

Press Release

Two Pieces in the Shape of a Pear

Hauser & Wirth Southampton
5 August – 30 September 2023



To conclude Hauser & Wirth Southampton's summer season, American artist Pat Steir will curate a special exhibition focused on the revelatory thrill of pairing works by artists across medium and genre. Work by Cindy Sherman will be paired with that of Mickalene Thomas, Rita Ackermann with Avery Singer, Mary Heilmann with Martha Tuttle, and Steir's own work with that of Rashid Johnson.

Steir's title for the presentation, 'Two Pieces in the Shape of a Pear,' is inspired by French composer Erik Satie's famous duet for piano, 'Trois morceaux en forme de poire' (1903). Accordingly, the duets that comprise her exhibition pose many of the same questions the artist began to pursue forty years ago in her monumental painting montage, 'The Brueghel Series (A Vanitas of Style)' (1982 – 84). Comprising 64 panels, each exploring the style of an artist or art historical movement, this opus allowed Steir to reveal and revel in a compendium of connections and deviations between periods and approaches—capturing the often-surprising characteristics that unite and distinguish them. Steir was interested in comparing these styles not only to one another, but to the times in which they existed. Steir has remarked that, 'All art which endures the centuries can be considered great art—it symbolizes to us that there is something common among us—to our condition. Art that endures allows us to speak of the human condition.' That sensitivity to context and cultural reverberation remains central to her art and thinking today.

By pairing works with similar conditions and subjects for the exhibition at Hauser & Wirth Southampton, Steir foregrounds both similarities and differences in the sensibilities and approaches of her chosen artists. 'Two Pieces in the Shape of a Pear' questions the ways in which works of art can express their cultural moment, whether through compositional devices or choice of subject matter. For example, the pairing of Steir's own poetic abstraction 'Roman Series (II)' (1993) with Rashid Johnson's ghostly 'Surrender Painting "Pouring"' (2023) invites the viewer to compare and contrast the prevailing cultural contexts and lived experiences of two artists who at first glance might seem to exist in unbridgeable parallel planes. Meanwhile, the geometric vocabularies deployed by Mary Heilmann and Martha Tuttle resonate across decades. The figurative and abstract languages that Rita Ackermann and Avery Singer use in their paintings reveal the artist's hand in Ackermann's work while disguising it in Singer's, raising provocative questions about art historical hierarchies. And works by Cindy Sherman and Mickalene Thomas highlight both artists' diverse approaches to photography via their use of different iconography, motifs and even media to embed complex layers of meaning within their pictures.

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About the artists

Born in Budapest, Hungary, in 1968, **Rita Ackermann** currently lives and works in New York. Ackermann's practice manifests in paintings and works on paper that propose a continuous shift between representation and abstraction. Employing a range of media, including oil and acrylic paint, pastel, wax pencil and raw pigment, her expression hinges on automatic gestures and opposing impulses of creation and destruction.

Cindy Sherman's groundbreaking photographs have explored themes around representation and identity in contemporary media for over four decades. Since the early 2000s, Sherman (born 1954) has constructed personae with digital manipulation, capturing the fractured sense of self in modern society—a concern the artist has uniquely encapsulated from the outset of her career.

Influenced by 1960s counterculture, the free speech movement, and the surf ethos of her native California, **Mary Heilmann** (born 1940) ranks amongst the most influential abstract painters of her generation. Considered one of the preeminent contemporary abstract painters, Heilmann overlays the analytical geometries of minimalism with the spontaneous ethos of the Beat Generation, and her works are always distinguishable by their often unorthodox—always joyful—approach to color and form.

Born in Chicago in 1977, **Rashid Johnson** is among an influential cadre of contemporary American artists whose work employs a wide range of media to explore themes of art history, individual and shared cultural identities, personal narratives, literature, philosophy, materiality and critical history. Johnson's expansive practice embraces a wide range of media—including sculpture, painting, drawing, filmmaking and installation—yielding a complex multidisciplinary practice that incorporates diverse materials rich with symbolism and personal history. Many of Johnson's works convey rhythms of the occult and mystic: evoking his desire to transform and expand each included object's field of association in the process of reception.

Born and raised in New York, **Avery Singer** (born 1987) has employed the binary language of computer programs and industrial materials in order to remove the trace of the artist's hand while engaging the tradition of painting and the legacy of modernism. Through the use of new technologies to depict past art historical references, she pushes past the limitations of painting. Often reimagining the subject of painting and image-making as the subject itself, by disengaging with romanticized views, Singer creates her own way of seeing.

Mickalene Thomas (born 1971) was born and raised in New Jersey and lives and works in New York. Her influential and innovative practice has yielded instantly recognizable and widely celebrated aesthetic languages within contemporary visual culture. Not only do her masterful mixed-media paintings, photographs, films and installations command space, they occupy eloquently while dissecting the intersecting complexities of Black and female identity within the Western canon.

Born in Santa Fe in 1989, **Martha Tuttle** is an artist and writer working between painting and sculpture. She is interested in the intimacies and discourses possible between entities of varying scales and time frames, such as the human and the mineral, or the pebble and the interplanetary.

Among the great innovators of contemporary painting, **Pat Steir** (born 1938) first came to prominence in the late 1970s and early 1980s for her iconographic canvases and immersive wall drawings. By the late 1980s, her inventive approach to painting—the rigorous pouring technique seen in her Waterfall works, in which she harnessed the forces of gravity and gesture to achieve works of astonishing lyricism—attracted substantial critical acclaim. Informed by a deep engagement with art history and Eastern philosophy, and a passion for artistic advocacy in the both the visual and literary realms, Steir's storied five-decade career—continues to reach new heights through an intrepid commitment to material exploration and experimentation.

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For additional information, please contact:

Andrea Schwan, Andrea Schwan Inc., andrea@andreaschwan.com, +1 917 371 5023

Daniel Rechtschaffen, Hauser & Wirth New York, danielrechtschaffen@hauserwirth.com, +1 415 608 2148

Christine McMonagle, Hauser & Wirth New York, christinemcmonagle@hauserwirth.com, +1 347 320 8596

Caption and courtesy information:

Pat Steir

Roman Series (II)

1993

Oil on canvas

81.3 x 81.3 cm / 32 x 32 in

© Pat Steir

Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

Rashid Johnson

Surrender Painting 'Pouring'

2023

Oil on linen

121.9 x 91.4 x 4.3 cm / 48 x 36 x 1 5/8 in

© Rashid Johnson

Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

Photo: Stephanie Powell