is gone — suggesting that the subject, Maria Callas, is herself a victim and/or product of public adoration. Where blurring dominates a painting, it suggests a psychological "hands off!" This gives the viewer a chance to really look close-

ly, rather than delivering instant satisfaction. *Woman* exemplifies the effects of celebrity — beautiful, elusive, no longer grounded in anything real or serious — effects that Richter seeks to expose and question.

Richter, however, does not always maintain a distance. In a painting of his own daughter *Betty* (1988), the red and white of her garment is unflinchingly real — one longs to touch it. Such definite loveliness is pervasive and easily enjoyed. Even when the tonal focus is disturbed, as in *Cathedral Square, Milan* (1968), the shimmering appearance of glimpsing the scene through old glass is spectacular. Purity, straightforwardness — the result is extremely gratifying. Perhaps these are examples of subjects Richter perceives as possessing a purity worthy of direct address. Still, *Betty* turns away.

Darker and more aloof are the Baeder-Meinhof series of paintings, *October 18, 1977*. Based on various newspaper and police photographs, this series includes portraits of "group founders" Andreas Baader and Ulrike Meinhof. The paintings portray the radical Marxist students-turned-terrorists both alive and dead, including in the interiors of their cells while imprisoned. They include as well depictions of funeral processions and a disturbing look at a simple phonograph, allegedly hiding the gun Baader used to kill himself. These works are painted in blurry blacks and whites and grays, forcing one to struggle to bring them into focus. Again, one is coaxed, slowly, to contemplate and wrestle to comprehend that which is being presented.

Painted in 1988, this series of 15 works rocked complacent Germans. Calling themselves the Red Army Faction, Andreas Baader and Ulrike Meinhof, along with Gudrun Ensslin, Holger Meins, Jan-Carl Raspe, and Ingrid Miller, banded together to protest generally against materialism and their country's refusal to come to terms with its Nazi past. Their Red Army was a reaction to the increased violence of the police against peace-

ful protesters. Starting with robberies, actions became violent as members occupied the West German Embassy in Stockholm in a convoluted alliance with other terrorists from the Middle East and Europe. Members already thrown in jail staged hunger strikes. Meins and Meinhof were discovered dead in their cells and the police ruled it a suicide. On October 18, 1977, a plane was hijacked with a plan to exchange hostages for remaining members of the group. It ended with everyone getting killed except for one of the hijackers and the passengers themselves. Later that day, Baeder, Raspe, and Ensslin were all found dead in their cells. And the official verdict again was suicide.

Richter creates a face for these victims of ideology, as people who believe in something even if these very beliefs are what kills them. Painted without romance of any sort, Richter tried to remain ambiguous but public opinions were mixed. People who loathed the Red Army Faction thought the works too sympathetic, and vice-versa.

Shown in the same environment as his dominant abstract works, the series demonstrates Richter's keen ability to traverse the plains of all styles. He describes abstract painting as "... walking, step by step, without an intention, until you discover where you are going." Figuration, especially when taken from a photograph, is a readymade saga, while abstraction, perhaps, is more like a tale that is made up as he goes along.

Whether presented in the form of beauty, life, or death, the end is at hand. Richter leads us gently through this coarse landscape of his world, with extraordinary dexterity. This long overdue retrospective clearly shows us an artist who creates lasting images through exacting technique and an ability to look honestly at his culture and deep inside himself.

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