

## GERHARD RICHTER: LANDSCAPES

### Through July 2, 2004

The exhibition Gerhard Richter “Landscapes” consists of nine paintings tracing almost 40 years of landscape painting by the artist. The landscape is the most frequently reoccurring motif in Richter’s oeuvre, and no other subject has preoccupied the artist over such a long period of time. It is also the one subject that melds, most coherently, the two “styles” of painting that has engaged Richter since the 1960s: abstraction and figuration.

The first landscape painting is *Egyptian Landscape* painted in 1964. It is made up of four color landscapes paintings set into a white background with each landscape identified by an accompanying caption. The composition and color, which simulates cheap mechanical reproductions, reference a page from a travel guidebook and is typical of Richter’s work from the 1960s. *Egyptian Landscape* is also considered to be one of the artist’s earliest color paintings, as most paintings of the period followed the grisaille palette of newspaper images. More importantly, this painting depicts an exotic locale, a far-away destination where a middle-class German living in a post-war West Germany might long to travel to. It symbolizes a desire for economic independence and reflects the general zeitgeist of this period. (Richter’s first vacation would not come until 1968 when he would travel to Corsica.)

In addition to the newspaper images and family snapshots that proved to be the bulk of sources for the 1960s paintings, Richter was also looking and thinking about the work of the German Romantic Caspar David Friedrich. *Ruhrthalbrücke*, 1969, a painting of a bridge famous for its innovative engineering, takes many lessons in composition from Friedrich, namely the low horizon line and large expanses of sky. But in Richter’s work the compositional devices that Friedrich used to represent a sublime and incomprehensible Nature are avoided, revealing what interests Richter more is the process of transforming the original photograph into a painted image.

The complex process of taking a photograph and painting it onto a two-dimensional surface is at the heart of all of Richter’s figurative paintings. In his pursuit of an accurate representation of reality, Richter uses photographs of people and places as his starting point. The inescapable discipline required in the act of painting a projection of a photograph onto a canvas eradicates all issues of style and artistic training. This leaves the painting free from any intentional, subjective decisions by the artist regarding composition and other pictorial issues.

*Haus S*, 1972, is an excellent example of a work which embodies the two most significant realities of painting for Richter, the first being the illusionism of the image and second the material presence of the paint. Here the translation of the photographic original into paint is underlined; the depiction of a house set into a forest is, at the same time, as readily available to the viewer as the physicality of the paint which is thickly applied and sits visibly on the canvas. The blurriness of the painting is a technique that

Richter uses often as it further generalizes the motif, subordinating the particularities of the photograph and freeing the image from the original situation.

*Feldweg*, 1987 and *Buschdorf*, 1985 are both pastoral landscapes of meadows and fields. Not only are they typical of the German landscape in which Richter himself inhabits, but as paintings they surpass their topographical origins via the transformation of the photograph into a painting. Because it belongs to a long art historical tradition, a painting is timeless for Richter, whereas a photograph is transient. By painting the photograph, the landscape becomes more universal, and less about the specifics of the original place. He furthers this process by avoiding any figures or objects that would tie the landscape to a recognizable place or event. *Davos*, 1981, is a time-defying representation of a well-known mountain at a mysterious time of day. The landscape become an analogy of Nature and each painting is an attempt by Richter to capture the reality of the world around him. For Richter, the painting of a landscape is closer to reality than the photograph of it, because the painting is more clearly an object with a physical presence.

There is a conceptual similarity between the abstract paintings and the landscapes. *Venice*, 1985, typifies this ongoing dialogue between figuration and abstraction which is at the basis of all of Richter's work. Here the landscape has been obliterated by the over-painting of an abstract composition. For Richter the landscape is both an illusionistic representation of reality and a structural model for an abstract composition. In *St. Moritz*, 1993, the snowy scene is blurred to the point where it is almost indecipherable, and as the viewer approaches the canvas, the image collapses into abstraction.

In tracing Richter's use of the landscape over the forty years he has been making art it becomes apparent that this motif allows him to tackle two co-existing components of our perception of reality: illusionism and abstraction. Landscape paintings become abstraction through the application of paint and Abstract Paintings become landscapes through titles the artist assigns them. With each picture Richter attempts to capture the randomness of our perception of Nature, and he aspires to reconstruct the complex and contradicting structures that make up each visual reality.

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