

Gerhard Richter is among the most important artists of our time. In a career spanning sixty years he has created an oeuvre of striking thematic and stylistic variety. The Fondation Beyeler's exhibition of his work is the largest to date in Switzerland and the first to focus on his series, cycles, and interior environments, shedding light on an aspect of his output that has received little attention in the past. Richter has produced series of works alongside individual items since the 1960s. This applies to his earliest photo-realistic paintings and to his abstract pictures, to his works featuring mirrors or sheets of transparent glass and to his recent digital prints. From the outset he has been interested in how his art is presented and how it relates to its architectural surroundings, prompting him on several occasions to create work for specific locations. Over the years he has produced many cycles, series, and environments addressing the interrelation among individual images, groups of works, and exhibition spaces in ways embodying a wide range of issues, approaches, and concerns. Some works, for example, such as *Eight Student Nurses* (1966) and the cycle *October 18, 1977* (1988), belong together by reason of their subject matter. Others, including *Annunciation after Titian* (1973) and *S. and Child* (1995), consist of various versions of a single motif, the artist unfolding a set of variations on a theme. His suites of abstract paintings, on the other hand— among them *Woods* (2005) and *Cage* (2006)—generate a larger physical pictorial space in which each image constantly interacts with the impression created by the whole.

Richter's engagement with the relationship between painting and actual space dates back to the 1950s, when he was a student of wall-painting at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste Dresden. Designs for murals he produced at this time show him already paying close attention to the architectural context. Later, his keen interest in the connection between architecture and the presentation of art is particularly apparent in a dense sequence of sketches and designs in his Atlas that date from 1968 to 1971. Depicting both real and imaginary exhibition spaces, these drawings explore basic relations between images and architecture in ways that range so widely that the limits between art and space become blurred.

Interest in architectural context has been accompanied since the early days of the artist's career by a penchant for multiple paintings. An example included here is *Eight Student Nurses*, based on newspaper reproductions of photographs of eight murdered nurses. Concern with the effect produced by pictures in newspapers is as old in Richter's work as his engagement with serial images. Often he combines both aspects, addressing the shifts in meaning that occur when images are divorced from their original context.

In the 1970s a different kind of cycle or series appeared in Richter's work: the theme and variations. *Annunciation after Titian*, for instance, investigates a painting dating from 1535 in a number of

versions produced immediately one after the other and evincing various degrees of abstraction. The pictures are now dispersed among various collections, so the current exhibition provides a rare opportunity to see them together.

*Annunciation after Titian* stands as an example of how Richter's series and cycles affirm the processual in art. This was an aspect widely embraced in the 1960s, as artistic practice devised its own forms of productivity in a creative response to the rapid reproducibility facilitated by mass production in the industrial age. According to French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, the serial in art consists not in identical replication, but in the interplay between repetition and difference, which allows art to free itself from static representation and embrace continuous process. Richter's serial works, too, must be seen in terms of progressions and mutations that subvert the fixed organization of repetitions and the deliberate disposition of differences.

Another important series produced in the 1970s was the gray pictures, a set of which Richter installed in the Städtisches Museum in Mönchengladbach. These works disclosed artistic qualities even in variations whose color—gray—had been used initially as a negation. The process of what might be called “destructive creation” that had informed the Titian paintings is in evidence here, too.

The cycles of abstract paintings, such as *Bach* (1992), *Woods* (2005), *Cage* (2006), and others included here, are conceived differently in terms of the painting process from series like the *Candles* and *Skulls*: the abstract works are painted simultaneously, rather than successively. The simultaneity creates a dense set of multipolar interrelations among the various canvases that generate a larger, distinctive pictorial space comprising the actual surroundings.

Titles play an important part in the abstract cycles. Cage, for example, indicates that the pictures were based on the music of John Cage, which Richter often listened to while working on the paintings. Or again, the Woods cycle addresses in abstract terms the double sense that we might lose our way in the woods or feel protected by them. In these abstract cycles actual physical space is augmented by space for feelings and a feeling of space.

The cycle *October 18, 1977* (1988) occupies a special place both here and in Richter's oeuvre. It resulted from an engagement over many years with recent German history as encapsulated in the Baader-Meinhof gang. The fifteen paintings were based on photographs reproduced in the press, and some of them, including the three pictures titled *Dead*, approached their subject in a number of variations. Rather than embodying an unequivocal political standpoint, the canvases convey a sense

of ambiguity, doubt, and the unrelenting intensity of the conflict. The space generated by the pictures here is historical and it encourages viewers to expand their notions of how history can be depicted in terms of painting.

In *S. and Child* (1995), a cycle based on family photographs that evokes images of the Virgin and Child, Richter addresses the relationship between tradition and the present in a more explicitly iconographical and thematic way than he had when engaging with a historical model in *Annunciation after Titian*. He stayed with the subject despite iconographical misgivings and this ambivalence is even reflected in the technique of the paintings. The compelling quality of this approach was underscored by the space generated by the cycle when it was shown in an exhibition at the Musée d'Art contemporain, Nîmes, in 1996. Paintings such as these belong together. This distinguishes them from such series as the still lifes, in which each image should be seen independently, even though they all revolve around one and the same motif.

The spatial component of Richter's art acquired a new quality in the *Mirrors*, which have played an increasingly significant role in his work since the 1990s. Previously, he had shown only paintings. Now, reflecting sheets of glass focused attention on exhibition spaces and viewers, with the architecture, too, being incorporated into the images. Reflecting objects, actual space, and constantly changing mirror images interact at various levels, so that viewers and their perception of themselves form an integral part of the work. Surface structures are still important and not engulfed in the reflections. Indeed, paint applied to the panels, along with the properties of the glass, can be seen to generate the reflections in the first place. For all these reasons, four diptychs titled *Double Gray*, all new works, are displayed in the exhibition.

The monochrome mirrors in the four *Double Gray* diptychs have the character of objects. This aspect features even more strongly in Richter's works involving transparent sheets of glass. Two complex works, *12 Panes (Row)* and *7 Panes (House of Cards)*, both dating from 2013, permit multiple shifts between looking at the glass, looking *through* the glass, and looking *into* the glass via its reflections—that is, between objects, actual space, and pictorial space. Two *Strip* pictures are among the most recent in the exhibition. Based on digital photographs of an abstract canvas that the artist painted in 1990, this series uses computer technology to enlarge details and produce several mirror images of them. Richter's investigation into the artistic possibilities of serialism and repetition here acquires new facets. Combinations of numerical systems, colors, and potentially infinite progressions had already played a crucial role in his *1024 Colors* (1973) and *4900 Colors* (2007), both included here. He returned to them in the *Strip* pictures, in which the serial and cyclical aspects form an integral part of the works.

The exhibition explores in a number of ways the nature and significance of series, cycles, and space in Richter's oeuvre. It encompasses spaces devoted to specific themes, spaces devoted to working processes, and extended spaces devoted to the direct interaction between pictorial space and physical space in works involving mirrors and transparent sheets of glass. Visitors move not only from work to work, but also from space to space, in each of which they find themselves at the center of a specially structured ensemble. Every space generates a new set of relationships between the artist's works and the physical context.

Individual works form a counterpoint to the serial images. The single items include paintings that have acquired iconic status, such as Iceberg in *Mist* (1982), *Betty* (1988), *Small Bather* and *Reader* (both 1994), and *Ella* (2007). Punctuating the sequence of spaces, these pictures seek to encourage the viewer to reflect further on the relationship between single works and groups of works in Richter's oeuvre.

*(This document was automatically generated by Contemporary Art Library.)*