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With brushes or spray guns, Katharina Grosse exhibition in St. Louis shows growth in career

Jane Henderson Sep 29, 2022

Identifying a Katharina Grosse painting by her signature would be tough. She signs paintings on the back.

But viewers of a retrospective of her studio work will take in decades of her development, from comparatively small abstracts to huge works that can include cut or round canvas, outlines of kelp and twigs, or swirls from an industrial spray gun.



"Untitled" by Katharina Grosse is on display on Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum at Washington University.

Jens Ziehe/Photographie

Even without the signature, paintings in the exhibition at the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum at Washington University offer visitors a sense of Grosse's work that will make it identifiable in museums around the world.

One unifier is the German painter's use of vivid colors, sometimes repeated in separate works, she says.

"I've defined the starting point," she says of the exhibition, "but then it's very possible that toward the end of the work, I'm very far away from where I started." She was in St. Louis last week for the preview and opening of "Katharina Grosse Studio Paintings, 1988-2022: Returns, Revisions, Inventions," which runs through Jan. 23.

Grosse has studios in Berlin, where she mostly works indoors, and also in New Zealand, where she likes to work outside near the sea, her paintings affected by wind or other confrontations of nature. She says she "likes the interference."

At 61, she is lithe, with bright eyes and a confident manner. Born in Freiburg im Breisgau, in southwest Germany, Grosse has always known she was interested in color and painting rather than something like photography, popular when she was in school.

For much of her career she has painted directly on walls or architecture. At the Contemporary Art Museum in Houston, she once sprayed the gallery interior along with clothes, coins and papers on the floor. Even her home is full of color, she says, with pink bathrooms and a pink and baby blue library.



Katharina Grosse
Larissa Hofmann

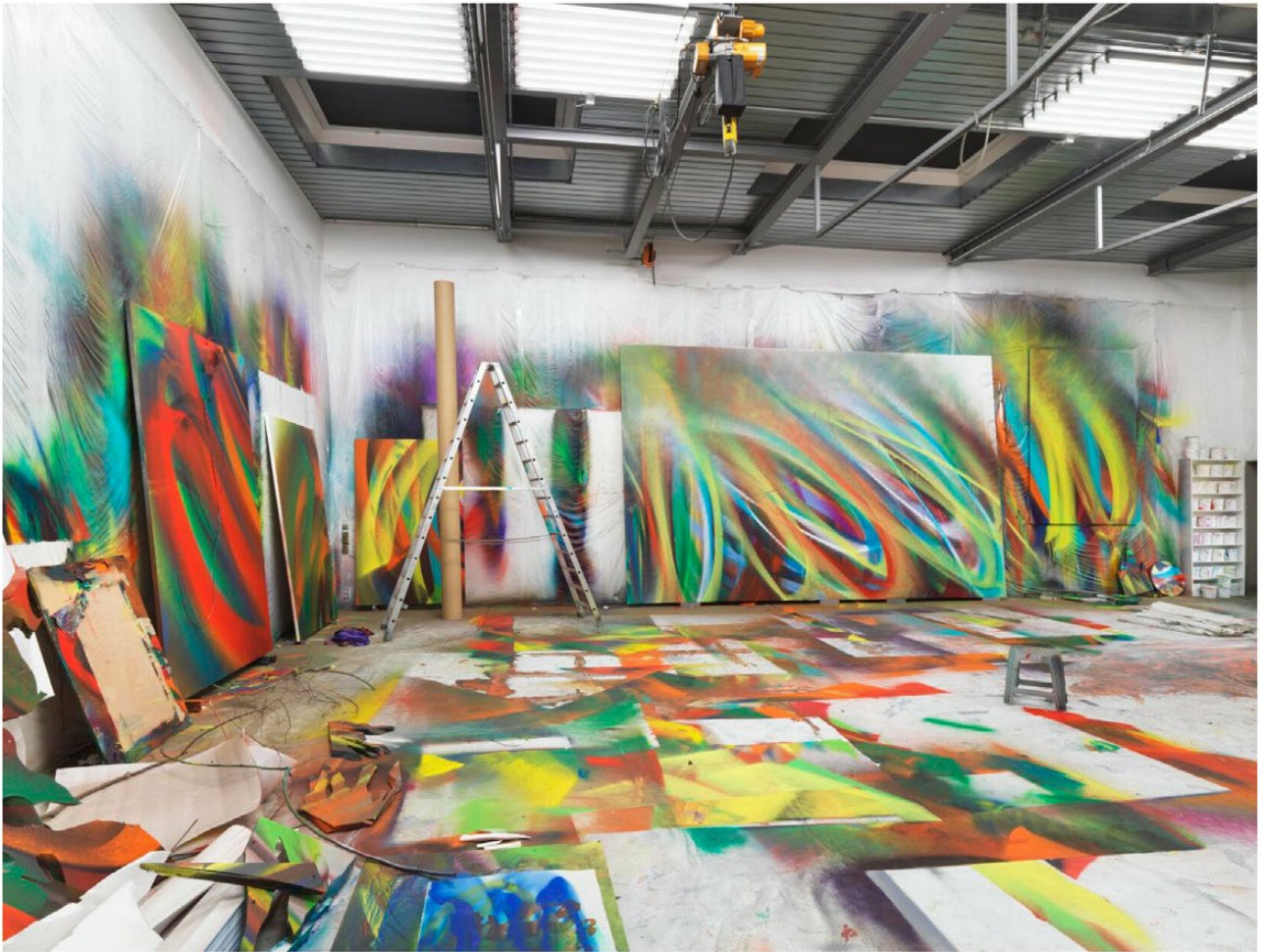


A mural by Katharina Grosse inside the Gary M. Summers Recreation Center at Washington University
Courtesy of Washington University

A few years ago she came to St. Louis with a commission to paint the wall of the university's recreation center. She says she planned the colors, the size, the placement and size of windows. But after that, she just worked "with the flow," painting on wallboard, wood veneer and steel and redoing sections if she didn't like them. How did she know when to stop? When it looked done.

"I liked painting in a place where people work out," she says. She likes working at a site where visitors likely know little about her work. "It makes you feel almost like a young artist, starting out again."

As the exhibition introduction says, Grosse is "internationally celebrated for her large-scale, on-site works that she paints across built and natural environments. To date, less focus has been placed on her studio-based paintings. This is the first exhibition to explore these important canvases and the role they play in the artist's oeuvre."



Jens Ziehe/Photographie

The artist likes both painting indoors and outside on buildings, comparing them to swimming in a pool or in the sea. She can do some things indoors that she can't outdoors, which require a crew and plan. "It's more like collaboration with everyone who participates."

Grosse says walking through the Mildred Kemper exhibition should be like experiencing a "catalog" of her studio work. Early on, framed canvases include geometric rectangles with just a few apparent colors. For one, she first painted the entire canvas one color, then over it created a few rectangles of secondary color, with brush marks revealing the earlier base color.

Later works among the 37 “Untitled” paintings, in a section called “Fissures/Ruptures,” show Grosse reinventing the shapes, surfaces and color combinations, as the museum says. For one, she nailed branches to the canvas when she painted. The branches were removed, but the nail holes remain. At other times, she uses stencils or includes dirt.

A couple of pieces show sliced canvas hung on the wall, almost like a doorway. Grosse says she cut up the canvas first, then painted it. Also in the exhibition are silk panels digitally printed with photographs (including Grosse’s paint-covered hand).

When using an industrial spray gun, Grosse wears a white coverall. She says controlling the spray and creating different effects depends on motion, including whole body movement, distance and the consistency of the paint.

“With this extensive testing of the boundaries of painting, especially the loosening of ties between the artist’s hand, the paint, and the canvas, Grosse opens the artwork up to the world and vice versa,” the museum says.



“Untitled” by Katharina Grosse is on display on Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum at Washington University.

For the artist, paintings are nonlinear; they can be viewed at once, unlike most books or films. A painting “allows us to see different moments in time at once,” Grosse says.

Museum director Sabine Eckmann has edited the first large scholarly book on Grosse’s studio work, “Katharina Grosse Studio Paintings, 1988-2022.” With text in English and German, it includes 160 color plates with 38 other images documenting her work over three decades. Five essays explore her processes, along with the way her paintings “interlace with the everyday to create uncertainties.”

Eckmann says the exhibition tries to put Grosse’s “fluid practice” into a “fluid exhibition itself, where the works really are in dialogue and we hope to see them anew every time we enter the gallery.”