

Press kit: Gerhard Richter

Gerhard Richter. Birkenau Cycle, Drawings, Overpainted Photos
Dec 18, 2021 – Apr 24, 2022
K21

Press conference and preview
Thursday, December 16, 11am, K21

Speakers

- Susanne Gaensheimer, Director Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen
- Isabel Pfeiffer-Poensgen, Minister of Culture and Science of the German State of North Rhine-Westphalia
- Vera Pues, Foundation for Art, Culture, and Social Affairs of Sparda

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Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen presents Gerhard Richter’s “Birkenau”-Paintings at K21

From December 18, 2021, K21 – Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen will present the “Birkenau” cycle by Gerhard Richter (b. 1932), created in 2014. The work is based on four photographs that were clandestinely taken by prisoners of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. Within his oeuvre spanning six decades, there are several works by Gerhard Richter that tackle the subject of the Holocaust and the (un-)representability of the crimes of National Socialism. It was not until his Birkenau cycle, however, that the artist found a form for and a way of dealing with the subject.

“Gerhard Richter. Birkenau-Paintings, Drawings, Overpainted Photographs”

The four photographs that serve Richter as the starting point for his “Birkenau” cycle were taken in August 1944 by Jewish prisoners who were part of the so-called “Sonderkommando” (special unit) of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. “Sonderkommando” was a Nazi term for prisoners who were forced to assist in the murder of prisoners in gas chambers and the subsequent burning of the bodies. Using a camera smuggled into the camp, clandestinely and at the risk of their lives, Alberto Errera, who presumably triggered the shutter, David Szmulewski and other members of the “Sonderkommando” managed to take four photographs showing the area around Crematorium V. These are the only known photographs from the extermination camp taken by the victims themselves and were only made public after the end of the Second World War.

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Gerhard Richter has known at least one of the photos since his studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Dresden. However, it was only after his flight to the West in 1961 that he began to deal with the subject of the Holocaust, collecting motifs and using them as sources for his painting. These first attempts, however, did not lead to a satisfactory solution for him. He thus destroyed the works “Execution” and “Diary”, created in the early 1960s. In 1967, Richter included one of the photos taken by the “Sonderkommando” in his “Atlas”, the collection of photographs, newspaper clippings, and sketches that serve as source images for his paintings. In the mid-1960s, he created the works “Mr. Heyde”, “Uncle Rudi”, “Aunt Marianne”, and “Family at the Seaside”, each painted from a photograph, which deal with the German past and his own family. In the 1990s, Richter again attempted to paint from photos from concentration camps, as evidenced by the first sketches for the entrance hall of the German Bundestag (1997). He rejected this idea as well and instead proposed the reverse glass painting “Black-Red-Gold” as a sign of a new beginning.

Richter’s artistic exploration took place against the backdrop of the discussions held in the postwar years about the conditions of a cultural practice after the Holocaust, the representability of Nazi crimes, and the possible forms of a culture of remembrance. As shown above, the artist stepped back each time from direct depiction and decided against painting from the photographs taken in the concentration camp. As late as 2011, in an interview with Nicolas Serota, he called them “unpaintable”.

An occasion to revisit the topic was provided by the review of Georges Didi-Huberman's book "Images in Spite of All" in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, accompanied by one of the photographs by the "Sonderkommando" from 1944. In his treatise, published in 2008, the French philosopher analyzes the four photographs from a phenomenological perspective and presents them as an argument in the discussion about the representability of the Holocaust.

Finally, towards the end of 2013, Richter began to transfer the four photos onto the canvases. When the result did not meet his expectations, he painted over them until the figuration disappeared. Two approaches practiced by Richter meet here: painting from photographic sources and painting over a motif. This places the work in a relationship of tension between realism and abstraction, photography and painting: a feature that characterizes Gerhard Richter's entire oeuvre.

Richter uses a procedure that determines his "Abstract Paintings" created since the mid-1980s. He applies several layers of paint to the canvas with a self-constructed squeegee and drags them across the picture's surface. The paint is distributed unevenly, with the lower levels shining through in some places, in others disappearing completely under the overpaint or emerging surprisingly through scraping. The result is an interplay of chance and conscious decisions by the artist.

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Unlike the colorful, gestural abstractions of recent decades, the "Birkenau" paintings are often perceived as more restrained and hesitant. The color spectrum is reduced to only a few colors—black, white, and the complementary colors green and red.

These four abstract paintings are shown together with four gray mirrors that hang opposite the pictures, as well as prints based on four photographs from the extermination camp. Together, they form a spatial installation characterized by reflections and references. The "Birkenau" cycle" deals with fundamental questions about the possibilities and limits of painting and representation. With this, Gerhard Richter finally found a way of dealing with and a form for a theme that he addressed repeatedly over the last six decades.

The special relationship to reality which has been attributed to photography from its very beginning has been questioned since the 1960s at the latest. In the case of the four photos shot by the "Sonderkommando", we are dealing with an excerpt from reality that allows insights but can never represent the full extent of the horror of the concentration camps. With his "Birkenau" cycle, Richter also does not claim to depict the Holocaust, but creates a space of memory and reflection despite this impossibility.

The exhibition at K21 is complemented by a selection of the artist's overpainted photographs and new drawings, which frame Richter's painterly approach to "Birkenau" on a conceptual level. For Gerhard Richter, who sees himself primarily as a painter, drawing was a medium he rarely resorted to. In recent years, however, he has increasingly devoted himself to drawing, exploring a variety of techniques: pencil, oil pastel, or ink pen. These are abstract works, generally without a compositional center, characterized by serenity and precision.

The basis for the overpaintings, which the artist has created since 1989, are primarily photo prints in the format 10 x 15 cm. They are photographs from his own collection: snapshots of visits to museums, trips, or walks. Here, the tension between photography and painting is once again thematized.

Partners and Sponsors

The exhibitions on the Bel Etage are supported by the Foundation for Art, Culture, and Social Affairs of Sparda.

Media Partner of the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen:

Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung

Supported by the Ministry of Culture and Science of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia

Information: Your visit to the museum (13.12.2021):

At the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, the vaccinated-recovered rule ("2G-Regel") applies to adults and young people aged 16 and over. Please have proof of vaccination or past illness and a valid identification document ready. Children and adolescents under the age of 16 are considered the same as immunized individuals. Registration is also required to attend an event, workshop or tour, and to visit the library.

K21**Exceptions:**

- **adults and adolescents 16 years of age and older who cannot be immunized for medical reasons must present a negative rapid test (max. 24 hours old) or a negative PCR test (max. 48 hours old) in addition to a doctor's note.**
- **When visiting a museum in the context of early childhood education, school and higher education (e.g. when visiting a museum with school classes) and in the context of integration courses, the 3G rule applies to participants over the age of 16. Pupils are considered to be tested on the basis of their participation in the mandatory school tests.**

The mask obligation, distance and hygiene regulations of the Corona Protection Ordinance of the State of NRW continue to apply.

Exhibition preview**Lygia Pape. The Skin of ALL****Mar 19 – Jul 17, 2022****Press conference: March 17, 2022, 11 am, K20**

The Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen is dedicating its first solo exhibition in Germany to the Brazilian modernist, Lygia Pape (1927–2004). Titled "The Skin of ALL," the exhibition presents the artist's multifaceted, interdisciplinary oeuvre, which, based on her irrepressible love of experimentation, was developed continuously over five decades.

Her oeuvre includes abstract-geometric paintings, drawings, reliefs, unique woodcuts, two ballet compositions, sculptures and poems, as well as experimental films, immersive spatial installations or collective performances and explorations of public space.

Together with Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Pape was one of the key figures of the neo-concrete movement of the 1950s and 1960s in Brazil. Her specific understanding of a geometric abstraction resulted in a radical new conception of concrete-constructivist art. In addition to ethical and socio-political issues and against the backdrop of the twenty-year-long dictatorship in Brazil, Lygia Pape harnessed her poetic works to champion experimental and sensory experiences of every stripe. For her, the viewers were the actual creators of her works.

A Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen exhibition in conjunction with Projeto Lygia Pape.

K21**Reinhard Mucha****Sep 3, 2022 – Jan 22, 2023****Press conference: September 1, 2022, 11 am**

Reinhard Mucha's work, in terms of its redefinition of sculpture, photography and installation, is considered to be one of the most important positions in contemporary art. At its two locations K20 and K21, the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen combines installations by Mucha (b. Düsseldorf 1950) in this exhibition that have not been seen for many years, featuring works from each one of his creative phases and thus creating a panorama that spans over forty years of the artist's work. In addition to the installation "Das Deutschlandgerät" (The Germany Device) [2002] 1990, which was reconstructed in K21 from 2002 onwards and was originally made for the German Pavilion at the 1990 Biennale di Venezia, his early seminal work "Wartesaal" (Waiting Room) [1997], [1986] 1979 – 1982 – which has not been shown publicly since *documenta X*, 1997 – will be on view. "Das Figur-Grund Problem in der Architektur des Barock (für dich allein bleibt nur das Grab)" (The Figure-Ground Problem in Baroque Architecture (for You Alone There Remains Only the Grave), one of the few remaining larger installations of museum furniture and everyday objects, will be realised anew for the first time since 1985 in K20's Grabbehalle,

The exhibition is supported by the Art Mentor Foundation Lucerne and the Kunststiftung NRW.

The exhibitions in the Bel Etage are supported by the Sparda Bank West Foundation for Art, Culture and Society.

Piet Mondrian. Evolution**Oct 29, 2022 – Feb 12, 2023****Press conference: October 27, 2022, 11 am, K20**

The world-renowned painter Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) is famous for his astringent, geometric compositions in black and white with selected primary colour fields in red, blue or yellow. Yet it is not commonly known that the Dutchman opted to paint landscapes and other figurative motifs in his early years as an artist and often staged them with a surprising palette of colours. The Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen delineates Mondrian's artistic path from his early endeavours in painting to his wholly abstract works and traces the connections between the different groups of paintings.

From the beginning of his career as an artist, Mondrian was in search of the ideal composition. In his view, this comprised the perfect balance of all pictorial elements. Mondrian readily came across motifs – windmills, lighthouses, the dunes by the sea and the water, in which farms and rows of trees were reflected – in his homeland. This selection of paintings provides an insight into his work in the studio and his individual experimentation with colours and forms with the aid of Cubist stylistic elements, before turning to pure abstraction at the beginning of the 1920s.

The exhibition is courtesy of the Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel and the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, in conjunction with the Kunstmuseum Den Haag.

K21**Look at Me. Photography from The Walther Collection****Apr 9 – Sep 25, 2022****Press Conference and Preview: April 7, 2022, 11 am, K21**

From April 9 to September 25, 2022, the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in collaboration with The Walther Collection, will stage the largest-ever presentation in Germany of the Neu-Ulm and New York-based private art foundation.

“Look at Me” presents ground-breaking photography from Africa and the global diaspora that exemplify its conception, history, and significance as an artistic medium at the heart of the extensive The Walther Collection. As a non-profit foundation, The Walther Collection has dedicated itself to the critical understanding of historical and contemporary photography and related media in worldwide exhibitions and academic publications since the early 2000s. Okwui Enwezor (1963 – 2019), one of the most influential curators of recent decades, was instrumental in compiling the collection and presenting it for the first time in 2010. Based on this exhibition, the serial conceptual works by photographers, such as Yto Barrada, Samuel Fosso, David Goldblatt, Seydou Keïta, Santu Mofokeng, Zanele Muholi and Malick Sidibé, form the bedrock of “Look at Me”: they portray people – presenting and staging themselves in front of the camera – thus addressing complex questions about the colonial gaze, constructions of gender, and social identity. The exhibition examines how identity has been shaped, defined, and perceived over different periods of time.

"Look at Me" is also dedicated to individual strategies of self-empowerment and self-presentation, as well as to the power of the postcolonial gaze. The criteria of typology and taxonomy are of central importance here, comparable, for example, to the works of August Sander or Bernd and Hilla Becher, which are also part of The Walther Collection. Eventually, the exhibition draws attention to the contradictions and shared concerns of pictorial strategies and artistic projects in Europe and Africa.

The exhibition has been jointly conceived in conjunction with The Walther Collection; advised by Contemporary And (C&).

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