Over the past decade, Katharina Grosse has been pushing paint out into space—onto the walls, floors, and ceilings of museums, building facades, and living spaces, as well as objects such as balloons, mounds of soil, and used clothing. Grosse confronts all manner of fixed geometries and hard edges with layers of color that oscillate, stretch, knot, loop, and tangle in turbulent swirls. Working in a Tyvek suit with a respirator, aerial lift, and spray gun, Grosse has developed a physically engaged, self-reflexive method of painting which expands beyond the historically veiled production of the medium.

Third Man Begins Digging Through Her Pockets (2012), commissioned by MOCA Cleveland, is a haptic romp of color, dominated by purple, orange, and yellow applied to the Museum’s newly minted three-story atrium. The work, which is visible from outside at night, appears like a fleshy tear across the smooth interior—as if the building were, for a moment, becoming animal. While the sprawling installation provokes such associations, Grosse’s work is not representational. Her electric, sometimes dissonant palette resists being read as an image. Instead, the work embraces a state of ambiguity that opens alternative ways of seeing and understanding.

Grosse’s spray gun expands her gestures beyond the reaches of her body, allowing her to easily traverse architectural boundaries. This unrestrained action thwarts the frontal tradition of pictorialism, which relies on the wall as a framing device. Working on a large scale amplifies Grosse’s movements, to the point that they can be traced and replayed by viewers as they step through the atrium and up the stairs, approaching the work from multiple vantage points. This performativity is a vital aspect of Grosse’s powerful restaging of painting.

Borrowing from the language of stage direction, Grosse’s title shuffles the work between action and backdrop. The artist’s parents often took her to see community theater, and she remembers the penumbral spectacle of Pina Bausch’s productions, Tanztheater, as it became known, is a radical blend of experimental theater, surrealist art, and danced body language. Bausch, who passed away in 2009, was known for her willingness to press her multimedia sets and performances into provocative, sensuous, and violent realms. In this case, the building itself is both the theater and the pocket, and Grosse is the hand, gruffly rifling through it.

The staging of paint onto interior surfaces can be traced back to Baroque design, where image and architecture were often elaborately woven together. The effect was to dismantle the routine framing of a given space with painting’s powerful capacity for illusion and depth. For Grosse, paint becomes a layer that portrays architectural features (wall, ceiling, window, or floor), while at the same time actively separating it from the surface. Collapsing real and pictorial space, Third Man Begins Digging Through Her Pockets emphasizes the instability of what we know and the potential that lies beyond the limits of conditioned sight and thought.


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KATHARINA GROSSE

Katharina Grosse (1961, Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany) lives and works in Berlin. She studied painting at Kunstkademie Düsseldorf, where she is currently a professor. Solo exhibitions of her work have been held at numerous institutions, including the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris; and Palais de Tokyo, Paris. She has participated in numerous international group exhibitions, including the 11th Biennale of Sydney; and the 25th São Paulo Biennial.

WORK IN THE EXHIBITION

Katharina Grosse

Third Man Begins Digging Through Her Pockets, 2012
Acrylic paint
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist
Commissioned by MOCA Cleveland

Photos: Tim Safranek Photographics