

Artforum

Schwabsky, Barry: *Katharina Grosse*

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ARTFORUM



View of "Katharina Grosse," 2011.

Katharina Grosse

MASSACHUSETTS MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART (MASS MOCA)

Was this a very big show or a very small one? Normally a painter might exhibit ten or a dozen works giving a sense of what she's been up to recently, or, offered a big survey at a public space, perhaps forty or even a hundred canvases demonstrating the development of her practice over multiple decades or a whole career. In Katharina Grosse's "One Floor Up More Highly," which occupied MASS MOCA's Building 5 from December 2010 to January 2012, the German artist showed only two works: a single untitled painting on canvas (dated 2010) and a vast, three-dimensional site-specific "painting" (after which this exhibition was titled) that used the architecture of MASS MOCA itself as material support, along with piles of soil and a large, concave construction of acrylic on glass-reinforced plastic.

This was a folding together of large and small (though the canvas-bound painting was small only relative to the 24,000-square-foot expanse of the painting-installation) and a condensation of time: Giving added purpose to the building's mezzanine, from which viewers could look down upon where they had just passed—and therefore at the image that they had, just moments before, helped to constitute—the show enabled a multitude of aspects and viewpoints. But what was most impressive was how close to the bone the experience of viewing this work often was. I couldn't help but think of Mark Rothko's statement, that he painted "very large pictures . . . precisely because [he wanted] to be very intimate and human." Rothko probably never considered that a painting could be quite this large, but the sentiment remains the same—and the blurry fields of sprayed paint for which Grosse's installations are known probably have a lot more to do with the nebulous fields of color and line with which the Abstract Expressionist wanted to envelop his viewers than with the graffiti writers' tagged walls with which her work is sometimes compared.

Overturning conventional perceptions of scale seemed to be very much part of what *One Floor Up More Highly* was all about, and not only in Rothko's sense of containing viewers within the work rather than allowing them to "command" it, because in a way, it also seemed to show itself through a "reducing glass," which was exactly what Rothko said he was trying to avoid. Exploring this grand, light-filled indoor landscape, I periodically felt I was looking at details in one of those blown-up photographs of a painting's heterogeneous surface composition that you sometimes see illustrating a conservator's analysis in a museum catalogue; specks of mineral pigment loom mountainous—a three-dimensional concatenation of enlarged details. Giant white cylinders of sinuously carved Styrofoam, in particular, recalled crystal formations seen under a microscope. And then suddenly amid the spray-painted floors and windows and the piles of soil (which somehow could never not look dirty, no matter how thoroughly they'd been coated with paint), one saw some piled-up old clothing, spray-painted along with the rest, as if a colony of squatters had hastily abandoned the place just as the artist and her crew arrived. Now, for a moment, in place of the fantastic telescoping of small and large one had just been experiencing, there was a reminder of the real human scale—and the real corporeal existence of actual (though absent) human bodies. Grosse is engaged in pictorial illusionism on a grand scale, but there are always these moments in her work in which illusion uneasily rubs up against the real. It is this tension, and not brute size, that gave this piece its surprisingly understated drama.

—Barry Schwabsky