

CRITIC'S PICK

The Sublime Farewell of Gerhard Richter, Master of Doubt

The Met Breuer closes with an exhibition of the 88-year-old German painter, likely to be the final major show of his lifetime.

By Jason Farago

March 5, 2020

An exquisite melancholy has settled upon the galleries of Marcel Breuer's inverted ziggurat on Madison Avenue: an air of dashed aspirations, commitment and farewell. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, which rented Breuer's granite fortress from the relocated Whitney Museum of American Art in 2015, will be vacating the building in July, three years ahead of schedule. (Costs were too high.)

The museum could not have offered a more apt final show — more rigorous, more resigned — than “Gerhard Richter: Painting After All.” It engrosses two floors of the Breuer with art of total mastery that also, at every turn, casts doubt on its own achievement. The squeegeed oils, the clammed-up portraits. The aseptic color charts, the matter-of-fact panes of glass and mirrors. Here they all are, poker-faced as ever, pushing forward with painting even as Mr. Richter subjects painting to endless criticism and interrogation. Some say the medium died in the 1960s, some say it's never been more vital. He believes both, and, at times, neither.

At this agitated moment for museums, desperate to prove their social impact, this greatest of living painters asks: What is contemporary art *really* for? Can it do anything? Have I accomplished anything? Mr. Richter, even as his auction prices have reached Alpine elevations, has never been certain — and this beautiful valediction, with 60 years of work, affirms the artistic and moral force of his irresolution and skepticism. (The artist, 88, has said this will very likely be the last major museum exhibition of his lifetime. It travels to Los Angeles in summer.)

Know first that “Painting After All,” organized by Sheena Wagstaff, chairman of the Met's department of modern and contemporary art, and the art historian Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, along with Met assistant curator Brinda Kumar, is *not* a retrospective of Mr. Richter's career. At 18, I was one of hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers who found a strange and necessary comfort at the Museum of Modern Art's sprawling survey of Mr. Richter's painting, staged five months after the Sept. 11 attacks. That retrospective, in the winter of 2002, drew unexpectedly large audiences who found, in Mr. Richter's difficulty, variety and uncertainty, a release from the pain downtown and the march to war in Washington. This new show joltingly opens with “September,” a small, blurred 2005 painting of a plane striking the World Trade Center — the first of many works here that look at violence, and its media representations, with a cool, ambivalent gaze.



Gerhard Richter, "Self-portrait" (1996). The artist uses a dry brush to blur his compositions, which almost always originate from photographs. Charlie Rubin for The New York Times



"September" (2005) repaints a media image of the destruction of the World Trade Center, and obscures it with streaks of blue and gray. Charlie Rubin for The New York Times

But they are quite different, in style and aim. The Breuer show includes about 100 works: just a little over half the quantity MoMA assembled in 2002, even though Mr. Richter has painted at a vigorous pace in the two intervening decades. It omits many of his most important series, like the “48 Portraits” (1972), his pallid pictures of dead white men, and “October 18, 1977” (1988), his ghostly cycle of the lives and deaths of the Baader-Meinhof gang. It also leaves out “Atlas,” his titanic photographic compendium of a century’s cultural history. But it includes, as MoMA did not, Mr. Richter’s work in glass sculpture; his mirrors that throw back your reflection in a bereft minor key; and his editions and recent digital prints.

Spaced generously across the museum’s third and fourth floors, the show capitalizes on Breuer’s brutalist architecture. Wide-open sightlines let you appreciate the diversity of the artist’s approaches and his refusal of signature style. Each floor is anchored by a central gallery of abstractions. The fourth floor, stronger, revolves around Mr. Richter’s staggering “Cage” series, among the largest of his squeegee-facilitated compositions. The third floor, more troubling, has at its core his recent “Birkenau” quartet, from 2014, whose abstract drags and stutters obscure imagery of the Holocaust, and which have never been shown before in North America.

Mr. Richter was born in 1932 in Dresden. He trained as a Socialist Realist painter in that destroyed eastern city before defecting to West Germany in 1961, months before the rise of the Berlin Wall. Alongside Sigmar Polke, Blinky Palermo, Konrad Lueg and other students at the exuberant Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, he began painting deadpan figurative canvases in a sapped grisaille. The imagery often came from lifestyle magazines, aerial photography, and also family albums, and their cold, distanced style held up a mirror to the new Federal Republic’s consumerist vapidness and Nazi inheritance.



“House of Cards (5 Panes),” a new glass sculpture by Mr. Richter, stands amid black and white photographic paintings from the 1960s. Charlie Rubin for The New York Times



“Uncle Rudi,” from 1965, depicts Mr. Richter’s uncle in Nazi uniform. The painting was a breakthrough for the German artist coming to terms with the past. Charlie Rubin for The New York Times



Detail of “Forest (5),” from 2005. Mr. Richter has always worked in both figurative and abstract modes. Charlie Rubin for The New York Times



Four works from the “Forest” series at “Gerhard Richter: Painting After All,” at the Met Breuer. Charlie Rubin for The New York Times

An early gallery at the Breuer contains nine of these grayscale “photographic paintings.” Several depict Nazis, including “Uncle Rudi,” a small 1965 portrait of the artist’s mother’s brother, smiling proudly in his new Wehrmacht uniform. The black-and-white palette and small scale echo its family album source — but, by dragging a dry paintbrush over the wet oils, Mr.

Richter turned history into a staticky transmission. The blur wiped away both the sentiment of the family portrait and the self-righteousness some young Germans brought to the Nazi past. All that was left was a mist, in which repudiation cannot be separated from guilt.

The blur is as close as Mr. Richter has ever come to a stylistic signature, and it recurs here in seascapes, landscapes, and street scenes; portraits of his daughter Betty, her head resting on a table like meat on the butcher block, or his ex-wife, the artist Isa Genzken, nude and from behind; and smaller canvases of Sabine Moritz, his current wife, nursing their newborn in the manner of a Madonna and Child.

Hard not to see the influence of Renaissance Italy in these landscapes, portraits and quasi-religious scenes. Hard not to feel, too, their aloofness and sterility. Always, the blur serves as the mark of faith and doubt in painting. The photographic source suggests that these kinds of depictions are dated beyond relevance; the blur shows him pursuing that tradition despite it all.

Mr. Richter made abstractions at the same time as these photo paintings, but only in 1980 did he pick up a squeegee and drag it along successive layers of paint, to produce stammering, arrhythmic compositions. The successive building up and wiping away of pigment results in “abstract pictures,” as most are dryly titled, whose hidden depths and lost pasts remain stubbornly inaccessible.



“Betty,” a small painting from 1977, depicts his young daughter. Museum Ludwig



A painting from the "Birkenau" series, 2014. via the Met Breuer

This exhibition stints on his 1980s work to concentrate on his abstractions of the last 20 years, such as the mighty "Cage" sextet (2006), whose streaks of greens, silvers and yellows reconcile skill and randomness. (John Cage's dictum, "I have nothing to say and I am saying it," could be Mr. Richter's motto as well.) The "Forest" series, painted in 2005, displays more evident squeegee marks: some have large vertical strips of depigmentation, producing a distinction between figure and ground that's rare in Mr. Richter's art.

The skull, the candle, the family album, the blurred forest: so much of Mr. Richter's painting, in abstract or representational modes, has orbited around the absent nucleus of the concentration camp. Photographs of the Holocaust appear in the "Atlas" as early as 1967, but only in 2014, with "Birkenau" (the largest sector of Auschwitz), did he address it directly in painting.

"Birkenau" began with a yearlong effort by Mr. Richter to render in paint four photographs of the death camp, taken by Jewish prisoners forced to burn corpses at the gas chambers. He could not do it. So he began to overlay the Holocaust imagery with layers of dark color, which he would then scrape off in turn. Nothing of the original pictures is visible, and compared to the rippling "Cage" series, these paintings are more abraded and pitted, done in a stifling palette of scarlet, green and black.

The "Birkenau" paintings are vexing. I respect Mr. Richter's need, as a German artist so intensely focused on what can and cannot be represented, to wrestle at last with these images from hell. Yet "Birkenau" is more direct than usual from him, and I have serious reservations about the decision to show, alongside the four paintings, the four terrible source photographs. The

paintings would seem to deny us any Holocaust voyeurism, or what Mr. Buchloh, in the catalog, calls “spectatorial scopic abuse.” The source photos, though, tacitly encourage a repulsive search in each painting for the obliterated violence beneath. The death camps should never be a game of “I Spy.”



The “Birkenau” gallery at the Met Breuer includes four paintings at left; four exact inkjet reproductions at right; a mirror work at back; and the source photographs from the death camp, visible in the mirror’s reflection. Charlie Rubin for The New York Times

Facing “Birkenau” are exact digital prints of the same works, as if to dissolve their momentousness. Between the four “Birkenau” paintings and the four copies are four gray mirrors, and everything appears under dimmed lights. If “Birkenau” is meant to assert that we will never truly understand the Holocaust, at the Breuer everything adds up too easily: The abstract paintings express the inexpressible, the copies indicate that even the worst can happen again, and the mirrors force us to face our place in history.

It’s the one room in this otherwise impeccably hung exhibition that feels overfilled. If it were up to me I’d hang the “Birkenau” paintings like any others, and leave us to our grief. Yet I suspect Mr. Richter, closely involved in the organization of this room, has his own aims with the copies and the mirrors. The Third Reich and the G.D.R. inculcated in him a lifelong doubt of ideologies — but now, nearing 90, the artist doubts even his own doubtfulness, and he seems less confident than his many admirers of what “Birkenau” achieves. For 60 years, he has treated uncertainty as an ethical duty. That remains true even at this final celebration, and with every pass of the squeegee, he has modeled how an artist can create in the face of doubt, face down the fear of wrongness, mistrust oneself and still fight on.

That is the priceless example he offers today’s young artists, whose every mistake or hesitation gets pounced on by digital Savonarolas. So much dogmatism out there, so much high-volume moralizing. The voice we need to hear is the voice that says: *I don’t know. I’m not sure. I’m still thinking. I’m still working.*

Gerhard Richter: Painting After All

Through July 5 at the Met Breuer, 945 Madison Avenue, Manhattan; 212-731-1675, [metmuseum.org](https://www.metmuseum.org).

Jason Farago is an art critic for The Times. He reviews exhibitions in New York and abroad, with a focus on global approaches to art history. Previously he edited Even, an art magazine he co-founded. In 2017 he was awarded the inaugural Rabkin Prize for art criticism. @jsf