

Paul Klee *Psychic Improvisation*

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537 West 20th Street, New York



Paul Klee, *ein Doppel-Schreier (A double screamer)*, 1939
© Klee Family. Courtesy David Zwirner

*I am beginning to see a way to provide a place for my line.... With new strength ... I may dare to enter my prime realm of psychic improvisation again. Bound only very indirectly to an impression of nature, I may again dare to give form to what burdens the soul.*¹

—Paul Klee

David Zwirner is pleased to present *Psychic Improvisation*, an exhibition of work by Paul Klee, on view at the gallery's 537 West 20th Street location in New York. Organized in collaboration with Alain and Doris Klee, with additional support from the Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern, this will be the gallery's third solo exhibition of the revered modernist's work, following *1939*, at David Zwirner New York in 2019, and *Late Klee*, at David Zwirner London in 2020. While those exhibitions focused on Klee's work from the middle to late 1930s, this presentation will explore his singular use of color and line, offering a concise yet instructive overview of the artist's practice from the 1920s and 1930s.

This exhibition will feature a range of key works that visualize the artist's immense skill as a colorist and a draftsman. Several works from the early 1920s—around the time Klee began teaching as a "form master" at the newly founded Bauhaus—feature vibrantly colored grid-like fields whose appearances vacillate between landscape and pure abstraction. Two related paintings, *Friedhof (Cemetery)* and *Mädchen am Fenster (Girl at the window)* (both 1920), exemplify this quality of Klee's Bauhaus-era colorism. In these works, Klee breaks up the picture planes into cubist-style arrangements of geometric

¹ Paul Klee, *The Diaries of Paul Klee: 1898–1918*, ed. Felix Klee (Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, Berkeley, 1964), p. 232.

fragments and forms. Trees and crosses rendered in dark pigment appear as pictographic signs and contrast with the artist's sensitive application of reds, greens, yellows, and blues, which delicately fill the quadrilinear and triangular forms that structure the compositions. White highlights further enhance the tonal range of the works and give the paintings an overall sense of light emanating from behind their surfaces—like stained glass.

Klee's experimentation with line served as a vehicle for exploring abstraction during his time at the Bauhaus, and his inventive and varied use of the graphic medium comes through in intimate works composed of abstract, fractal-like forms or meandering webs and networks of lines. In *Härten in Bewegung (Hardnesses in motion)* (1927), Klee interlocks a series of rectangular planar forms that are all bisected by dark graphic lines to create dynamic spatial relationships on a modestly scaled support. The hard-edged geometry of that work finds its counterpart in *dynamisch-polyphone Gruppe (Dynamic-polyphonic group)* (1931), in which the combination of seemingly diaphanous overlapping organic shapes—made from delicate weaves of crosshatches—visually achieve the abstract sonic quality referenced in the work's title.

Complementing Klee's high-modernist style will be drawings and paintings that highlight the artist's unique and varied approach to the human figure. In works like *Der Schutzmann vor seinem Haus (The policeman in front of his house)*, from 1923, the titular figure appears as a mechanomorphic assembly of shapes and lines with watercolor spreading out from the graphic forms in a bright medley of soft pigments that diffuse into the paper support. Other representations are more diaristic and at times caricaturish—accomplished with an economy of means that makes them evocative and ambiguous. Another standout composition exemplifying Klee's colorism, *ein Doppel-Schreier (A double screamer)* (1939), from the artist's late period, embodies a dual sense of humor and terror, in the form of two abutting heads—rendered in red and orange tones—with mouths agape and terrified expressions, set against a deep lapis blue ground.

Created during the tumult of the interwar years in Europe, the works in this exhibition testify to Klee's status as a pioneering figure in the history of modern art, while the formal sophistication and deeply personal nature of the works underscore why his art continues to resonate with viewers and artists today.

A pioneering modernist of unrivaled creative output, Paul Klee (1879–1940) counts among the truly defining artists of the twentieth century, exploring and expanding the terrain of avant-garde art through work that ranges from stunning colorist grids to evocative graphic productions. Klee taught for a decade, from 1921 to 1931, at the Bauhaus, the famed German art and design school, and the novelty of his work and ideas established him as one of the institution's foremost instructors. He was associated with some of the most important art movements of the twentieth century, such as expressionism, cubism, and surrealism, yet his practice remained highly individualistic and distinct; it was never encapsulated by the concerns of a movement or reducible to the modernist binary of abstraction and figuration.

Klee was born a German citizen in Münchenbuchsee near Bern, Switzerland. In 1911, he had his first solo exhibition at the Galerie Thannhauser in Munich. In the same year, he met fellow artist Wassily Kandinsky and became acquainted with the expressionist group Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider), exhibiting with them at their second show, in 1912. Later that year, after becoming familiar with the art of Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, and Robert Delaunay during a trip to Paris, Klee began incorporating cubist and other innovative colorist techniques and ideas into his own distinct practice. Two years later, in 1914, Klee

traveled to Tunisia with his friends the artists August Macke and Louis Moilliet, a revelatory experience that the artist credits with further awakening him to color.

The renowned gallerist Hans Goltz, a fierce supporter of modern art and Paul Klee's first general agent, from 1919 to 1925, staged a retrospective of Klee's art in 1920 at his gallery in Munich. Alfred H. Barr, Jr., the first director of The Museum of Modern Art, New York, had become familiar with Klee's art in the 1920s and presented an exhibition of his work in March of 1930, the institution's first solo show of a living European artist. In 1935, Klee's work was the subject of major retrospectives at the Kunsthalle Bern and the Kunsthalle Basel. In 1940, shortly before he passed away, Klee had a solo exhibition of new work at the Kunsthaus Zürich. In 1941, a traveling memorial exhibition was organized by The Museum of Modern Art, New York, and toured additional venues across the United States, including the San Francisco Museum of Art.

Klee's work has been the subject of major retrospectives and traveling solo exhibitions at institutions worldwide. Among major exhibitions of his work during the past decade are *The EY Exhibition: Paul Klee – Making Visible* at Tate Modern from 2013 to 2014; the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, held *Paul Klee: Irony at Work* in 2016; Fondation Beyeler, Basel, hosted the retrospective *Paul Klee: The Abstract Dimension* from 2017 to 2018; Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich, featured *Paul Klee: Construction of Mystery* in 2018; and Museo delle culture, Milan, presented *Paul Klee: Alle origini dell'arte (Paul Klee: At the Origins of Art)* from 2018 to 2019. In 2019 *Paul Klee: Equilíbrio Instável* debuted at Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, São Paulo, and traveled to Centro Cultural do Brasil, Rio de Janeiro, and Centro Cultural do Brasil, Belo Horizonte. In 2022, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art presented the two-person exhibition *Paul Klee & Lee Mullican: Outward Sight and Inner Vision. Paul Klee and the Secrets of Nature* was on view at Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona, from October 21, 2022 to February 12, 2023.

In 1947, after the death of Paul Klee's widow, four prominent collectors in Bern established the Paul Klee Foundation, which was housed in the Kunstmuseum Bern until 2004. On the occasion of a large donation of works from the Klee Family, the foundation was absorbed into a new museum dedicated to the artist. In 2005, the Zentrum Paul Klee opened as an independent institution and research center with a building designed by Renzo Piano. Klee's work is in the permanent collections of countless major museums around the world.

For all press inquiries, contact

Julia Lukacher +1 212 727 2070 jlukacher@davidzwirner.com

Erin Pinover +1 212 727 2070 epinover@davidzwirner.com