



Gerhard Richter
(German, born 1932)

Biography

Gerhard Richter (1932) was born in Dresden, Germany, during the rise of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (the Nazi Third Reich). Some of Richter's relatives were even directly involved in the Nazi movement. Richter's mother, the daughter of a concert pianist, encouraged her son's early talent for draftsmanship. In 1948, at the age of 16, Richter quit his formal education and took up an apprenticeship as a set painter for the theater. The wake of war proved traumatic for Richter: two uncles had been killed in action, and his father had lost his employment. This turmoil, coupled with the artist's early artistic training under postwar communist-driven ideology, eventually led Richter to seek his creative inspiration in nature over any political or religious affairs or philosophies.

Beginning in 1951, Richter studied at the Kunstakademie, Dresden, where he painted murals and political banners commissioned by state-owned businesses. During this time, the East German communist regime imposed a Social Realist style on all practicing artists; this policy effectively turned art to the service of political propaganda. In keeping with this development, the government banned exhibitions of American Pop art and Fluxus. These circumstances severely limited Richter's fledgling artistic style, as he was instructed to paint only landscapes in a manner heavily informed by pastoral romanticism. During a visit to West Germany in 1959, Richter discovered the work of contemporary artists Jackson Pollock and Lucio Fontana. Pollock's uninhibited splashes of color across canvas had a profound impact on Richter, provoking him to reflect on his own artistic ideology. Indeed, Richter began to question how a realist style did not seem to capture the energy, sense of truth, and spirit of artistic liberation that he observed in the abstract work of his American and European contemporaries. Supposedly "realistic", his work seemed to fail to reflect the underlying, tumultuous nature of reality itself.

In 1961, just prior to the government's official completion of the Berlin Wall, Richter moved to Düsseldorf. Once again enrolling at the local Kunstakademie, Richter intended to work in a more uninhibited, avant-garde manner; in the process of rethinking his approach to art making, he purposely destroyed many of his early paintings from the 1950s and the 1960s. While continuing to paint in a realist manner, around 1961, Richter began using photographs, projecting and tracing images directly onto the canvas.

Richter believed that he was, as an artist, "not painting a particular person, but a picture that has nothing in common with the model." Thus while he painted individuals from photographs, Richter's replica images were often blurred and bore nothing distinctively identifiable about the subject, an effect that forced the viewer to consider the fundamental components of the painting itself, such as composition, color scheme, and so forth, rather than leaving the viewer to identify with, or be distracted by, a picture's implied content or its emotional element of "humanity." Eventually finding himself frustrated over whether to pursue abstraction or figuration, he decided to concentrate on the chance details that emerged from the painting process. Using the same method as employed in his representational paintings, Richter began blurring, scraping, and concealing various painted layers in his new canvases. In 1966, he created a series of grey paintings that featured compositional structure and paint application rather than realistic subject matter. Richter applied the paint in thick brushstrokes, or with rollers and an aggressive sweep of a squeegee (ironically, a tool commonly used for window cleaning and clarifying one's scope of vision). In this particular body of work, he minimized the visual impact of realist imagery in favor of a spontaneous, gestural illusion of space.

In 1971, Richter became a professor at the Kunstakademie, Düsseldorf. This marks the beginning of his "color chart" paintings, in which he systematically applied square hues of solid color to large canvases. During this time, Richter received wide criticism for his express refusal to be identified with a specific artistic movement, as well as for his work's apparent unwillingness to acknowledge various social and political issues pertaining to the WWII Nazi regime.

Richter embraced the title, Abstract Painting, in 1976, as a generic one for all his subsequent canvases, a move that effectively forced viewers to interpret a given work without explanation provided by the artist. One year later, Richter returned to figurative work in his Baader-Meinhof series, which chronicled the controversial death of a group of young German terrorists in a Stammheim prison. Photographs served as references as Richter painted the dead and captured the horrific vanity of the terrorists' actions. The blurred imagery of Richter's paintings might be said to parallel the unsolved mystery surrounding the inmates' sudden demise.

Gerhard moved to Cologne in 1983, where he continues to live, while he maintains his professorship at the Kunstakademie, Düsseldorf.

During the 1980s and '90s, Richter achieved international celebrity for his series of entirely abstract paintings that, on first glance, would seem to carry on a tradition of Abstract Expressionism; nevertheless, on close examination of their dense surfaces, these color-resplendent works suggest that they have been calculated to refer only to themselves or their processes of production (i.e. in lieu of expressing any personal psychology of the artist himself). Sharing a typically postmodern attitude of skepticism toward all grand ambitions, Richter seems in this body of work to revel in his own ability to pack pigments in dense layers across the canvas, and then disturb the entire, quasi-archeological field by raking it laterally, as though the artist was mechanically plowing "intersections" where his own control of his materials gives way, in this place and that, to purely chanced textures and random coagulations of color. These "abstract pictures," as Richter titles them, ultimately seem to constitute isolated moments of pure visual pleasure.

Richter came of age as a painter at what was, for an artist, a very challenging moment in history, indeed, when both modern art and global politics had arrived at historic "milestones" in their respective development. Richter found a viable means for reconciling his long grounding in Social Realist painting with more conceptually challenging, avant-garde developments afoot in Europe and the United States. At a time when the "death of painting" was increasingly proclaimed by a new generation more interested in art's conceptual potential than with mastering long traditions of material craftsmanship, Richter demonstrated that painting could still powerfully question all images for their truth potential, no matter whether they might originate in the news media, the cinema, the internet, the ubiquitous realm of commercial advertising, or even the family photo album. Richter has also reinvigorated the idea that desiring "beauty" in one's work is a perfectly acceptable ambition, particularly at a time when many of his generation presumed that any desire for aesthetic pleasure was something to be embarrassed about, or indeed applicable only to a distant, presumably less sophisticated people in history.

Selected Exhibitions

2017

Modern Masters, SmithDavidson Gallery, Miami, USA

2016

Birkenau, Museum Frieder Burda, Baden-Baden, Germany

2015

Gerhard Richter: Painting, Wako Works of Art, Tokyo, Japan

2014

Gerhard Richter: Strips and Glass, Kunstmuseum Winterthur, Winterthur, Switzerland

2013

Gerhard Richter: Two Sculptures For a Room by Palermo, Tate Modern, London, UK

2012

Gerhard Richter: Panorama, Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin, Germany
Gerhard Richter, Centre Pompidou, Paris, France

2011

Panorama, Tate Modern, London, UK

2009

Gerhard Richter Portraits, National Portrait Gallery, UK

2008

4900 Colours: Version II, Serpentine Galley, London, UK

2001

An American in Europe: The Photography Collection of Baroness Jeane von Oppenheim, Museum für Angewandte Kunst, Cologne, Germany

2000

Sommerutstillinger 2000, Astrup Fearnley Museet for Moderne Kunst, Oslo, Norway

1999

Pop Impressions, Europe/USA: Prints and Multiples, MoMA, Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA

1994

The Tradition of the New, Postwar Masterpieces from the Guggenheim Museum Collection Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, USA

1990

Gerhard Richter: Atlas der Fotos, Collagen en Skizzen, Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Germany
Gerhard Richter 18. Oktober 1977, Museum of Fine Arts, Montreal, Canada

1980

Gerhard Richter: Zwei Gelbe Striche, Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, NL

1970

Gerhard Richter: Graphik 1965-1970, Museum Folkwang, Essen, Germany

Selected Literature

2016

G. Richter, *Gerhard Richter. Birkenau*

2015

H. Friedel, *Gerhard Richter. Atlas, in Four Volumes*

Selected Art Fairs

KunstRAI Amsterdam, Amsterdam, NL

Photo London, London, UK

Art New York, New York, USA

TEFAF Maastricht, Maastricht, NL