

Hans HARTUNG

*Tussle Magazine,
Hans Hartung Revenge*

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TUSSLE

By David Rhodes, February 8, 2023

Hans Hartung *Revenge*

Perrotin Gallery, New York January 13 - February 18, 2023

Hans Hartung, *T1974-R1*, 1974 Acrylic on canvas Unframed : 72 13/16 x 118 1/8 inch Photograph : ©photo Thomas Hennocque ©Hans Hartung / ADAGP, Paris & ARS, New York 2022. Courtesy Fondation Hartung - Bergman & Perrotin

Hans Hartung’s 1975 exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum, New York is the impetus for this current presentation of the artist’s paintings, some of which were in fact included at the Met exhibition in 1975, and are installed here on the third floor. All three floors of the gallery are given over to “Revenge”, a substantial exhibition that is intended as a repost to the negative reception of Hartung’s paintings back in 1975. There were several reasons for the hostility, some predictable, even if very misguided, when considering the paintings themselves. Firstly, what were the supporters of this Met project thinking—painting was certainly not the *cause du*

jour for the New York art world at this moment, far from it, Minimal sculpture, Conceptual Art, Film and Photography, however, were. The audience that did remain for later day Abstract Expressionism and Color Field painting were certainly not going to appreciate the challenge of Hartung's extraordinarily singular paintings that did not fit the expectations of any residual critical community for painting in New York ready to accept new work, and especially not from Europe, or perhaps especially, France—an insistence on superiority of New York over Paris had been evident in not so subtle ways since the late 1940s. Sadly, the Met exhibition's bitter failure even today remains paradigmatic of Hartung's underappreciation in the United States. This is all the more reason to welcome Emmanuel Perrotin's persistence, this is the second exhibition in New York at his gallery of the artist's paintings, the first, "A Constant Storm", curated by Matthieu Poirier, was in 2018. The current exhibition was co curated by Perrotin Gallery and the Bergman Hartung Foundation.

Hartung was known in the United States as a part of the second School of Paris. His work had been seen in group exhibitions such as *1949: European and American Painters,* at the Betty Parsons Gallery and *Advancing French Art,* at the Louis Carré Galleries, part of which travelled to the Museum of Art in San Francisco, the Art Institute in Chicago, and the Museum of Art in Baltimore. He had also been collected by collected by Eugene Gallatin and Peggy Guggenheim. Today American museums if they have works by Hartung, for example, MoMA, the Guggenheim and the Albright-Knox Gallery they tend to be from no later than the 1950s. A key advocate for the Met exhibition was John Lefebvre—emigrating from Berlin in the 1930s—a New York gallerist, he had been trying to convince a large American art institution to exhibit Hartung since the early 1960s. A retrospective of Hartung's work was held in 1969 at the Fine Arts Museum in Houston, before travelling to two venues in Canada. And, through Myriam Prévot-Douatte, Hartung's gallerist in Paris, André Emmerich agreed to organize an exhibition of recent paintings for the spring of 1969. Prévot-Douatte noted apprehensively that Emmerich's enthusiasm for Hartung was an exception, as in New York, "It's not even as if they are against the School of Paris here—it's more as if Paris didn't exist at all and nothing from there could interest them." What transpired was that Emmerich decided against an exhibition of recent Hartung's because "critic's, collectors, museum people, etc. seem unanimously agreed upon the fact that Hartung is out of the contemporary scene." He goes on to say that earlier Hartung's would be more favorably received. The exhibition was a critical and commercial failure—there were no sales. Ominous indeed for the later Met exhibition.

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



Henry Geldzahler, director of the Metropolitan Museum, however remained a firm admirer of Hartung, and organized the fated exhibition there in 1975 after already acquiring a painting for the museum's permanent collection. Remarkably, the exhibition would comprise only recent work: 27 paintings, painted between 1971–75. The reception was brutal. Led by a thoroughly dismissive review in the *New York Times* by art critic Hilton Kramer who said, "Why? Why Hartung? This is the question that fills the air, like a barking dog that won't shut up, as one goes around the exhibition that came to the Metropolitan Museum this week. Why, out of the hundreds of living artists whose work might conceivably commend itself for exhibition in this august establishment, single out a painter of such surprising mediocrity and dullness?" Apart from the disparaging comments about the paintings, Kramer also similarly commented on the artist's career, Paris, and the French. Kramer epitomized the chauvinism and provincialism of certain New York artists and intellectuals of the time. The work he attacked was clearly beyond his capacity for difference, innovation and originality. His question why Hartung and why now can be appreciated, it must have seemed incomprehensible in relation to the established trends in New York. Geldzahler apologized in a letter to Hartung, stating that he had, "overestimated the accessibility of Hans Hartung's work to the New York audience." He also acknowledged, echoing Emmerich, that the reception could have been better if there had been the inclusion of earlier works and not exclusively recent works. Again, the reluctance to accept Hartung as a contemporary rather than as a representative of a prior period of painting: Art Informel, Abstract Expressionism, etc. How could a German-French artist living in Paris even compete with New York based artists was the woeful perception?



Hans Hartung, *P1973-B15*, 1973 Acrylic and ink on cardboard Unframed : 29 3/8 x 41 1/16 inch Photograph : ©photo Thomas Hennocque ©Hans Hartung / ADAGP, Paris & ARS, New York 2022. Courtesy Fondation Hartung - Bergman & Perrotin



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

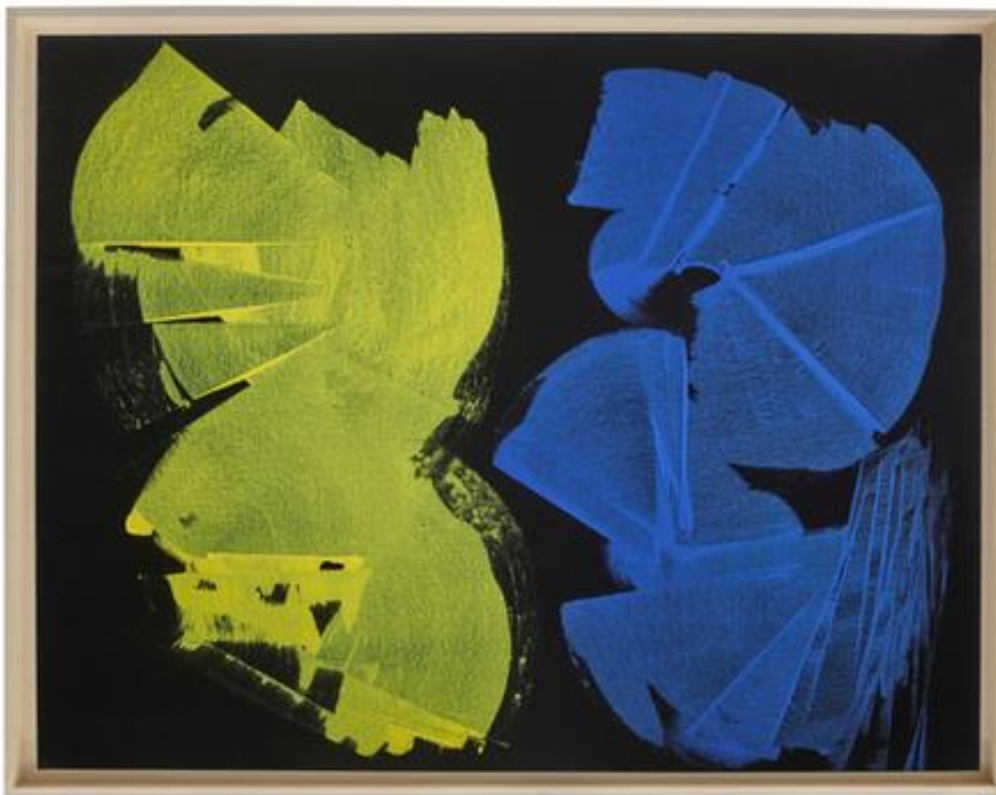
Hartung's paintings are still notable as a singular trajectory that defies easy categorization. Looking at the technical process, surface and color of Hartung's paintings today at Perrotin they are challenging, and remain extraordinarily fresh and, they still stand outside the mainstream of accepted or fashionable painting. They also still stand outside consensus attitudes, aesthetic or political, one of course reflecting the other. The scaling up from preliminary drawings to finished paintings whilst retaining the impact of spontaneity confounds. Something acceptable in Franz Kline, who also employed this procedure, but not in Hartung, who had explored this technique decades before Kline. The use of unusual implements to apply or remove paint, including, for example—multi headed brushes (manufactured for him by the famous company Cléton), spray guns, gardening tools, various customized scrapers, the branches of bushes, some of which are presented in a vitrine at Perrotin Gallery, along with a film that has images of Hartung at work. The painting "T1974 – R33" (1974) is narrow and horizontal. The warm tan colored surface of the painting is already horizontally stratified by a texture: fine grooves left by the indentation from scraping or the residue paint from a heavily laden brush. Against this horizontal motion are dark vertical diagonals, black and blue, that pass over and make visually clear the haptic working of the "tableaux," as the French say, or support. This support, the canvas, is never a neutral element in Hartung's paintings, it is always active and incorporated. For example, the cardboard surface revealed by the single gesture of blue paint from a wide brush in "P1974 – A40" (1974).



Hans Hartung, *T1974-E42*, 1974 Acrylic on canvas 55 7/8 x 70 7/8 in Photograph : Claire Dorn ©Hans Hartung / ADAGP, Paris & ARS, New York 2022. Courtesy Fondation Hartung - Bergman & Perrotin

This relationship is exemplary in remembering how Hartung transfers skills and methods from printmaking in which he was vastly experienced. He used rollers designed for printmaking to

apply paint, for example "T1975 – R35" (1975), or made scratches into the surface of his paint with metal instruments as one might in working on an etching plate. Hartung's color is also unusual, it is striking for its emphasis on tonal shifts used in producing a particular light or change in contrast. The lyrical beauty often associated with French painting is absent. Matisse's frequent use of black, or even the constant black of Hartung's friend Pierre Soulages notwithstanding. Hartung's use of black is different, it is often present in combination with dissonant or near nocturnal hues. There are surprising color combinations but no purely pleasing chromatic effects. Although this use of color is largely Hartung's alone it does bring to mind in its brevity and weight the paintings of German Expressionism such as those of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner or Max Beckmann. Compositionally, the cutting of forms at the edge of the canvas recalls the way in which a window frames the view of a landscape or a rectangular view as seen through a camera lens. "T1977 – R33" (1977) is landscape like, the black color applied from a branch recalls a rain squall.



Hans Hartung, *T1971-R12*, 1971 Acrylic on canvas Unframed : 44 7/8 x 57 1/2 inch Photograph : ©photo Thomas Hennocque ©Hans Hartung / ADAGP, Paris & ARS, New York 2022. Courtesy Fondation Hartung - Bergman & Perrotin

Hartung's romanticism and pragmatism, his expansive understanding of art's role in communicating unlanguage realities continues a tradition of 18th Century Romanticism in Germany, his pure sensuality in insisting on the materiality of painting reaches back to Courbet and French 19th Century painting. It is all brought forth in compelling, precise, unpretentious and mysterious paintings, produced as if from a workshop, or machine, for the physical visibility of painting. This is what Hartung achieved in his studio, and it holds up, perhaps it is too

uncompromising for a wider audience, even one inured to abstraction but unable to see what abstraction can potentially be.