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3 May 2019

# OCULA

## Katharina Grosse on Mumbling Mud in Shanghai

By Mikala Tai  
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In the summer of 2018, the K11 Art Foundation mounted a solo exhibition of German artist Katharina Grosse in Shanghai, bringing her immersive installations to China for the first time. Internationally acclaimed for a practice that boldly challenges viewers' perception of space, her playful work has been shown at institutions worldwide, from the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow to Mass MoCA in the United States but, despite her 23-year career, never in China. *Mumbling Mud* was an opportunity for Grosse to return to Shanghai, where she briefly lived in her early twenties. Looking back, she has clear memories of exploring the city's vibrant fabric markets and it seems only fitting that her first major exhibition in Shanghai—the historical heart of China's textile trade—saw the space draped in a vibrant canvas of her own. The exhibition is now on view at the chi K11 art space in Guangzhou, where it opened on 30 March and will run until 2 June 2019. Here the exhibition has been adapted and tailored to the space.



Katharina Grosse. Courtesy K11 Art Foundation and Galerie Nächst St. Stephan, Vienna. © Katharina Grosse and VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Photo: JJYPHOTO.

Often when artists travel and exhibit in China their work expands. The possibilities of production and of scale in China remain dizzyingly intoxicating; almost everything is feasible. However, for Grosse—a master of scale whose work responds to the architecture that it inhabits—her practice appears perfectly at home in both Shanghai and now Guangzhou. Presented as an exhibition in three stages, *Mumbling Mud* lures audiences with brazen colour, and overwhelms them with a series of exhibition zones that must be navigated and deciphered. Curated by Venus Lau, the exhibition is one of the most comprehensive and considered explorations of Grosse's practice to date. With an intention to completely engulf the viewer, *Mumbling Mud* operates as a parallel world of exploratory visual etymology.

Surrounded by abstracted colour, anchor points of reality are elusive. The viewer becomes untethered from the everyday and must negotiate unfamiliar terrain. Grosse encourages viewers to explore and navigate this new landscape, urging them to let their rigidity of routine slip away. In the ever-expanding Pearl River Delta metropolis of Guangzhou, *Mumbling Mud* disrupts the monotony of the mundane and compels viewers to return to reality with fresh eyes and a new perspective.



Exhibition view: Katharina Grosse, *Mumbling Mud*, chi K11 art space, Guangzhou (30 March–2 June 2019). © Katharina Grosse and VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Nächst St. Stephan, Vienna.

There is a sense of liberation in your work where, through the spontaneous spray of paint, you seemingly shake off the historical weight of painting. It is as if all rules are broken. Your paint sees no boundaries and doesn't differentiate between dirt, canvas, or furniture. Instead, it gleefully splatters at will. Standing immersed in your works, I am always overcome with a sense of freedom, play, and unabashed enjoyment of colour, surface, and texture. It is a much-needed counterpoint to our modern lives of control and restraint. In the process of creation, do you also feel this sense of release?

I paint over the border of objects and architectural settings in order to expand the area rather than close it off. I feel borders to be zones of extremely dramatic theatricality, because that is where highly diverse interests overlap, intertwine, and are compelled within a narrow space to engage in competition; to exist in simultaneity. In border areas, we experience mutually exclusive things in an instant, as a paradox. Let's consider the border between water and land—a concept of the border that is quite familiar. What does the ocean mean for me when I come from the land? What does it mean for those who come from the ocean?

Borders are spaces of negotiation that have to be created again and again. My works provide models for thinking through border-spaces. How would it be if the borders of objects were not so binding for us? If it were possible for objects to be redefined, to be newly materialised by a constant change of perspective? Would we then not encounter our loved ones, neighbours, strangers, or the community differently?



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Much has been written about how your work questions and challenges not only traditions of landscape painting but painting itself, however I am keenly interested in how your practice engages with the concept of time. Through your literal landscape paintings, you create a parallel universe where slipping through the canvas curtain leads you to a new world where time seemingly stretches. Immersed in sublime colour, and consumed with navigating an unfamiliar and surprising terrain, time seems to slow down. Do you feel this within your work and in the process of creating?

Yes, especially with the large outdoor works and their tendency to expand almost in slow motion. Painting makes possible the simultaneity of imagining and acting in an unusual way, because there is no transmitter between me and my tools. Unlike any other medium, painting allows us to see different moments in time coinciding. You can perceive everything on the canvas at the same time. Movements that have been painted first and last are both simultaneously present on the image field. All the layers on the surface generate a cluster of the present, past, and future. There is no linear or causal hierarchy of activities in a painting. In that respect, painting is very anarchic and antinarrative. To follow this concept of time, it requires a mind that is agile and ready to give up an adopted point of view at any moment for the next potential constellation or reading. Everything can become anything at any minute.



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K11 facilitated conversations between yourself and leading Chinese artists such as Zheng Guogu and Cao Fei ahead of your exhibition. Both Zheng and Cao originate from Guangdong province and have experimental but expansive practices. How did these conversations influence and inform the devising of *Mumbling Mud* and its presentation here in Guangzhou?

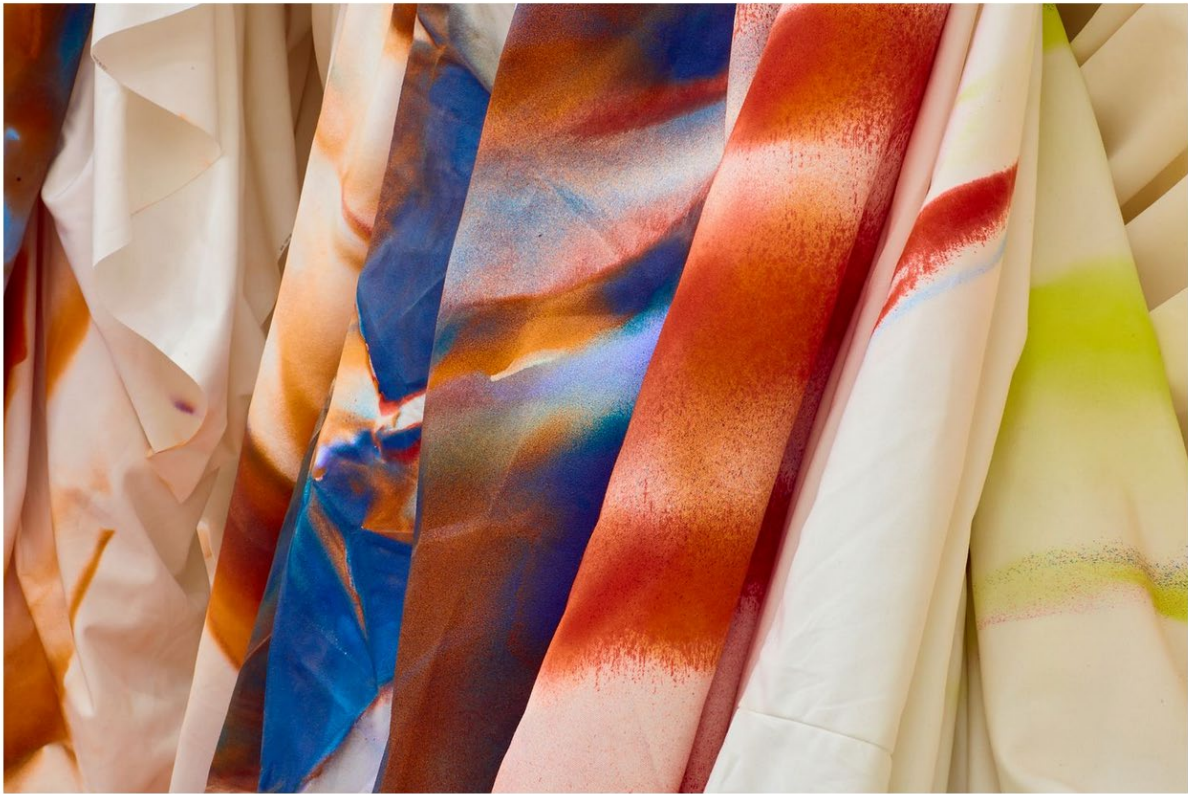
It was a great opportunity to meet with Cao Fei, Cui Jie, Li Ming, Zhang Enli, and Zheng Guogu, and speak with them about their work, the things that stir them, and their perspective on my works. Parts of these conversations and images of the artists' work will be published in the exhibition catalogue we are currently working on. To meet every artist for a long talk, and to visit Cao Fei and Zheng Guogu in their work environments brought me much closer to their thinking and concerns.



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Recently, the titles for your exhibitions have become poetically intriguing, like *The Horse Trotted Another Couple of Metres, Then it Stopped* (2018), which was shown at at Sydney's Carriageworks (8 January–8 April 2018), or *Two younger women come in and pull out a table* (2013) at Tilburg's De Pont Museum (16 February–9 June 2013). The titles are visually provocative and strangely figurative, while the work itself is often more abstract. The title of your show, *Mumbling Mud*, takes leave from the Cantonese phrase 鬼食泥 (*gwai sik nai*), which means a type of speaking that hovers between sense and nonsense. As a teenager, my grandmother would lament that my mode of speech was largely 鬼食泥; an indecipherable mumbled murmur. How did you come across this phrase and why did it become such an influence on the exhibition's concept?

'Mumbling' can be understood as an intermediate state between speaking and silence, while 'mud' is an intermediate state between the solid and the liquid. The title *Mumbling Mud* emerged from a conversation with Venus Lau, the artistic airector of K11 Art Foundation, whose mother tongue is Cantonese. The saying in Cantonese refers to when someone speaks in a manner that is both audible and inaudible, and literally translates to: 'ghost eating mud'. Where does the mud go when a ghost, as immaterial a being as could be, swallows it? For me, it marks the transition from imagination to realisation—the very moment when things just come into being, unnamed and indescribable, open to becoming anything.



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This exhibition presents a series of distinct zones, each their own exploration of excess and expansion. Throughout, piles of dirt become reminiscent of constant urban development, metres-upon-metres of spray-painted canvas are as encompassing as they are constricting, and finally a meticulous styled home interior showroom appears spattered with paint as an oddly familiar, yet unnervingly devoid simulacrum. While the colours may be joyous, it is a critique of our dystopian reality. The result is hallucinogenic and sublime, but underpinned by a sense of impending doom. As humanity remains obsessed with advancement, with only marginal concern for the repercussions, is *Mumbling Mud* a warning to us all?

With my painting, I seek to cause vehement agitation. I want the viewer to be so disturbed—positively or negatively—that they develop the wish to change something. I want to stimulate radical empathy. —[O]