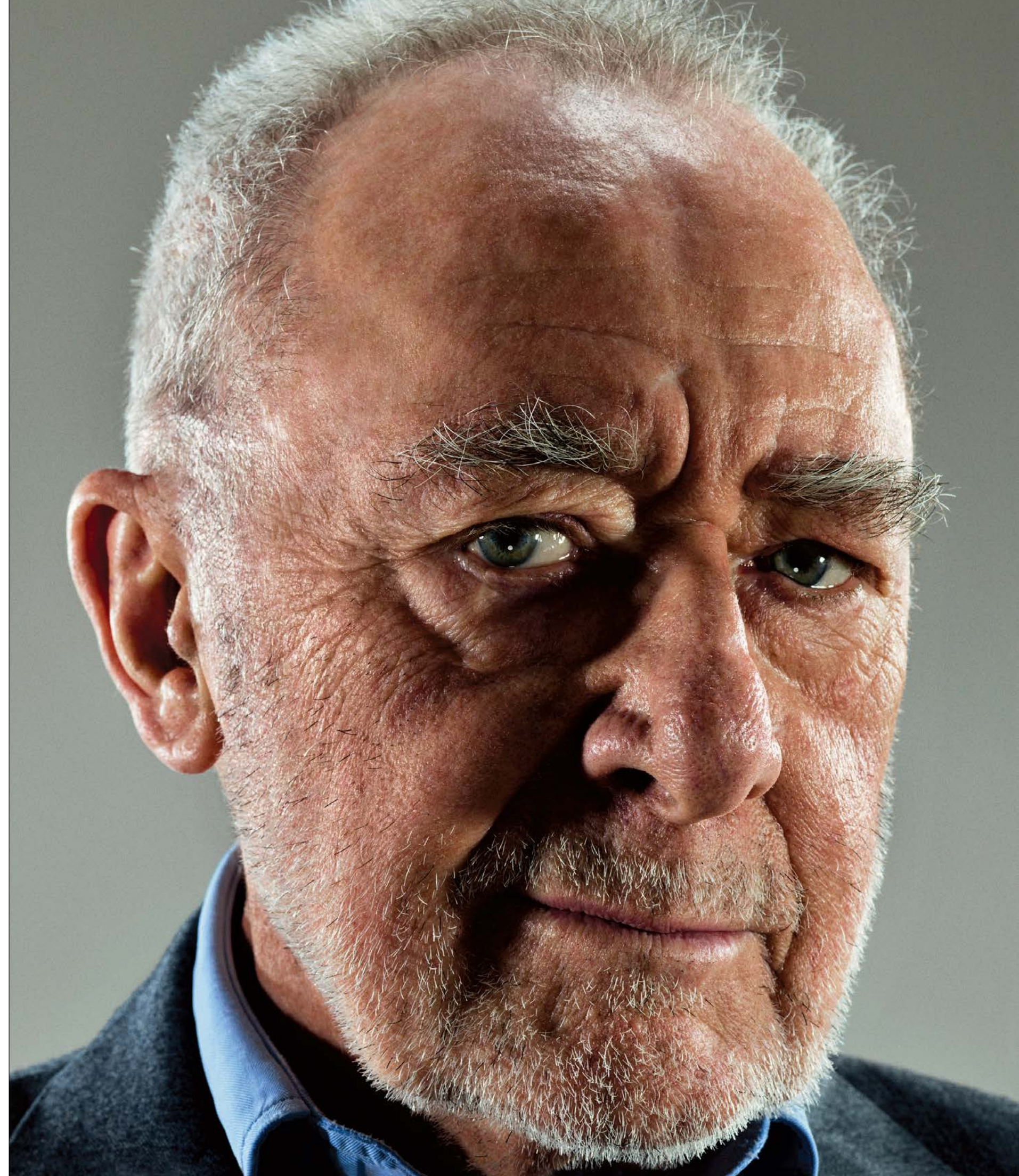
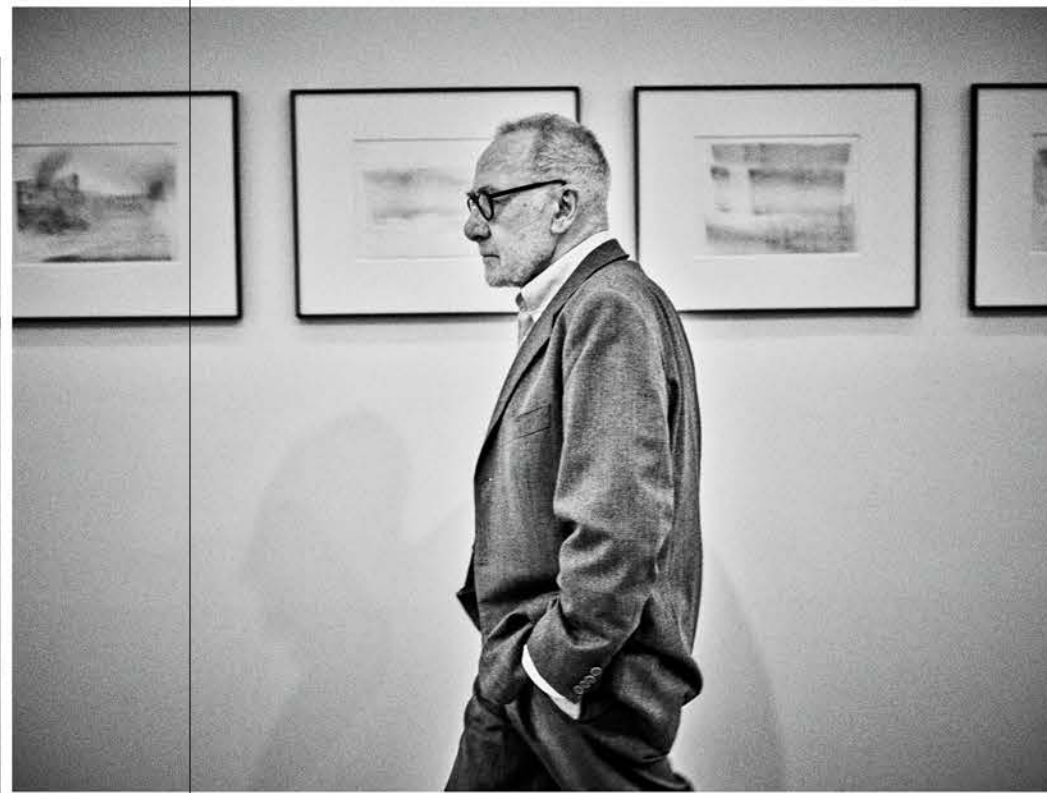


Brush With GREATNESS

Over the past half century, Gerhard Richter's oeuvre has grown to encompass colorful abstracts, black-and-white photo-realist works, conceptual sculptures and computer-generated prints—and now, at 84, as he returns to the canvas, some of his most vibrant paintings to date.

BY CAROL KINO
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARIO SORRENTI





GERHARD RICHTER is sitting in the tiny library of New York's Marian Goodman Gallery, trying to figure out how to talk about his newest abstract paintings, which hang in the brightly lit space on the other side of the wall. Thickly striated with brilliant blurs of color—blue, yellow, green, violet and red—made by dragging a giant squeegee across the canvas, their layers pulse with an ebullience that hasn't marked his work for decades. Perhaps that's why the artist, long

(*Orange*)—is still vigorously creating work. But before he created these paintings, he had barely put brush to canvas in four years. Today, though the show's official opening is some days off, the gallery is crowded with critics, curators and collectors hoping to land one of the new creations. Richter confesses that he hates the hoopla surrounding his shows. "The worst thing is the dinner afterward. Sometimes I don't go. Even when I was young, sometimes I didn't go." Yet he always finds it thrilling to see the work in the gallery: "This is fantastic, *ja*."

erupting into wry asides and hearty laughter.

He began the abstract oil paintings in this show in 2014, after a hiatus when he had so many exhibitions—including a 2011 Tate Modern retrospective, *Panorama*, which traveled to Berlin's Neue Nationalgalerie and Paris's Centre Pompidou—that he'd hardly been able to paint at all. The crush of bureaucratic responsibilities can be stifling, he finds. "The more known I am, the more work I have to do—I am like a manager now," he says. Instead, during that period, he created reams of other work, including 300 psychedelic-looking "Behind Glass" abstracts (some of which are also on view in the gallery), made by pouring lacquer onto glass, and over 80 eye-popping striped "Strip" digital prints, a few as long as 32 feet, achieved by putting slices of a photograph of a 1990 painting—each a fraction of a millimeter wide—through innumerable permutations on a computer.

Since Richter sometimes refers to himself as a picture-maker rather than a painter, does it matter how his vision is achieved? He looks shocked. "One is handmade, and the other not," he says. "When you do something with your hand, it's a different thing than simply conceiving it. You do it with your whole body."

Indeed, in the 2011 documentary *Gerhard Richter Painting*, he's seen staggering from one side of the canvas to the other as he pushes a squeegee into layers of wet paint, then stands back to consider the effect before shouldering his burden and starting the task again. Richter says his judgments have grown more assured with age. "It's another job now, like

life," he says. "It may be more difficult when you are old." Besides the angst of creation, the physical exertion takes more of a toll: As he puts it, "This is a reason these paintings are not as large as in the movie."

IF EVER AN ART CAREER exemplified the saying "Be careful what you wish for," it well may be Richter's. For decades, he's been lauded—and sometimes mistrusted—for his dazzling ability to move back and forth between figuration and abstraction, using a vast array of styles.

He first became widely known for blurry grisaille oil paintings based on black-and-white photographs, including, most notably, the 15 works in *October 18, 1977*, a 1988 series fashioned after news imagery of the arrests and deaths of Germany's terrorist Baader-Meinhof Group. Richter has also produced fluffy white clouds, still lifes and portraits that suggest old masters and Romantics, landscapes that recall surveillance photographs and unfocused likenesses based on snapshots that oddly foreshadow the contemporary obsession with cellphone photography. Then there are the abstractions, which include everything from those heavily impastoed squeegee works to monochromatic gray canvases, colored mirrors, framed glass panels and

DRAWING ATTENTION Richter, photographed with his new drawings in New York's Marian Goodman Gallery, is ambivalent about his celebrity. "He's old, and this painting is a million or two," he mimics would-be collectors saying.

conceptual color charts based on industrial paint samples. And his abstractions sometimes flirt with reality, like the 2005 series *Wald (Forest)*, whose brushstrokes suggest tree trunks, or the 1986 series *Cage*, which Richter made while listening to the avant-garde composer John Cage, whose ideas about chance-controlled creation have long inspired him.

"I think of Richter as a gymnast," says Neal Benezra, the director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, which has one of the world's most significant collections of the artist's work. "The history of modern painting has been one of painters trying to identify a signature style. Picasso is the great exception to that rule, and Richter has had a fundamental role in putting that idea away for good. He keeps the audience on their toes."

Along with Richter's outsize ability has come outsize fortune and fame, and the potential for idolatry, which has soared along with the market for his paintings. "Picasso loved it, and Gerhard does not," says the critic and curator Robert Storr, who organized Richter's 2002 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, which boosted the artist's visibility and helped begin his transformation into a hot auction commodity. "Gerhard has huge artistic ambition, but he was not seeking the kind of artist persona that Picasso and other people of that generation sought. He lives modestly. He is a family man."

Richter met Moritz in 1992, when she was his last student at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, where he taught for 23 years; they married in 1995, after he'd

split from his second wife, the sculptor Isa Genzken. They now have three children, Moritz, 21, Ella, 19, and Theo, 9. (Richter also has a daughter, Babette, 49, from his first marriage to the textile designer Ema Eufinger.) Today, his life centers around his house and his studio next door, a boxy concrete building on the outskirts of Cologne. He is there most days by 8 a.m. and works until 6 or 7 p.m., leaving only to eat his regular lunch of bread, yogurt and tomatoes. "I know that even on holidays or Sundays, I can call his studio and he'll be there," says Dieter Schwarz, the director of Switzerland's Kunstmuseum Winterthur and a close friend.

Richter is known for making his paintings completely on his own, without help from his two studio assistants. His wife is one of the few people he relies on for feedback: In the documentary, she visits to look at some new paintings and, after thoughtful assessment, suggests that he put one away before he's tempted to change it.

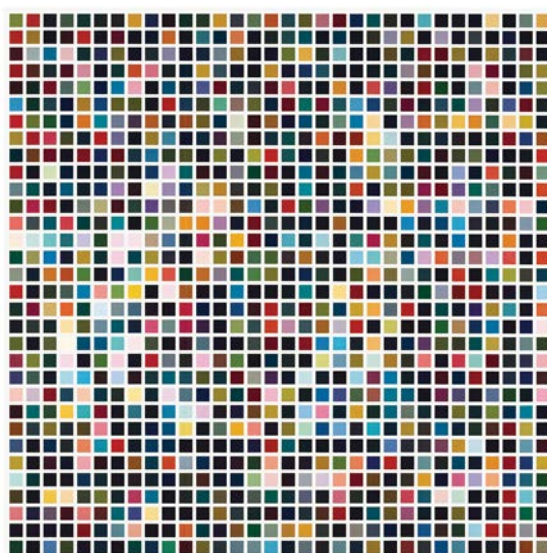
Richter is a merciless editor, stopping, starting, reworking canvases again and again until he is satisfied. Throughout his career, he has also been known to destroy finished work, even after it has been exhibited. "I think there always has been a struggle," Schwarz says. "He always has had this kind of skeptical attitude toward what he was doing." For this reason, he adds, Richter is unimpressed by the present trends in art. "He thinks you have to have knowledge of technique and art history, and you have to be really critical toward yourself and toward

"GERHARD HAS HUGE ARTISTIC AMBITION, BUT HE IS NOT SEEKING THE KIND OF ARTIST PERSONA THAT PICASSO SOUGHT. HE LIVES MODESTLY." —ROBERT STORR

renowned for being squeamish about interviews, has decided to "surrender," as he jokes, to this one. Even though "it's fantastic to be asked, because it shows interest, I feel very incompetent to answer," he says in thickly German-accented English by way of explaining his chronic reluctance.

At 84, the man considered by many to be the world's greatest living painter—and its priciest, too, at least at auction, where his record stands at \$46.4 million for 1986's *Abstraktes Bild*, just behind Jeff Koons's \$58.4 million sculpture *Balloon Dog*

Richter's third wife, the artist Sabine Moritz, 46, is sitting beside him, watching protectively. (He's painted her so many times, suffused in Vermeer-like light, in 1994's *Lesende (Reader)*, or nursing their first son in the 1995 series *S. mit Kind (S. with Child)*, that her presence seems oddly familiar.) Richter initially comes across as demure and polite, with cropped gray hair, a rumpled gray suit and a formal, professorial mien. Occasionally he speaks through a translator. But he can also be playful, interspersing conversation with emotive *ja*'s, then



BIG PICTURE
From top left:
Tisch (Table), 1962;
*4 Glasscheiben (4 Panes
of Glass)*, 1967; *Domplatz,
Mailand*, 1968; *1024
Farben (1024 Colors)*, 1973.

what is happening in order to find a position. Today's 'anything goes' attitude is very foreign to him."

Indeed, Richter's own tastes in art tend toward the historical and the painterly. He and Moritz live with a Courbet landscape, and he is a fan of Velázquez. On this New York trip, he has seen a show of Edgar Degas monotypes at the Museum of Modern Art ("I was very taken with it," he says) and had plans to see an exhibition of Robert Ryman's work at Dia: Chelsea. "He's a great admirer of Ryman," says Storr, "I think in part because Ryman does the things he cannot do. Bob has a kind of unquestioning faith in abstraction, and Gerhard has always questioned abstraction. He's been drawn to it and at the same time doubted it."

But despite his chronic self-questioning and doubt, his worst times come, Richter says, when he is not making any work at all—the moments when "I get very unhappy or I'm afraid to start over," he says. "I'm just empty."

BORN IN DRESDEN in 1932, a year before Hitler came to power, Richter seems to have always had an underlying need to work against the grain. After training as an artist in East Germany, he established a successful career as a muralist, working mostly in the Soviet-approved socialist realist style. But in 1959, he saw his first Jackson Pollocks and Lucio Fontanas at the Documenta art exhibition in Kassel, West Germany, and realized he

had to get out. Two years later, in 1961, he fled for Düsseldorf with his first wife. He enrolled at the Kunstakademie, an avant-garde hotbed soon dominated by Joseph Beuys, the shamanistic godfather of conceptualism—although Richter was always highly skeptical of the hero-worshipping clique Beuys gathered around himself. He never saw his family in the East again, but Richter was able to find common ground with other East German artists like Blinky Palermo and Sigmar Polke. He soon made his name by painting blurry versions of family photographs—like *Onkel Rudi (Uncle Rudi)*, 1965, showing his mother's favorite brother, who'd died a few days into the war, posing proudly in his Wehrmacht uniform—thereby unearthing the festering history that many sought to forget.

By 1971, Richter was teaching at the Kunstakademie himself. The photographer Thomas Struth, who entered his class in 1974, remembers him as an intense taskmaster. The judgments about what was good and not good were often "very tough," Struth says. "It's obviously important to create your own foundation. For a 19- or 20-year-old, it was not so easy. And he was at the time quite an ironic man. You had to guess what was being said."

Hans Ulrich Obrist, the artistic director of London's Serpentine Galleries, met Richter as a teenager in 1986 at the opening of a retrospective in Switzerland. By then, the artist had added many different series to his quiver. "I was completely mesmerized by all these parallel realities," Obrist

says. "The '80s abstract paintings, the monochrome gray work, the photo-painting, the glass art—it was almost like quantum physics." In their first conversation, Richter told him painting was a game. "It's like playing boules," Obrist recalls him saying. "Each time, you create new situations." They have been fast friends since—even though Obrist curated one of the recent shows that kept Richter out of his studio, the 2014 *Pictures/Series* retrospective at Basel's Fondation Beyeler.

Richter's relationship with Marian Goodman, who represents him everywhere in the world but Japan, has also been enduring. They first worked together during the '80s market boom, when New York had a frenzied interest in German neo-expressionist painters like Georg Baselitz and Jörg Immendorff. "I realized everyone was looking in the wrong direction," she says, "and the great artist of our time was Gerhard."

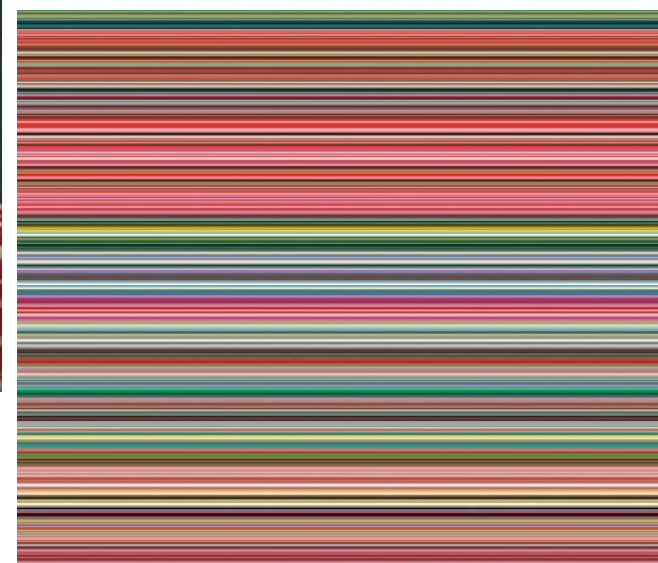
After an awkward meeting in Richter's studio, then in Düsseldorf, during which the two were so shy they barely spoke, they began working together. Gradually, his other galleries fell by the wayside. Today, Richter continues to be handled exclusively by the 88-year-old dealer herself.

"He's not an artist who just picks up a paintbrush and produces a work," Goodman says. "It's this intellectual exercise." Although Goodman suspects that making the computer-generated Strip pieces may have helped Richter radically rethink his use of color, the period in which he was unable to paint

FROM LEFT: *TISCH*, 1962, OIL ON CANVAS, 90 X 118 CM, © GERHARD RICHTER 2016 (127/2016); *1024 FARBEN (1024 COLORS)*, 1973, OIL ON CANVAS, 275 X 290 CM, © GERHARD RICHTER 2016 (127/2016); *4 GLASSSCHEIBEN (4 PANEES OF GLASS)*, 1967, STEEL FRAMES EACH 160 X 100 CM, © GERHARD RICHTER 2016 (127/2016); *DOMPLATZ, MAILAND*, 1968, OIL ON CANVAS, 275 X 290 CM, © GERHARD RICHTER 2016 (127/2016); *1024 FARBEN*, 1973, ENAMEL ON CANVAS, 298 X 298 CM, © GERHARD RICHTER 2016 (127/2016)



TRUE COLORS
From left: *Abstraktes
Bild*, 1986; *Betty*, 1988;
Strip, 2013; *938-4
Abstraktes Bild*, 2014.



every day was "very hard for him," she says. "I mean, that is his life's work—this daily practice of painting and having the time to let things come to the surface and to experiment and to change."

In summer 2014, after the Beyeler retrospective opened, he was finally able to tackle an idea that had possessed him for years: making paintings based on four blurry black-and-white photos taken covertly by a prisoner in the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, which documented the lead up to a gassing and its aftermath—the ultimate buried moment in German history. (As a boy, Richter had been obligated to join a junior branch of the Hitler Youth.) "They are fascinating, and different from photographs taken by liberators and documentary photographers," Richter says. "Illegal, taken under very bad conditions, shaky." But his attempts to render them as photo-paintings, as he'd done with the Baader-Meinhof material, failed.

"I tried to make them realistic," Richter says. But he soon realized that "they were not to be improved upon. I couldn't make them better. I could only make them worse."

The paintings he ultimately created, mournful black-and-white abstractions, streaked with green and red, layered on top of the photo-paintings, toured Germany and will be shown at Moscow's Jewish Museum & Tolerance Center this fall. After painting them, Richter says, he began to "feel free." Not long after, he found his way into the new, more colorful abstractions on view in New York—though

by some accounts, he still experienced doubt and frustration while making them.

A different sort of frustration is in evidence when he discusses the current state of the art world, a topic that clearly rankles him. "We don't have so many painters now," Richter says. "Painters are so entertaining now, with performance, with this and that. Sometimes it makes me angry, because museums only try to catch people," he adds, referring to their increasing transformation into social-gathering hubs. What would he rather see? "To be more serious,"

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—GERHARD RICHTER

he says. "There's not so much interest in painting."

The attention his own work receives, Richter believes, centers around one thing: "Money," he says.

"He's old," he mimics someone saying, "and this painting is a million or two!" He's also heartily sick of people telling him everything he does is wonderful. "People are so impressed by the success I have that they lose their ability to make a judgment. And there's so many people who just want to buy a picture. They don't even care about seeing it. They just want to write the check. There's so many counterfeiters

and so many people who do the kind of art where they're simply signing their name to postcards."

A few days later, Richter dutifully arrives, with Moritz at his side, at the glittering dinner held in his honor at New York's Rainbow Room following the private opening of his show. Among those who have come to pay their respects are curators from MoMA and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, collectors like Glenn Fuhrman and Charles and Helen Schwab, and old acquaintances like the artist Bruce Nauman. As the crowd files into the dining room to eat, Richter's

youngest son, Theo, who's accompanied his parents on one of these trips for the first time, suddenly leavens the mood by bolting around the tables and zipping up the stairs.

But it's still a long way from Richter's serene Cologne studio. Back in the gallery, separated by only a wall or two from his paintings as they hang in glorious daylight in the space, Richter is smiling at the thought of getting back to work. "I'm happy that I'm able to paint," he says. "To make something, ja. Normally, as we all do." ●