

The Museum of Modern Art

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THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART PRESENTS FIRST NEW YORK RETROSPECTIVE OF PAINTINGS BY GERHARD RICHTER

Exhibition's Focus on Paintings Reveals the Multifaceted Nature of Richter's Work and His Mastery of Multiple Genres over the Course of His Career

***Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting*
February 14–May 21, 2002**

NEW YORK, February 2002—*Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting* is the first full-scale survey of the paintings of the influential German artist ever mounted in New York as well as the most comprehensive overview of the artist's work yet seen in North America. The exhibition, among the largest MoMA has ever devoted to a contemporary artist, presents 188 canvases from every phase of Richter's career, from 1962 to today. This exhibition demonstrates the artist's mastery of diverse genres, including gestural abstractions, landscapes, portraits, and other photo-based pictures, as well as the vitality of painting as a mode of expression. Richter's diverse body of work calls into question many widely held attitudes about the inherent importance of stylistic consistency, the "organic" evolution of individual artistic sensibility, the spontaneous nature of creativity, and the relationship of technological means and mass media imagery to traditional studio methods and formats. While many contemporary postmodernists have explored these issues by circumventing or dismissing painting as a viable artistic option, Richter has challenged painting to meet the demands posed by new forms of conceptual art.

Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting is organized by Robert Storr, Senior Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture, The Museum of Modern Art.

Richter has long been a greatly respected figure in Europe, but, Storr states, "the fact remains that compared to American contemporaries of similar achievement—Jasper Johns and Robert Ryman, to name two—Richter is relatively unfamiliar to the general American public and still insufficiently known or understood by the dedicated audience of modern art." Two exhibitions of Richter's work have been shown in the United States: a twenty-two-painting overview at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1987 and an eighty-painting

survey that opened at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto in 1988 and then traveled to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Over the years, Richter's renown in America has grown, with his work featured in galleries, group or thematic shows at museums, and exhibitions devoted to a particular aspect of his work.

Richter has been enormously prolific and has worked in all mediums. Painting, however, has always been his primary concern, and with the exception of one early drawing and his sculptural portraits of himself and Blinky Palermo, *Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting* is exclusively focused on paintings. Storr states: "Fifty years after Richter found his vocation and forty years after making his first distinctive mark, the accumulated evidence selectively presented in this exhibition vindicates his faith in an art form fewer and fewer of his closest supporters have believed in and much of the general public has taken for granted, at high cost to painting's ability to convey fresh meaning. In any event, it is a medium that has come to depend for its survival on Richter's severe scrutiny—and it has survived and thrived in large measure because of it."

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Born in 1932 in Dresden, Germany, Gerhard Richter grew up under the Third Reich and National Socialism. He left grammar school at the age of fifteen and enrolled in a trade school, where he studied accounting, stenography, and Russian. Around this time, Richter started to draw, and by the age of sixteen he knew he wanted to be an artist. Richter's first arts-related job was as a member of a team that made Communist banners for the government of the German Democratic Republic. He then applied to the Art Academy in Dresden, but was turned down on his first attempt; he was finally accepted in 1952. During his five-year stay at the Academy, Richter received traditional studio training under Heinz Lothmar, a minor Surrealist and dedicated Communist who supervised the mural painting department at the Academy. This department was known for granting students the greatest freedom to experiment, as mural painting was assumed to be a "decorative" form by otherwise strict enforcers of the Socialist Realist aesthetic. Richter became an accomplished mural painter and upon graduation executed several successful mural commissions. The steady income and success from these commissions enabled Richter to travel to the West.

In 1959, during his second trip west, Richter saw *Documenta 2*, one of a series of exhibitions designed to reintroduce Germany to international modernism and the avant-garde that had disappeared during the

Nazi regime. This exhibition had a profound impact on Richter; most importantly he was exposed to the work of artists Jackson Pollock and Lucio Fontana, whom he credits as helping him open his eyes to modernism. Seeing their work was what Storr calls “the turning point of Richter’s artistic life.” In 1961, shortly before the Berlin Wall was erected, Richter moved to West Germany and began a radically new phase of his career in the heady artistic milieu that developed around Cologne and Düsseldorf in the 1960s. He enrolled in the Academy of Art in Düsseldorf in 1961 and there discovered Abstract Expressionism, Art Informel, Neo-Dada, Fluxus, and a host of related avant-garde tendencies. Storr states: “Richter the virtuoso was a product of his own re-education as a painter once he arrived in the West rather than the strange reincarnation of an accomplished but conservative technician schooled in the East.”

Richter's professor at the Academy was the Art Informel or gestural painter Karl-Otto Götz, whose influence is seen in the artist's work throughout his career. Joseph Beuys was appointed Professor of Monumental Sculpture the same year Richter started at the Academy, and while Richter initially avoided him, he appreciated him for his influence on art, and they became colleagues in 1971, when Richter joined the Academy faculty.

Richter also formed ties with other artists of his generation, notably Sigmar Polke and Blinky Palermo. Richter, Polke, and their friend Konrad Lueg identified themselves as German Pop artists, and briefly upheld a satirical variant of Pop they called Capitalist Realism. Richter and his friends viewed the commercial culture of the West from a different perspective than their American and British counterparts as a result of the economic and political situation in Germany in the immediate postwar era.

Beginning in 1962 with gray-scale paintings that melded newspaper iconography and family snapshots with an austere photo-based realism unlike anything done by the American Photo-Realists, Richter set his own course through the tangle of isms that thrived around him. Although Richter's subject matter, such as the amenities of modern living (*Toilet Paper [Klorolle]*, 1965), superficially resembled that of Pop artists like Andy Warhol or Roy Lichtenstein, the selection of other images such as aerial bombardment (*Mustang Squadron [Mustang-Staffel]*, 1964) or a smiling Nazi soldier (*Uncle Rudi [Onkel Rudi]*, 1965) hinted at a more brooding and historically informed sense of contemporary reality. Formally, Richter eschewed the graphic, often cartoonish quality of New York Pop for a painterly treatment of his snapshot and magazine-clipping sources that resembles Photo-Realism but with opposite effects. Systematically reducing the information transcribed from the source image to an elusive, usually ashen blur, Richter heightened the viewer's sense of the unnaturalness of both original photographs and their painted renditions.

In the early 1970s, Richter went on to paint spare monochromes that evoked mainstream Minimalism but with a significantly different intent and feeling. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Richter’s brightly

colored and boldly delineated canvases suggested but also diverged from the pyrotechnic Neo-Expressionist painting then in full flush. These gestural abstractions continued his methodical yet magisterial deconstruction and reconstruction of the language of painting. Meanwhile, throughout his career, Richter has cultivated a subtly romantic and seemingly antimodernist manner in the landscapes and the hauntingly beautiful “old master-like” portraits he has intermittently produced even as he has pushed abstraction to new levels of visual intensity.

In 1988, Richter completed a startling cycle of fifteen black-and-white paintings titled *October 18, 1977*, based on press photographs of the Baader-Meinhof group—a band of German radicals turned terrorists who died in a Stuttgart prison on that date in tragic and highly controversial circumstances. This group of paintings marks a turning point in Richter’s career, which had previously been interpreted as detached and ironic. The most recent work in this exhibition, from the 1990s to the present, including the *Moritz* series (2000–01)—which have not been widely seen in America—reveals a gentle, occasionally elegiac sensibility despite the abiding critical severity of Richter’s painterly identity.

In every aspect of his varied output, Richter has assumed a skeptical distance from vanguardists and conservatives alike regarding what painting should be, choosing instead to test the limits of what he as an artist can create out of the formal conventions and contradictory ideological legacy of the medium. The result, paradoxically, has been the most thorough dismantling of those conventions and at the same time one of the most convincing demonstrations of painting’s renewed vitality to be found in late 20th- and early 21st-century art.

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Travel:

After its showing at MoMA, the exhibition will embark on a national tour to The Art Institute of Chicago (June 22–September 15, 2002); the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (October 11, 2002–January 14, 2003); and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C. (February 20–May 18, 2003).

Publication:

The exhibition is accompanied by a comprehensive illustrated catalogue featuring an extensive critical essay by the curator, an interview with the artist, chronology, exhibition history, and bibliography. *Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Paintings* contains over 200 color and duotone reproductions and numerous gatefolds; 336 pages. It is published by The Museum of Modern Art, New York, and distributed by D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers (see separate release for detailed information).

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