

Hans HARTUNG

The Brooklyn Rail,
Hans Hartung: Revenge

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profile and distributed around the building's architecture, also act as transitional moments between a series of "tables" and "thrones," interactive installations Cassells created throughout the exhibition. Cassells's table arrangements draw on the ornate aesthetics of power, notably as represented by mass-produced royal memorabilia, but juxtaposes it with food, flora, landmark legal cases, tableware, and other found objects. The overall effect is familiar yet thought-provoking.

Merola's and Cassells's work ultimately converges in a shared investigation of what the writer Jason Moore describes as "Capitalism in the Web of Life," which is easier to tell through stories than describe analytically. After passing through the Saint Lawrence Seaway in 1959, the royal yacht *Britannia* sailed through Lake Ontario. On July 1, Dominion Day in Canada, it turned South into the Welland Canal, bypassing Niagara Falls. Traveling through the industrial corridor along the canal, it passed just over ten miles from Love Canal, where that year, a resident observed black sludge leaking through her basement walls, the first report of an evolving environmental disaster.

The narrative of the royal visit, created by Pathé and others, was, of course, an elaborate fairytale. The colonial experiment the Queen symbolized was over, and the seaway she triumphantly opened would soon become a vector for invasive species, throwing the Great Lakes ecosystem into chaos. The region's industrial economy would create massive wealth disparities and a legacy of contaminated sites that disproportionately impacted working people and communities of color.

But still, millions of people came and cheered.

In conversation, Merola and Cassells describe *Swan Song* as a space for deconstructing narratives that mask power, and for imagining new narratives that produce healthier bodies and social and ecological relationships. But it's also a space that turned ugly subject matter into a beautiful exhibition. And by encouraging visitors to sit at its luxuriant tables, it claims beauty not as a trapping of privilege but as a common right.

And ultimately, *Swan Song* is about the possibility of holding these two ideas simultaneously; to view an ice sculpture of the royal bird and enjoy its beauty while organizing against the ugly reality it masks.

Steve Panton is a contributor to the *Brooklyn Rail*.

HANS HARTUNG

BY ROBERT C. MORGAN

Revenge

Perrotin, New York

January 14–February 18, 2023

The German-French artist Hans Hartung was considered by many Europeans a highly significant painter working in the context of abstract art before and during the Second World War. The stylistic term assigned to Hartung's work, *l'art informel*—"lyrical abstraction" in the United States—was, for some critics, the counterpart to the abstract expressionist movement that eventually made its appearance in the New York art world by the late 1940s.

The current exhibition of paintings by Hartung, titled *Revenge*, is a partial repetition of an earlier major exhibition of the artist's work shown at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1975. Several paintings from this exhibition have now been brought together nearly fifty years later for a second "recontextualization" of Hartung's contribution to abstract art—one that was made, at least partially, during an intensely difficult period in European history.

It is a fact that Hartung's paintings from the 1970s were not well known in the United States on the occasion of the Metropolitan show. As radically experimental paintings in terms of color and geometry, they were considered out of place next to the more prominent paintings seen in Europe decades earlier. Although the Met exhibition received support from Hartung's American colleagues—i.e., Rothko, Stella, Katz, and Rosenquist—it was rejected by many collectors and art world professionals of the time.

One of the more problematic interventions was a lengthy, pessimistic review by the critic Hilton Kramer, who took the liberty of blasting the work of one of Europe's most prestigious painters as a second-rate version of abstract expressionism in the *New York Times*. Ironically, Hartung was suddenly dismissed as inferior to the American avant-garde despite his presence in major collections, both public and private, such as those of Peggy Guggenheim, Eugene Gallatin, and Alfred Barr, then Director of the Museum of Modern Art.

It would appear that one reason for mounting the current exhibition would be to make up for lost time, which, of course, cannot be easily done. Even so, it is worth questioning some of the stylistic and aesthetic presumptions that inform how Hartung's work is read—then and now, and from both a European and a New York point of view.

Here I would begin with a statement from the artist himself published in *Libération* (August 1988): "The age, the view of the world, now aggressive, now sweet, positive or negative, depending on



Installation view: Hans Hartung: *Revenge*, Perrotin, New York, 2023. © Hans Hartung / ADAGP, Paris & ARS, New York 2022. Courtesy Fondation Hartung - Bergman & Perrotin. Photo: Guillaume Ziccarelli.

Installation view: Hans Hartung: *Revenge*, Perrotin, New York, 2023. © Hans Hartung / ADAGP, Paris & ARS, New York 2022. Courtesy Fondation Hartung - Bergman & Perrotin. Photo: Guillaume Ziccarelli.

the moment, and this wish to live, to be part of life, are things I try to express in my paintings."

Clearly there is a sentimental aspect to Hartung's activity as an artist. Indeed, his attraction to the poetic may have created discord among those given to the somewhat predictable, all-over intensity of abstract expressionism. But this would not be enough to separate the New Yorkers from the war-torn Europeans, at least from a painterly perspective. For the most part, Hartung's paintings, even as early as the 1930s, have a more direct formal quality: they are stronger in terms of *expression*, in comparison with the more *automatic* sensibilities of the New York painters.

Yet, at the same time, there is a keen sense of playful inventiveness in Hartung that extends his shapes and colors ways that go beyond the obvious. One may observe this in the paintings leading up to the 1970s, where the artist's formal vocabulary enters into a clearly stated expressiveness that in many ways gives meaning to the abstract forms compiled throughout his career. Ultimately there is little doubt as to the extent of the formal play that appears essential to Hartung's work. There are linear and shaped forms, both organic and geometric, all placed side-by-side. These are the forms that identify his work, giving it a structure from which a sensory dynamo of images outside the figurative world is constructed.

The heroic aspect of Hartung's paintings remains stable, even as the forms themselves suggest movement through,

over, and within one another. Much of this is contingent on color and its application specifically to establish what the critic David Anfam calls "the blur." As I understand it, this is a surface phenomenon that gives these paintings their heraldry, poignancy, and incisiveness, all in one. The surface becomes more than texture. It is a sensory operative capable of transforming color into light.

Throughout the current exhibition on Orchard Street, one makes contact with form and color lucidly painted both on paper and canvas. In all cases, there is a consistency that appears unforgiving in its placement. All three floors of the Perrotin gallery celebrate the extraordinary work of Hans Hartung in a show that instrumentalizes the domain of abstraction in art. This is an exhibition that takes us forward into our own consciousness in a manner that fulfills our expectations of art on its own terms, masterfully driven by the artist himself.

Robert C. Morgan is an artist, critic, and art historian.