

**Hans HARTUNG**

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# Hans Hartung, No Matter What They Say

A caustic *New York Times* review from 1975 almost destroyed his career, but he remained one of the most influential artists of the 20th century.

Joe Fyfe



Hans Hartung, "T1974-R33" (1974), acrylic on canvas, unframed: 27 15/16 inches × 118 1/8 inches (all photos Joe Fyfe/Hyperallergic)

It could be argued that the German-French painter Hans Hartung (1904–1989) had overall a bigger influence on art than the Abstract Expressionists. By the 1930s, he was a painterly nonobjective artist. Reproductions of his work had reached the US, and his paintings were also seen in the A. E. Gallatin Collection here in New York. He was the bridge between pre-war German Expressionism and post-war German abstraction. Hartung's odd technique, derived from his auxiliary practices of photography and printmaking, of using a wide variety of tools and plants as paint applicators, married the optical to the haptic. Gerhard Richter's paintings made from gradations, dry brushing, and squeegees, compounding the photograph in paint, are heavily indebted to Hartung, who anticipates the imprint-as-painterly-mark aesthetic of Christopher Wool, Wade Guyton, and Rudolf Stingel. In addition, Andy Warhol's first abstractions, the *Shadows* series (1978–79), were directly influenced by Hartung's 1975-76 Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition.

*Hans Hartung: Revenge*, currently at Perrotin New York, refers to this show 47 years later, seeking to redress the damning *New York Times* review by Hilton Kramer that resulted in "the American market turning away from him," as a documentary film accompanying the exhibition attests. Beyond Kramer's blinkered assessment, Hartung's work most likely didn't go over well in the heyday of conceptualism, earth art, and the literal use of materials. The illusionism present in his paintings by way of atmospheric spray paint, with contrasting roller marks highlighting mechanically applied textures and dramatic lights and darks, might have appeared not only false but gratuitous. The dark, corrupt soul of Europe. Anyway, painting, most artists

agreed, was dead. In addition, American artists and critics were in their third decade of blocking any acknowledgment that the École de Paris had anything worthwhile to contribute.

From that perspective, Kramer's opening line, "Why? Why Hartung?" does not sound so strange. If you are content with the market-driven painterly figuration incessantly placed in your path, you could ask the same question today.



Hans Hartung, "T1974-R26" (1974), acrylic on canvas, unframed 72 13/16 inches × 118 1/8 inches

Thankfully, for the second time since their opening in New York, Perrotin has ignored the zeitgeist and devoted all three floors to this eccentric and deserving artist, whose work came from childhood drawings executed to ward off fear during lightning storms, the music of Bach, and the paintings of Rembrandt. The third-floor hanging that reprises the installation and sequential hanging of works in The Met exhibition is particularly revelatory. The filmic element is present in Hartung's utilization of the rectangle to radically crop the abstract images. In the deceptively simple "T1974-R26" (1974) for example, a membranous white band made with a wide brayer diagonally bisects the blue background. Bending to its right is a slightly wider, thickly brushed yellow stripe. The ground reveals that it has black underpainting, and its blue overpainting is striated horizontally to the right of the two bands and vertically on the left of them. In all, an intensely knit together pictorial paint structure. One can detect underpainting and revision throughout the exhibition. Amid these seemingly sadistic, moody, and rumbling works that are at once calculated and free, Hartung preferred a clarified edge, even in his

gatherings of rapid scratches into the surface, the visual equivalent of the sound of fingernails on a blackboard, but who else has done that?

The gallery film compares him, correctly, to Turner. He painted nature but foregrounded a manufactured machine-like disarray. Hartung practiced a kind of distancing, of making the viewer look again and think as much as be enthralled.



Installation view of *Hans Hartung: Revenge* (2023) at Perrotin New York; left: "T1974-R1" (1974), unframed: 72 13/16 inches × 118 1/8 inches; right: "T1974-E12" (1974), acrylic on canvas, unframed: 70 7/8 inches × 70 7/8 inches



Hans Hartung, "T1975-R35" (1975), acrylic on canvas, unframed: 70 7/8 inches × 70 7/8 inches



Hans Hartung, "T1973-E6" (1973), acrylic on canvas, unframed: 43 11/16 inches × 70 7/8 inches

Hans Hartung: *Revenge continues at Perrotin (130 Orchard Street, Lower East Side) through February 18. The exhibition was organized by Perrotin and the Hartung-Bergman Foundation.*