

Whitewall

Jordan, Eliza: *Katharina Grosse Expands the Medium of Painting in Response to Its Environment*  
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ART

## Katharina Grosse Expands the Medium of Painting in Response to Its Environment

By Eliza Jordan  
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Katharina Grosse, "It Wasn't Us," 2020, Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart – Berlin, photo by Jens Ziehe, © Katharina Grosse and VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2022, courtesy of König Galerie / Gagolian / Galerie nächst St. Stephan Rosemarie Schwarzwälder / Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie.

The German artist Katharina Grosse is known for her immersive visual experiences accentuated by color and scale. With an expansive creative practice that hinges on spray-painting various canvases, she employs architecture to blur the boundaries between painting and sculpture. Over the past three decades, working between studios in Berlin and New Zealand, she has layered sensational colors on an array of surfaces and spaces around the globe, including buildings, interiors, landscapes, and more. Her work is currently on view in “Apollo, Apollo” (through November 27) timed to the 59th edition of the **Venice Biennale** with Fondation Louis Vuitton and “Chill Seeping” (through July 11) at the Savannah College of Art and Design Museum of Art (SCAD MOA).

In Venice is a swath of colored metallic mesh fabric featuring a composite image of Grosse’s handprints. Here there is no distinction between the artist’s body and the act of creating, resonating with the city’s legacy of Fortuny fabrics, terrazzo mosaics, and reflections in water. At SCAD, where she was also the annual honoree for deFINE ART 2022, the exhibition includes a series of large-scale works created over the past 16 years. Relentless in its exploration of color and agency in space, the installation is utterly engrossing.

*Whitewall* spoke with Grosse in Savannah about how she strategically approaches her projects with curiosity and responsibility in mind.



Portrait of Katharina Grosse by Larissa Hofmann.

**WHITEWALL:** What first drew you to color?

**KATHARINA GROSSE:** Color was my first visual trigger. Even early on, I felt that my interest in color was enhanced by the idea of rendering something I saw as existing outside the canvas.

**WW:** In 2013, you created your first print on fabric, and just a year later, you presented your first suspended fabric as a painting in a solo show entitled “Inside the Speaker” at Kunstpalast Düsseldorf. Today at SCAD, we see one repurposed. How do the works change depending on which spaces they’re shown in?

**KG:** These works disguise and change the space a lot because they're soft. They fold. They have a different architectural feel. There are right angles, and all of a sudden, the draped pieces change the space. After a very big first show at Carriageworks in Sydney, I was wondering if I could reuse them. If they were tailor-made for one space, could they be used in a different way somewhere else?

We started to experiment with reusing the draped works, which is difficult because you can't re-drape them the original way, but that is also very fascinating. So, you get entirely different things—bits and pieces that were maybe not seen in the other show because it was folded in. But now, all of a sudden, these structures come out when you redo it somewhere else. Chill Seeping was a piece that was used in Helsinki at the beginning of last year. That space, for example, was 20 feet high. Here that's less, so we had to adapt and find new ways to show them.

I wanted to have in this show different paintings from different years, and one piece of my practice that's related to the space. The installation is cut into three different parts, with paintings between them from different years. The most recent is from last year.

**WW:** Most of these paintings were created prior to isolating amid the global coronavirus pandemic. When you look at those works now, does it bring on new meaning?

KG: No, because I'm always very isolated. Most of the time, I'm alone. I have a team that comes in every now and then. It didn't really affect me until the end of last year. That's when I really started to feel that my life—all of our lives—were very different. In terms of my practice, what I do in my studio, I could continue working.

WW: What was it like working in isolation during the pandemic?

KG: In early 2020, it gave me more time to paint my show for the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin. The museum became my studio for two months. I was also able to stay in my New Zealand studio for half a year, uninterrupted. But then, in the second year of the pandemic, everything became more chaotic, shows were postponed, and international collaborations were difficult with Zoom as the only meeting place.



Katharina Grosse, "It Wasn't Us," 2020, Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart – Berlin, photo by Jens Ziehe, © Katharina Grosse and VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2022, courtesy of König Galerie / Gagosian / Galerie nächst St. Stephan Rosemarie Schwarzwälder / Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie.

**WW:** Did that time change the way you thought about the work you were doing? The materials you use?

**KG:** Well, I think about what I can do all the time—like, can I use recycled works? I'm working right now on recycled polyester. For the past ten years, I've reused water. All wastewater is being collected, and we have a chemical to separate the pigment and the water. We're trying to be plastic-free, which is difficult. My flight itineraries are different; I try to fly less and connect more things in one flight. I'm far more selective with things I'm going to do. And I think our social relations have changed a lot, too.

**WW:** You have two studio spaces—one in Berlin and New Zealand. What are they like?

**KG:** In Berlin, I have a team around me. Usually, I have a lot of projects in process in different stages alongside my studio work. I also travel a lot from this home base. In New Zealand, I am very independent; there is no team around. I am usually working alone, and I travel very little. My studio there has both an indoor and outdoor painting space, which exposes me and the work to different spatial and temporal conditions.

**WW:** This year, you were named SCAD's deFINE ART 2022 honoree. What has it been like working with the school? The curator, Humberto Moro?

KG: It's been really interesting. I've never been to Savannah, so this is the first time. It's a great institution with an opportunity to see the work in the context of the other artists that are showing here at the same time. It's great for the students to have all these approaches available in the flesh, to meet the artists and hear us talk. It's also been great to work with Humberto. That's been enriching.



Katharina Grosse, "Chill Seeping," SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah, GA, USA, 2022, photo by SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah, courtesy of Helsinki Art Museum, © Katharina Grosse and VG Bild-Kunst Bonn, 2022.

**WW:** How are you approaching experiential works today?  
Are you reexamining the way you're approaching space?

**KG:** It's always different. I'm gathering experiences doing the work as well. It's not like I can just do something that's planned; making the work also changes the way I work and how I look at my own work. Even coming here today and seeing it here in the flesh, after being installed by a fantastic crew, it might change the way I make the next show.

But there is something that emotion can help us to do better in certain ways; make us more alert when we're encountering something that doesn't feel right instead of pushing it aside. I'm listening more to my sixth sense, in a way. That certainly has changed. I also think the preparedness to listen better has come to me more. And how we share space has changed. How we need outdoor space. Two years ago, I was doing a show when the pandemic had first started, and all of our talks were outside on a bench or in a park. I thought it was a great way to collaborate. The readiness to change things has been astonishing.

**WW:** You've spent time with Frank Gehry in Los Angeles, and you've spoken on being inspired by his architecture. What specific elements are you drawn to, or inspired by?

**KG:** I feel very inspired by Frank's early work—for example, when he built his own house using all sorts of materials and building methods. His buildings seem to be open-ended structures that can be continued in new ways.



In his subsequent building, there is a sense of theatricality that allows for new ways of staging artworks and forging unanticipated alliances between the audience, the art, and the flow of the building.

**WW:** What else is inspiring you right now?

**KG:** I just finished Nino Haratischwili's book *The Eighth Life*, the history of the 20th century seen through the eyes and experiences of six generations of women from Georgia.

**WW:** Your work spans painting to include large-scale installations, including in spaces like train stations and parks. What do you feel is the importance of public art?

**KG:** It is exciting to encounter art by chance and as part of our everyday lives. It is a contribution to the practice of thinking in public and, thus, proposing lively alternatives to fixed notions of reality. I also believe that public art reinforces the idea of civic space and underscores its quality of not being privatized but belonging to the citizens.



Katharina Grosse, "Untitled Trumpet," 2015, acrylic on wall, floor, and various objects, 259 3/4 x 826 3/4 x 511 3/4 inches, photo by Nic Tenwiggenhorn, courtesy of Venice Biennale, Barbara Gross Galerie, Galerie nächst St. Stephan Rosemarie Schwarzwälder, König Galerie, and Galerie Mark Müller, © Katharina Grosse und VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn / Nic Tenwiggenhorn and VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

WW: You've said that there's no distinction between painting, sculpture, and architecture. How so?

KG: The environment—its objects, and spatial containers—proposes a continuous field to be occupied by painting.

WW: How do you typically approach an installation?

**KG:** I go and see the institution and its spaces, and I familiarize myself with the intentions of the commissioning curators. Most importantly, I like to understand if I will be able to do something that I have not done before. Then I discuss the possible approaches with my team. We study the plans together and have a model built. Sometimes I know right away what I would like to work on. Others can take more time and a lot of twists and turns until I have found the door to a process.

**WW:** What role does technology play in your practice?

**KG:** My work often starts out as a handmade model or maquette and then moves back and forth between digital data files and hands-on versions of them. I use digitalization as a tool inasmuch as it does not have any aesthetic impact on the end result. As a tactile, multilayered image, my work addresses our bodily intelligence, and I understand it as a vital counterpoint to the homogeneous surface of the screen. It triggers all our senses at once and involves us physically.

**WW:** What are you working on this summer?

**KG:** I will be painting an outdoor dance floor for the Roskilde Festival in Denmark. And we are preparing a survey show of studio paintings for the Kemper Art Museum in St. Louis to open on September 15. Another very exciting project currently is the commission for the Fondation Louis Vuitton, the last element of which will open October 5. The installation element consists of cut and rolled aluminum sheets, hanging from the glass ceiling. I will paint it immediately prior to its installation in Paris.

WW: You've said that painting "allows for a wide understanding of time." How so?

KG: A painting is a cluster of all the layers that occurred during the process of its making. There is no linear sense of time with a beginning or an end. Past and future converge in the present.



Katharina Grosse, "Rockaway," 2016, MoMA PS1's "Rockaway!" series, New York, USA, photo by Pablo Enriquez, courtesy of MoMA PS1, © 2020 Katharina Grosse and VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.