

Thilo Heinzmann

*upfront, wild and unchained*

Perrotin, Seoul

October 31 - December 21, 2024

Thilo Heinzmann's signature 'pigment paintings' - abstract compositions of divergent and overlapping tangential calligraphic marks augmented with bursts of pure pigment exploding across the surface - are all both unique and part of a greater ongoing conversation. When the artist himself speaks, his observations and ideas tumble over each other in quick succession, just like his ebullient and enticing work. Heinzmann is a passionate cultural enthusiast with eclectic interests, including serious music and odd pockets of art history. It is the artist's generous curiosity which enlivens and propels the interconnectedness, the vectors, tangents and sense of space-time travel in his haptic work. His thought-life and art-making are all part of a continuous, open-ended flow. A flow of consciousness that leaves seductive marks and traces.

'Upfront, wild and unchained' (2024), his latest and second major solo exhibition in Seoul, comprises eleven recent untitled abstract pigment paintings. One pair (both O.T., 2023) are both three-metre-wide panoramic compositions which feature a palette moving from mauve to pinks, and blues to moments of emerald. In these visually dramatic paintings, lines and forms traverse or progress, even dance, rhythmically across the pictorial plane with abandon. Heinzmann's pigment paintings emerge from a process which, on one hand, he predetermines and calibrates, but which also sets free energy and chance encounters beyond his control. The emergence of each composition on a wet surface thus becomes revelatory, harnessing the power of the 'deliberate accident' and intuition based on honed experience turned to decisive action. The results are indeed, *upfront, wild and unchained*, as too are the effects on our imaginations.

The artist's works have an intense corporeal immediacy that sets daydreams loose. They appear as if made in a moment of exuberance a second ago, but then continue to form, rotate, drift, and float in perpetuity in the mind's eye. The pigment paintings are like mind maps. Their networks of forms also suggest firing synapses. They appear to speak expansively to interiority. For the artist, various groups of the pigment paintings have different conceptual starting points, for example, aerial urban topographies or complex personal relationships. The artist, however, invites us to freely interpret what we see, hence the lack of descriptive or sign-post titles. After all, abstraction is not a painting *of* something. It *is* something. Heinzmann knows to paint in this manner is to set things in motion without controlling the ultimate destination. Abstraction is perhaps the only form which might not limit the art and life dialogue the artist is having with himself, everyone around him, and the world.

The articulated surfaces of the pigment paintings exhibit a precision, confidence and utter nakedness. 'You see everything' the artist has noted. It is no surprise, then, that he first explored the techniques involved as far back as in 1994, and has been perfecting them ever since. Back then, it was in part the conceptually minded painter's response to the game changing arrival of PCs in the art academy. It would not be until 2008 and later, however, that the pigment paintings assumed their full, albeit non-exclusive, place in Heinzmann's oeuvre. Today, the artist still first prepares the ground of his new paintings by disrupting the binary code of the linen weave with the random texture of micro peaks and troughs resulting from a rolled painted ground.

Over many years, Heinzmann has collected hundreds of different types of pigment from around the globe. He makes the work in an outdoor garden courtyard off his studio, in part by

exposing vibrant pollen-like pigments to the elements. The wind helps and the resultant delicate pigment flares on the paintings seem somehow reproductive, life-affirming, like the scattering of visual seeds or spores. The wet surfaces are also subjected to various mark-producing physical operations with the help of two trusted assistants - both painters, who have worked with Heinzmann for more than a decade. 'Over the years, we've developed a silent language, a way of communicating, which enables me to paint in the way I do,' the artist noted in a recent interview. He is naturally secretive about his exact methods.

The story of Western abstraction, we now understand, has many more twists and turns, origin stories, strange rooms, renegade practitioners and weird resonances than once asserted in the standard canon. It is a cultural site both under ongoing construction and archaeological investigation. Important to Heinzmann's work's implicit contextual background are Modernist developments specific to post-WWII Germany. Art had a crucial role amidst the rumble and, in the wake of the utter moral collapse resulting from fascism, set incongruously against the 'economic miracle' that followed. (A divided Germany's art dialogue thus was quite distinct from that across the pond in the US, and different again to abstraction in South Korea, for instance.) In West Germany, for the then emergent generation, vanguard forms of abstraction played a key role in reckoning with the recent past, and the making of a reparatory break without forgetting. Heinzmann mentioned to me, for instance, of our father's generation of artists, such as Karl Otto Götz (1914-2017), originator of the paint scraping technique and professor of Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke, as well as figures like painter Hans Hartung (1904-1989). Given today's pluralistic postmodern approach to contemporary art, the mid-20th century primacy of abstract painting and the intensity of the surrounding debates last century seems hard to reanimate. Even theoretical pronouncements of the demise of the *Königsdziplin*, seem now somewhat remote, and clearly premature. Firmly in the now, Heinzmann's work speaks to abstraction's enduring strengths: its raw threshold assertion of the art's place in the world, its capacity to convey through materiality and presence across generations, and to speak specifically to generalities. In doing so, it is not to reconstruct an uncritical universalism, but to proffer that which we share in the imminent intersubjective present.

—Dominic Eichler