

Gerhard Richter Overpainted Photographs

19 January – 18 February, 2023
Sies + Höke, Düsseldorf

“Gerhard Richter’s history of using or referring to photographs in one way or another is long and complex, but whatever he does with an actual photo or the idea of a photo, it always feels reinvented.” (Siri Hustvedt)

Press release

With the exhibition *Gerhard Richter / Overpainted Photographs*, Sies + Höke presents more than 60 overpainted photographs dating from the years 1989 to 2018, illuminating this important part of Richter's oeuvre.

Overpainted photographs were created by Richter from the late 1980s onwards. Despite their small format, they have a significant status within the artist's oeuvre: like no other group of works, they embody the interface between the representation of photographic image content and abstract painting. This is not merely a technique—such as watercolour on paper—“but rather a special methodical procedure for obtaining unfamiliar images on the basis of the familiar.” (Uwe M. Schneede) Through photography, a representational motif is conveyed pictorially, while at the same time an abstract colour matter is applied to the surface. These two levels of reality appear as an interlocking unity, they enter into a close, tension-filled and subtle connection.

"I took some small photographs," Gerhard Richter said in an interview in 1991, "and then smeared them with paint. That partly resolved the problem". By "the problem" Richter refers to the relationship between the reality of the photograph and that of the paint. "Photography has almost no reality, it is almost a hundred per cent picture", Richter remarks, "and painting always has reality, you can touch the paint; it has presence".

The basis for Richter's overpainted photographs is his personal photo archive. Among the pictures he uses are portraits of his family, landscapes, city views or holiday images from Sils Maria and Juist; some are intimate testimonies of his private life, others are blurred snapshots or banal landscape views. The act of painting these photographs takes place in close connection with working on abstract paintings, specifically those for which Richter uses a squeegee. The masses of paint left behind on the squeegee always have "beautiful spots", according to Richter. Accordingly, he applies this leftover paint to photographs by squashing, scraping, dapping or smudging, obscuring certain parts of the underlying motif and thus directing the viewing gaze. A dynamic of revealing and concealing unfolds, where paint and photography are competing dimensions.

Richter's painterly effects on the limited space of a mostly 10 x 15 cm photograph prove to be astonishingly diverse. They range from a few sparse blobs of shiny lacquer to a full-scale coat of paint reminiscent of the artist's large abstract canvases. In each case, the colour seems to interact—according to the principle of controlled chance—with the underlying motif. The chromaticity of the paint frequently corresponds with the picture's colour values. The paint applications appear three-dimensional and concretely tangible; together with the glossy photo surface they develop a strangely haptic attraction. While the snapshots' familiarity only suggests intimacy, physical proximity is necessary to appreciate the multiple effects in these concentrated works.

The exhibition *Gerhard Richter / Overpainted Photographs* is accompanied by an extensive catalogue with a reprinted essay by Siri Hustvedt as well as new texts by Dietmar Elger and Mark Godfrey. Dieter Schwarz will speak at the exhibition opening on 19 January, 2023.