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BERLIN

# HENNING STRASSBURGER

## WHITE PRIMER AND FLAT SURFACES – ADDING TO THE CONTEMPORARY VISUAL CONTINUUM

Painter Henning Strassburger's studio occupies a physician's office in a former factory. The space is crammed with stacks of canvases, gossip magazines, sketches, a cowhide rug and, last but not least, the rangy figure of the artist himself. Large canvases, daubed with blue, pink and black acrylic swirls lean against the walls. He ushers Sleek in, apologising for the cramped size of his studio, part of a grey industrial complex in the Berlin district of Kreuzberg.

Educated at the Düsseldorf Arts Academy, the artist felt stifled by the traditional masculine atmosphere that emphasised painting over other disciplines and did little to encourage interest in other artistic media. "I made videos while I was there, which was sort of forbidden. In 2009! People couldn't understand it. But what I was trying to do – which I still do with painting – is to see what is happening in the world and make art that responds to it. Today, you cannot pretend as if you're innocent to the world of new media – everyone knows how to make a video, a



selfie, even art which looks like it is instantly sellable." Sleek asks him about the cheap gossip magazine cover stack on the studio wall. "It's about the colour system they use because they are obvious advertising colours. So I try to use these colours too because I think that everything that appears in the contemporary visual world somehow belongs together. Why should we, as painters, not think about the way that printed media or online media create a certain visual world," he says. Painting to him is just another part of the contemporary visual continuum, mediated through screen and print, and this affects the way he produces his work. "I do not want to say that I only think about



in, the process," he says. Asked about his use of pictorial space – his paintings are flat, and the white primer dominates – he says he is interested in flatness, another Abstract Expressionist reference. "I try to avoid space and depth," he says. His method of production, avoiding the personal mark in favour of the flat surface is a way of connecting painting to the reproduction and appropriation techniques used by New Materialist ("post-internet") artists. "For me, this is the challenge for the contemporary painter – to produce a painting that looks like a print." A painting, there-

fore, that is not a painting. *JF*

their [the paintings'] digital appearance, but that's part of the painting too. This is maybe the first time in art history that reproduction is thought of from the very first step in creating a painting," he notes.

Strassburger's paintings take the form of large-scale abstracts, but unlike his historical predecessors, the loops, swirls and grids on the canvas are not intended as a record of the subjective mark-making that is characteristic of a personal style. Artistic innovation to him is no longer possible. "I think the world is too fast to make real inventions. You can't do it in pop music, or in new media, or in painting."

His painting method is determined by his desire to create confusion about his process. "What I tried to do with these paintings is to make them look manual at first sight, so you can see the art historical context, a type of Abstract Expressionism. But when you come closer, you do not know. I never touch the canvas with a brush. You think about how it's been done, how it's been painted. You can touch it. That's what I am interested

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