

Gerhard the Inscrutable

**Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting
Museum of Modern Art, New York City, until May 21**

By Terry Martin

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Painting is dead; long live painting! That appears to be Gerhard Richter's motto. The German artist, whose work is the subject of a major retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA), has been credited with both destroying and salvaging the enterprise of painting. Some say he paints to prove that painting is impossible.

Enigmatic as ever at age seventy, Richter is the consummate chameleon, moving in and out of genres, switching media, and flipping from photo-realistic imagery to the realm of the abstract. If one moment he's making lovely landscapes, the next he's stacking panels of mirrored glass. In between, he pushes gobs of color around a canvas with a squeegee, turns out some life-like portraits, and paints a candle or two--producing works that sell for millions of dollars.

So, what makes Gerhard Richter such a hot international artist? Why does MoMA consider him "one of the most influential painters working today"? Art critics hate that question. Richter simply doesn't fit well into the pigeonholes of art theory. He's been pegged variously as a "neo-expressionist," a "deconstructionist," and a "nihilist." But none of these labels has stuck. Even the catchall "postmodern" doesn't seem to apply; the term belies the traditionalist (even romantic) elements in Richter's work.

Asked recently how he would like to be understood, Richter replied, "I don't know.... Maybe as the keeper of tradition." Then he laughed, suggesting the remark may have been made in jest. In that same interview, he claimed (perhaps more earnestly) that he's been trying to "paint the appearance of reality. That," he told the curators at MoMA, "is my theme or job."

As cryptic as that remark may sound, it at least provides a starting point for understanding Richter's photo-based work. He creates these pictures, which are among the artist's best known, by first meticulously tracing onto canvas the details of a photographic image and then introducing any number of distortions. It's a melding of organic and mechanical processes, reflecting a series of perceptual layers. For the viewer, the effect is one of seeing and not seeing. Taking Richter's cue, one might conclude that the appearance of reality is blurred.

Art critics often look to Richter's biography for clues to explain the apparent lack of consistency in his work. What one finds is that Richter's life was shaped by a patchwork of socio-political environments. It makes a compelling argument for ideological scepticism, or a case of historical schizophrenia.

Born in Dresden in 1932, Richter grew up in the shadow of the Third Reich. His mentally disabled aunt was killed in a Nazi euthanasia program. Both his uncles died in the

army. The family moved to the countryside before war's end but stayed near enough to hear Dresden obliterated by allied bombs.

Following the war, Richter went to art school in communist East Germany and learned the conventions of Social Realism. After painting political banners for a state-owned business, he travelled to the West in 1959 and saw Abstract Expressionism for the first time. Two years later, just before the Berlin Wall was built, he emigrated to West Germany. Settling in Dusseldorf, he studied at the Art Academy there and presented his Pictures of Capitalist Realism. The cold war set in, the protest movement hit the streets, and Richter's career ebbed and flowed with the shifting tides of contemporary art. His colleague and nemesis was Joseph Beuys.

Nazism, communism, nihilism, capitalism, realism, expressionism - the New York Times Sunday Magazine was on to something when it called Richter "An Artist Beyond Isms." His creative dialectic gives the impression of an artist seeking to transcend (or perhaps reconcile) competing aesthetic ideologies. Exploding the notion that painters should strive to develop a recognizable "style," Richter cultivates radically different, seemingly contradictory modes of expression.

Critics are frequently dumbfounded but exquisitely intrigued, admitting that they themselves don't know what his paintings are about. As Robert Storr, curator of the MoMA retrospective, put it: "Richter distils things not to get to their essence, their essential truth, but to get to their ambiguities, the essential question mark." Successful both critically and at auction, the paintings would appear to capture the Zeitgeist of a sceptical society.

Ten years ago, when a smaller Richter retrospective made the rounds in Europe, it was fashionable to describe his work as "painting about painting." Today, art aficionados are still furiously debating the meanings and merits of his oeuvre. The MoMA exhibition (which will travel to Chicago, San Francisco, and Washington) provides Americans with their best opportunity yet to see why Gerhard Richter deserves recognition as one of the most challenging and influential artists of our age.

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