

## **Isa Genzken**

### Basic Research

14 February - 12 April 2025

Our 17th exhibition with Isa Genzken is dedicated to her body of work *Basic Research*. We are showing paintings and works on paper from 1988-1992. Alongside the *Basic Research* works we are exhibiting the installation *Oil VII*, 2007, which Isa Genzken conceived as part of her presentation in the German Pavilion at the Venice Biennale of 2007, where it was first shown.

Galerie Buchholz is currently working on a Catalogue Raisonné of Isa Genzken's work, the first volume will be published in the summer of this year.

### Basic Research

Paradoxically it is a series of oil paintings that allows us to get to the core of sculptor Isa Genzken's artistic practice. The works, entitled *Basic Research*, were done in the years 1988 to 1992 with the simplest of means, but they give a concentrated summary of many essential aspects of Genzken's work, such as the use of moulds and imprints, inversions of inside and out, the relationship between space and image, as well as between abstraction and representation, and also Genzken's various methods for anchoring her work in reality.

It is surprising at first that Genzken employed the traditional materials of oil and canvas here, for her untypical, but she has used painting in a specific way that tallies with her overall oeuvre, because she worked with the technique of frottage. After spreading out the canvas on the floor of her studio, she squeegeed the oils over the canvas until they created an imprint of the uneven surface beneath with its structures, notches, streaks and traces of working materials. Only once this was completed were the canvases stretched, thus allowing the paint to run over the entire canvas and draw the edges into the painting. With few exceptions the works are of medium size and use dark colours, sometimes earthy, such as grey, brown or black.

The frottage method produced monochrome paintings with an evenly structured surface that has a depth, which, without being perspectival, conveys dimension and spatiality. The paintings can be read as non-representational: the eye follows the repeating formal elements and detects differences and details that deviate from the overall homogeneity of the work. Yet at the same time we feel we should perceive the works as illusionist representations. Hard as they are to evaluate in terms of what they are supposed to depict and how they have been made, a number of the *Basic Research* paintings recall rough surfaces, while others look like dust or minute particles enlarged under an electron microscope. Our perceptions oscillate between micro- and macrostructure, because the opposite extreme is no less imaginable: a satellite photograph or a bird's-eye view of a landscape, as is also suggested by the earth colours. It remains uncertain what we are looking at.

A work like *Basic Research* from 1991 also recalls that lack of orientation which Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp produced with their collaborative photograph *Élevage de poussière* (Dust Breeding) 1920. The exposure shows Duchamp's *Large Glass* (*La Marie mise à nu ...*) lying on the floor of his studio, covered in a thick layer of dust, with the differences in the thickness of the dust accretions giving the appearance of landscape formations and contours. When it was published in 1922 in the journal *Littérature*, it was stated that Man Ray had taken the photograph in 1921 from an aeroplane; indeed, later he was actually to call it *View From An Aeroplane*. A further parallel between Genzken's *Basic Research* and "Dust Breeding" lies in the fact that at the very heart of the artist's activities - the studio - the artistic act was limited to capturing a state that had seemingly come about without the artist's influence. Our attention is directed to a by-product that has been spawned by chance so that, in a sense, recording

the dust that has collected on an object or the floor, on which time has left its traces, is to focus solely on the outward parameters of the artwork.

Genzken called her imprints of her studio floor *Basic Research*, as if to signal that she wished to investigate the foundations on which her output is based. And she pursues “basic research” with these works inasmuch as she investigates the relationship between sculpture, architecture and painting by means of a reduced range of artistic basics - material, space and surface. During the process, “copies” - impressions of fragments of this floor - are swivelled from the horizontal to the vertical to form a picture. In this way the artist conveys that her basis lies here in her concrete architectural surroundings. In order to transform a floor print made from a fragment of the room into a picture, she resorts once again to a technique she uses in her sculptural practice. As the method of frottage she employed for the oil paintings involves physical contact with a material, so does the casting procedure she used at the same time for her concrete sculptures. With this direct connection between her oil paintings and the building, Genzken posits here the same relationship to reality that she laid claim to in her sculpture.

Genzken’s translation of the room into two dimensions also recalls Jackson Pollock, who transposed painting into the horizontal and turned the painting into a place. This spatialisation of painting which Pollock helped launch makes him relevant to Genzken’s work, in such a way that *Basic Research* can be seen - for all the esteem in which she holds him - as a critical reflection by Genzken on Pollock’s approach. Like Pollock’s paintings, the works in Genzken’s *Basic Research* also lack a central point, have neither up nor down nor direction, but are, rather, “all-over paintings”. But unlike the celebrated master of Abstract Expressionism, Genzken has a deliberately non-gestural take on painting, giving the works a virtually technical appearance that does not seem to have been done by hand.

Pollock, who valued his independence from subjects taken from the world outside, regarded the artist’s total concentration on his own inner world and its expression as the true mark of art in his day. Here, too, Genzken takes a diametrically opposite approach: given that her key work is the *Weltempfänger* (World Receiver), her entire oeuvre is directed to receiving information, or in fact receiving the world. The extreme importance of communication in her work is already demonstrated by such recurring formal structures as openings - as in her frequently used window motif - or by the way her works link up with their surroundings, as with the nylon rope she tied between three student halls of residence in Toronto to join them all together.

In her *Basic Research* paintings, Genzken does not merely make a “copy” of her studio floor, of the physical space in which she works. The building as the point of reference for her own work, the real existing architectural context in which she works, is transformed in this copy into a “work”. The emphasis is not on what she produces from within herself, only that frottage, or the imprint, was the right technical means to realise this. With this method Genzken denies herself any great scope for personal creativity from the outset. Instead the procedure is marked by the fact that the artist can only exert a very small influence on the picture’s final form, such as by choosing a particular section of floor. But ultimately she leaves it to the givens, to what is there in the building, so that unlike the psychic automatism of Abstract Expressionism her pictures arise “automatically”, independent of her personal influence.

Genzken delegates the creation of the work to the outside world and in this way counters the autonomy of the artwork promoted by Pollock. She deliberately leaves the work to chance and accepts the real world as her yardstick. Much the same applies to her concrete sculptures, which are likewise determined by deliberate constraints, in this case working with a recalcitrant material that is hard to model. But the constraints on her creative possibilities are calculated in advance and also harbour the possibility of opening a space for chance. When she casts her concrete pieces, Genzken emphasises how important the unpredictability and moments of surprise are to her, along with the fact that even after she had developed a particular routine, not even the clear tectonic structure of the sculptures allowed her to arrive at an exact idea of what the results would look like.

None of Genzken’s works are abstract in the sense of being free of references to the real, perceptible world around. And it is precisely the connection with reality that interests her and that she stresses, as is evident in her choice of media, such as collage and the Readymade, and in her assemblages of everyday objects - all techniques that allow her to bring together a large number of real existing elements of life. Related to these are the cast, the photograph, or the imprint in the form of a frottage, which record real material. Because essentially even photography is nothing but a kind of “imprint” made by light on photosensitive paper. Genzken’s interest in a practice geared to reality can also be gleaned from the way she has chosen sculpture as her medium of preference. Sculpture had been lauded in traditional art theory, founded by Herder’s celebrated essay on sculpture, as “truer” than painting, because it addresses not only the sense of vision, but above all that of touch. The fact that sculpture,

unlike painting, involves a stronger physical interaction between beholder and object in their mutual surroundings is precisely what allowed it to become the guiding medium for minimal art in the 1960s.

Genzken's artistic beginnings in Düsseldorf were strongly determined by her interest in minimal art, which had a local platform-at the Konrad Fischer Gallery, for instance, and in the journal *interfunktionen*. But *Basic Research* also shows how independent Genzken was from the paradigms and dictates of minimal art and how she created space for the concept of representation that they so disdained. *Basic Research* resembles abstract painting, but actually it would be hard to find anything less abstract, because the painting, as record of the studio floor, is taken almost as directly from reality as a readymade. Genzken extends the avant-garde concept of realism - of grasping reality directly - almost materially. Reality is not depicted or represented, but selected, determined, and, as part of or an excerpt of the floor, it is isolated, revealed as a Readymade, and finally only declared to be a painting once the canvas is stretched. The *Basic Research* paintings correspond in this respect to the concerns of the minimal artists with directing the viewer's attention to the spatial context. At the same time, however, the works have an illusionist aspect to them, because the picture surfaces seem, as it were, to depict rough masonry or aerial shots of landscapes, in short: to represent something. Diverging concepts of reality meet up in one work, because however bound she is to the neo-avant-garde approach, Genzken's entire oeuvre has always had an element of depiction to it. Even the ellipsoids and hyperboloids originate in her view from the curvature of the earth. The constructivist analysis of a geometrical form encounters the play of ideas, the replay of reality.

The influence of minimal art, with its penchant for mass-produced articles made with the latest technology, is no less apparent in Genzken's early works than the enthusiasm for technology and science that was inspired by her engagement with Russian constructivism. With her mind set on establishing the truth by scientific means, she designated her oil painting "basic research", in the scientific sense, and in 1992 embarked on another project in her "research series": her spray pictures entitled *MLR* (More Light Research), which likewise served the aims of knowledge and enlightenment. It seems that during these years, Genzken was intent on demonstrating that art could arrive at insights every bit as objective as those of science. For instance, she had her section in the *documenta 7* catalogue written by two scientists. Informed by the example of the historical avant-garde, Genzken elevated working with technological and scientific, progressive, contemporary means to a mark of artistic quality, and regarded it as not insignificant that she already enlisted the services of a computer for her work at a time when it was less common.

Given Genzken's desire to be familiar with the latest technology, it must initially come as a surprise that she used the ancient, almost primitive means of the hand-crafted print for *Basic Research*. But once again her enquiries into the postulates of the avant-garde and of minimal art led her to make her own personal contribution, which actually broadened the discussion about the tension between conceptual and emotional forces rather than simply ignoring the latter. In the light of Georges Didi-Huberman's study on the imprint, the "basic" in the title of these paintings reveals a further significance. Didi-Huberman points to the anthropological dimension of the imprint and sees it not only as the first sign of humanity wishing to mark its presence, but also as the beginnings of art, as people fashioned their surroundings in a non-functional way with precisely such imprints. As a result of its timeless nature, the "technical stereotype" of the imprint is in his view also of interest to contemporary art. And since it is open to complexity, it in no way conflicts in Didi-Hubermann's view with contemporary artistic practice. As we see in *Basic Research*, with the genuinely physical transposition involved in an imprint, which permits relatively little creative intervention by the artist, over-determination is accompanied by a high degree of indeterminacy, because much that is involved in the manufacturing process eludes artistic control. According to Didi-Huberman, making an imprint is tantamount to "making a technical hypothesis in order to see what results". In keeping with this, the imprint is inscribed with the ability to remain open. And this is the basis of its heuristic value, which is confirmed in Isa Genzken's basic research - "as an experiment with an unforeseeable outcome".

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