

...
*windows that open into windowless rooms
steps that finish at the beginning of steps –
everything in sight falls easily
into the onlooker's eye.*

*at the bottom of the eye is a well
down the well is a city
in the centre of that city*

*at the well's edge
I lean over and fall*

...

Extract from The Well by Maarja Pärtna, translated by Jayde Will

The title of the exhibition, Wells, came to us simultaneously during my visit to Matthias's studio in Karlsruhe. It first emerged from a descriptive impulse, prompted by the painting entitled History Painting, which, incidentally, does not really depict a well, but rather a kind of empty fountain or basin. This almost reflexive imprecision nevertheless describes quite well what runs through the works in this exhibition.

The question of representation, this "old story," lies at the heart of Matthias's entire practice. I call it an old story because it is, fundamentally, one of the most essential and repeatedly addressed questions in the history of painting: not what to paint, but how to paint. One might also add: why paint? (today)

In Maarja Pärtna's poem, translated by Jayde Will, the well is associated with the eye, or rather with vision. Beyond the pupil, this well of the visible becomes an abstract depth in which both reality and the subject seem to lose themselves. What remains there, however, may belong to the order of residue, of an impression in the technical sense, of a trace, of a burn. How, then, can one paint from this trace that reality imprints upon us?

The task is double: to restore the concreteness of objects and cities that do indeed exist outside the eye, while at the same time acknowledging our inability to understand precisely how the eye manages to make these objects and cities appear to us in their most convincing materiality. The more one looks, the more one becomes lost in the paradoxes of the visible. One moves toward its limits; one seeks to make the line, the edge, appear. Perhaps this is where Matthias's work is situated: in this search for the visible, and for what painting can do with it.

Paul: Let's start with maybe the Channel series, the 5 canvases in speaker-like shapes.

In your earlier frottage works, the canvas often seemed to receive the trace of something absent, like the imprint of an object. In the *Channel* works, the process feels different: the structure comes from within the canvas itself, through the stitches, the rubbing, and the gradual erosion of the surface into lines. The result is less an "image", but paradoxically is even more a "painting" I would say.

Could you speak about this shift, from frottage as the imprint of an absent object, to frottage as a way of constructing the painting's own image and objecthood?



Matthias: The frottage was more directly related to something absent. Something had been there, or had touched the surface through the back, and what remained was this kind of husk, or shell. An image, but also the leftover of a contact.

With the Channel works, the situation is different because the structure is already in the canvas. The stitches are not an outside object anymore. They belong to the painting's body. Then, through the layers of paint and the rubbing, they become visible as lines, as a kind of graphic structure.

So maybe the trace is no longer only a trace of something else. It becomes part of the construction of the painting itself. The canvas produces its own image, but also its own objecthood.

I like this ambiguity. The surface is still flat, but there is an inherent depth, almost like a shallow puddle. The geometry mimics objecthood. It stretches away from the viewer, but also into the viewer's physical territory.

And in that sense, yes, maybe the dynamic of looking becomes inverted. It is not only that the viewer looks at the painting. The work also observes from the painting's point of view, redirecting the gaze back onto the viewer.

P: More generally, your abstract work seems to still hold strong ties to the real, or rather to the image, it's not a painterly abstraction per se, even though they still offer depth and restrained material pleasure, it is a sort of empty container of some kind of reality or potential image. This is why I also find them so coherent with your realistic paintings. And as a sort of play, you reintroduce a pointillist figure, the one of the Channel canvas, which reinforces the idea of them being on the edge, both objects and potential image containers.

I think the colour too, this grey, is interesting to think about. Grey could be seen as the shared ground where these two procedures meet. You told me also that you reuse the remains of your last palette, which makes the paintings emerge from one another.

M: Grey is important, but maybe because it is not really what it seems, or what we call it. It is ambivalent. It can mimic colourlessness, almost something universal or neutral, but each grey is actually a toned-down colour. It is usually mixed with its complement. And it is mixed each time anew.

I like the impossibility of getting the same tone again the next day. I try, but I constantly, maybe intentionally, fail. And then I often use the paint residuals from the day before, so one painting really carries something from the previous one. It becomes an ongoing process, with the hope that I won't need to clean the palette. So in the more realistic paintings, colour and light relate to shadow, value, photographic space, maybe illusion. In the frottage works, it seems more like dust, surface, pressure, matter.

Grey is where they meet. It can be optical, but also physical. It can build an image, and at the same time it can feel like the debris of a process.

That is why I don't think realistic paintings and the frottage works are opposed. They are still in the midst of a discussion about which bears the lasting imprint: the frottage or the photographic. The mummified representation, maybe, counteracting the haptic traces, the pressure imprint beside the imprint of gestures with a brush. The frottage registers contact. The realistic painting registers vision, or maybe the attempt to hold vision.

P: I sense that beyond the image, it is a sentiment of familiar space that emerges from several paintings.

I feel like there is some sort of visual familiarity in both the realistic and abstract paintings, meaning the viewer feels familiar with what is depicted or present on the painting, almost like a "known space." I don't know if it's clear. Like a familiar idea of space, that might go beyond the mere photographic quality of the greys and of the picture, but which might share with photography an emotional quality, this ghostly presence, this "memory image."



M: Yes, I see. . my interest lies in images as residuals, and residuals as images to say so. What remains on the canvas is often leftover debris, captured in a cycle of erasure and emergence. One layer can actively eat away at what was underneath. Solvents strip away the surface, revealing the structures below. So the image is not only constructed.. It is also removed, dissolved, and exposed again.

Maybe that creates this familiarity you are talking about. The image feels known, but not completely available. It is not stable. It appears as something that has already passed through a process, or something that is left after the process.

P: Jumping now on the History Painting, which is a wonderful example, alongside the drawings and the Selle watercolour, of your use of your painterly skill. Well first they bear the unavoidable appeal of the photographic image, and of the skilled painting. But I also feel like they display this appeal in a very cold or rather clinical way. Almost as something equidistant between you and the viewer. Your own affect is left aside (apart from you choosing the image to paint), and in this way it also echoes their “shell-like” quality you were referring to.

M: I like this appeal of what is considered—or not considered—skill. When you’re drawn in, you lean in, skill deconstructs itself upon closer inspection: it’s brushstroke next to brushstroke, visualizing duration and construction. It’s ultimately about time—I think here the process becomes far more evident than in abstract paintings or frottages, for example.

P: To come back to the spatial quality of the works, especially the abstract ones from the Cologne exhibition, I sense some sort of atmosphere and depth which bring a sort of warmth to them. Here, in the Channels there is still this sensation, but it’s hurt by these structured and expanding lines, which are really hitting the viewer, especially after looking, even falling into History Painting’s realistic and skillful facture. They push you back in a way.

M: Perhaps this new series offers an inverted point of view. The space offered to the viewer is becoming more and more confined, to the point where looking becomes a position of not having control. In that case, perception is driven by a restless rhythm. Repeated structures dictate a sequence of zooming in and out. The photographic images simultaneously draw the viewer in and out. This recurrence becomes annoying. It creates a loop that I am also trapped in.

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Matthias Gmeiner (*1998) lives and works in Karlsruhe, Germany. He will graduate in 2026 from David Ostrowski’s class at the State Academy of Fine Arts Karlsruhe.

Recent exhibitions include *PALMAR*, Braunsfelder, Cologne (Jan 2026 - Solo), *After the afternoon*, Regionale 26, Kunsthalle Basel (Nov 2025 - Group).

