



Supported by



RÉPUBLIQUE
FRANÇAISE
Liberté
Égalité
Fraternité

INSTITUT
FRANÇAIS

Alizée Gazeau *HÄUTUNG* opening [20 January 2023 from 6 pm](#)
20 January – 5 February 2023 at Gr_und, Seestr. 49, 13347 Berlin-Wedding
Thursday – Saturday, 3 pm – 7 pm & by appointment contact@alizeegazeau.com

Lisa Deml: The impression that settled on my mind when I first came to see this series of painting in your studio was that of maturity. To me, these paintings are a very clear and condensed expression of different lines of thought and experimentation that you have been following for several years. They seem to have grown through practice and now coincide with your first solo exhibition. How is this exhibition situated in your artistic development, what does it mean to mark this point in time?

Alizée Gazeau: I consider this exhibition as an opportunity to end a first sentence. I invoke the notion of a sentence, but you could also say it marks the end of a first journey. My work is concerned with process itself and I have the feeling that I could develop the same idea further indefinitely. In this sense, the exhibition at gr_und is also a challenge for me to put an end to this process. Even though I would never say that this process is finished, I have reached a point when I can let it settle down and let go. When the work enters into an exhibition space, it does not belong to me anymore, it is not about me anymore—the work has to speak for itself, as Louise Bourgeois would insist. She says that an artwork has nothing to do with the artist; it has to stand for itself. I find this credo helpful to navigate the tension between the intimacy inherent in artworks and the extrovert nature of exhibitions.

This is not only your first solo exhibition but also the first time that you work in painting and to this scale. How did you arrive at this discipline and format of 200x300 cm? Would you say that it is the result of a measure of trust and confidence you have gained in the process?

I felt the need to not only engage the hand and the eye in the work process but to involve the whole body. It is a very physical process as I work on the floor and pull and place the hammock and the net on the canvas. And it is not only a physical experience for me in the production process but also for the viewer in front of the paintings. I wanted the paintings to be bigger than us, so that they create an immersive sensation that exceeds the human body.

Given the expansive format of these paintings, how do you approach the canvas to begin with?

The paintings make me as much as I make them. It is a conversation between me and the various materials involved in the process, the canvas, the net, the hammock, colour and water. With these components, I create an environment, a framework within which the painting can emerge. Of course, the work process is different with every painting, there are different layers and rhythms at play each time. But what characterises my process is that I organise a situation on canvas and then leave the studio while the painting takes form. I return to it when everything has dried and I can remove the hammock and net to discover how they have impressed themselves on the surface. I very much enjoy this moment of revelation because it is often surprising. It is almost like a laboratory where I arrange the experimental setup and observe how it develops on its own. It is a delicate balance between controlling and letting go. While the first part of the work process is determined by my decisions and choices, the second part is beyond my command. So, even though this series of works are undeniably paintings, I would not call myself a painter.

What I find remarkable about your artistic practice is that all the components and materials that are involved in the production process retain a certain degree of agency and autonomy. This becomes most pronounced in the way in which you interact with the surface of the canvas. I know that you have given much thought to the notion of the surface—could you talk about what the surface is to you?

Of course, factually, paintings are two-dimensional, they have a flat surface. But I try to expand this understanding and to experiment with a sense of depth in my paintings. I want to create a sensation of the paintings coming towards you as you face them and dive into them. To me, this is also a reflection on what it takes to be an artist. At some point, I questioned myself and whether I am ready to be an artist or not. And an answer to this question is related to being ready to dive, to venture beyond the surface, and to confront memories and feelings of doubt and darkness. Producing these paintings was an almost physical experience of diving in and resurfacing to catch my breath. I think of these paintings as permeable surfaces. In a metaphorical way, they are questioning the idea of the skin, which is exposing you to the world at the same time as it is protecting you from it. To some extent, producing and showing paintings could be considered a healing process, not only for the artist but also for the people seeing them, as an instance of taking care.

As you mentioned the idea of the skin, this takes us to the title of the exhibition—Häutung. This notion of skinning seems to resonate on so many levels with your artistic practice, with the paintings themselves and their aesthetic impression, as well as with your work process and development as an artist. How do you relate the idea of Häutung to your practice?

As my work is concerned with the process itself, it is strongly connected to the concept of metamorphosis. For me, the process of printing relates to a continuous struggle to come to terms with the perpetual evolution and movement in which we are all implicated. Printing or imprinting are ancestral practices, ways to experience or own existence, for instance through handprints in stone or fossils. I had already produced prints with different found objects from the environment when I found the fishing net. It reminded me of fish skin itself—an interesting paradox, that the net mimics that which it is supposed to catch. The hammock is also a curious object that is allowing us to lie down and rest in nature, precisely by protecting us from the natural ground. Eventually, I moved away from natural

elements towards tools that humans produced in order to enter into a conversation with what is called “nature”. In many ways, this is very similar to artistic practice, and to my artistic practice in particular. Both the hammock and the net are permeable and ambivalent between controlling or letting go. And once I have printed them on canvas, they become something else altogether and take on a second life.

The paintings offer a very immersive experience. Initially, I thought of them as cartographies but, rather than looking onto a landscape from above, they seem to draw one into the landscape, into a submerged perspective. Agnes Martin once said that, to her, painting was like going into the field of vision, as you would cross an empty beach to look at the ocean. I consider this to be a very fitting description of these paintings, an invitation to look beyond them.

This is one of my favourite quotes of Agnes Martin and it resonates strongly with me. Of course, the paintings have a physicality and presence but I hope that they, in a way, disappear behind themselves. Each painting holds a space that not only unfolds spatially but also temporally. Perhaps it is for this reason that I always work in series, to express a certain rhythm, a perpetual movement or evolution. While each painting is a work in and of itself, it is also part of a larger whole, of a score or sentence. In the exhibition at gr_und, I will continuously change the composition and chronology of the paintings so that the viewing experience will be different at every visit to the gallery. In this respect, my curatorial approach correlates with my artistic practice as they are both concerned with the process itself and with keeping this process alive. This might come out of a fear of completion and stasis, but I want to think of it as an openness towards fluidity. To me, fluidity is a good word to indicate a method of working rooted in humility, in acceptance of incompleteness, and a sense of reverence for the material at hand, for the unfolding process, for the shared space, and for the other artists and their work. Fluidity as a working method is especially important in collaborative projects, and the experience of curating the group show Off Water was exemplary in this respect. It felt very rewarding to work with all these artists, all women artists, I should say.

As I understand it, the notion of fluidity that you suggest is correlated with a tendency towards permeability. Would you agree?

Certainly. However, it is not only a poetic concept but born out of necessity, too. Over the last few years, as I have been developing my working method, I realised that it is impossible for me to control the entire production process. I had to allow myself, after setting the framework for production in the studio and performing my part, to give in to the process and leave the painting as it was taking form. This is where my sense of humility and reverence for the material and process comes from and, at the same time, where I arrived at a form of liberation or emancipation in my working method. I freed myself from any expectations I might have had towards the working method and developed a production process that most closely aligns with my perception of these paintings. For the first time, I feel that the way I am working corresponds with the ideas I am thinking through. And perhaps this is where the impression of maturity arises that you mentioned at the beginning.

In the exhibition at gr_und, you not only present this series of large scale paintings but also two sculptures and a textile work that you bring together in a material assemblage. In contrast to the paintings in whose expansiveness one can get lost, these sculptural pieces are very condensed and highly plastic.

In fact, the two sculptures are saddles that I found at a stable. Similar to the fishing net and the hammock, the saddle is a tool produced by humans in order to communicate with nature. The saddles were lying upside down on the floor of the stable and I was surprised to find that they looked like flowers or vulvas. Even though the common notion of horse riding and the dimension of power and control associated with it are rather masculine, when turned upside down I found the saddles to be very feminine objects. I was intrigued by how the quality and meaning of an object could be shifted simply by looking at it from a different perspective. The same shift happens when an object enters an art space where the saddles are now installed on a wall as art pieces. Strictly speaking, they are not sculptures because I did not produce them but they become sculptural through their exhibition. And I present them in an assemblage with a piece of fabric that I found on the street when I first moved to Berlin. I cut it in rhombus-shaped pieces echoing the pattern of the fishing net and the hammock and sowed it back together. The rhombus is a symbol for femininity in many cultures as well as the basic form of a mandorla which is used in Christian iconography to frame religious figures. As part of the exhibition, the fabric with its rhombic pattern might be associated with a cocoon or discarded skin. But it is very important for me that each piece in the exhibition is open to manifold interpretations and invokes different associations that are all valid.

I cannot help but think of Louise Bourgeois again, not only her insistence on the autonomy of the artwork in interpretation but also her process of doing, undoing, and redoing that you have just described. The fact that this work of doing, undoing, and redoing is never done, that there is never a moment of completion—does that not feel exhausting?

It is exhausting and yet essential that there is something that remains unresolved and that drives the process onward through continuous questions. To evoke Agnes Martin's words again, she defines the artist as someone who wants to quit everyday but continues anyway. It is exhausting at the same time as it is healing. There are these moments when I return to the studio and remove the nets from the painting to see how it has taken form—and to find that something has happened that resembles an answer or an end to a sentence.