

An abstract painting featuring a vibrant, multi-colored background of reds, oranges, yellows, greens, and blues. Overlaid on this are several thick, black, horizontal brushstrokes that create a sense of depth and movement. The overall effect is dynamic and expressive.

Katharina Grosse:  
*Atoms Inside  
Balloons*

April 29 – June 10, 2007

**The Renaissance Society**  
at The University of Chicago

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# The Renaissance Society

at The University of Chicago  
5811 South Ellis Avenue  
Chicago, IL 60637

**Museum Hours**  
Tuesday - Friday: 10 am - 5pm  
Saturday, Sunday: 12 - 5pm  
Closed Mondays  
www.renaissancesociety.org

## Katharina Grosse: *Atoms Inside Balloons*

April 29– June 10, 2007

**Opening Reception: Sunday, April 29, 4:00-7:00pm**  
Featuring a talk with the artist from 5:00 - 6:00pm

## Katharina Grosse Was Here

Framed as a quest, the history of modern painting is a turbulent narrative. The holy grail in this instance is the essence of painting, i.e., those properties defining painting as an autonomous discipline, a purely aesthetic activity free from all worldly constraints, something made exclusively to be looked at. If the quest were whittled down to a single, fundamental property, it would be pure color. From Impressionism to the Washington Color School, the liberation of color came about in stages that, told in another fashion, read as the dismantling of a hard won mastery of illusionistic representation.

Yet the advent of abstraction hardly marked the triumph of color. Painting, in the early part of the Twentieth Century, was dominated by cubism and its attendant debates over form, specifically the rendering of three dimensional form on to the picture plane in a way that would maintain an integrity to the picture plane's flatness. Even though Fauvism was an alternative to cubism, color, no matter how key an element in, say, Matisse's paintings, was still subordinate to line and shape. Although the question was on the table as to whether color, in and of itself, could determine a painting's structure, in order for the primacy of color to assert itself, form, composition, and, last but not least paint handling, as it had been lionized by De Kooning and Pollock, would have to follow in the footsteps of illusionistic representation and be eliminated from the picture. In this regard, Color Field painting came at the tail end of a dialectic characterized by a series of sacrifices each of which seemed like a threat to painting's continued development. But after tossing out the baby and bathwater, why keep the bathtub of stretcher bars and canvas? While developments in post Color Field painting, notably the work of the French group *Support/Surface*, Sam Gilliam and Lynda Benglis would problematize painting's means of support, with the exception of Niele Toroni, its sustained abandonment was out of the question.

Katharina Grosse's site specific paintings/installations are a phoenix from the ashes of late modernism. Since 1998 Grosse has been using a compressed air spray gun to apply garish swaths and splashes of undulating color directly to gallery walls with sublimely spectacular results. Whether wild or discreet, her installations append themselves to modernist painting's Greenbergian *cul de sac* in an uncanny manner that is the better part of their beauty. To use Freud's language, if the primacy of color can be characterized as a "latent" rather than "manifest" objective in the development of modern painting, then it is fair to speak of color as repressed. Read through her work, what passed for the liberation of color would seem little more than color's continued

repression so long as painting was unwilling to do away with the means of support that defines the historical trajectory of easel painting. In other words, this traditional means of support functioned as painting's ego, representing all a painting could know of itself as contained within the edges of the stretched canvas. Knowing no such boundaries Grosse's installations are modernist painting's unruly id.

Grosse is forever in Jules Olitski's debt. He was the first painter to regularly use a spray gun. Regarding Olitski's use of the spray gun, Greenberg wrote, "the grainy surface Olitski creates with his way of spraying is a new kind of paint surface. It offers tactile associations hitherto foreign, more or less, to picture-making; and it does new things with color. Together with color, it contrives an illusion of depth back to the picture's surface; it is as if that surface, in all its literalness, were enlarged to contain a world of color and light differentiations impossible to flatness but which yet manages not to violate flatness." Grosse's palette is too saturated to achieve the illusion of depth of which Greenberg writes. That is not her goal. If anything, for an illusion of depth she has substituted the actual architectural space in which the work is sited. Paradoxically, Grosse's work often obliterates the corners where walls and ceiling meet, forcing architecture to succumb to the flat space of painting.

Beyond reveling in the primacy of color and Olitski's precedent-setting use of the spray gun, Grosse's work quickly distances itself from Color Field painting. This is even more the case when Grosse spray paints over various objects—furniture, clothing, mounds of earth—a tactic incorporated into her work a few years after the first spray gun installation. While the strictly painterly works are capable of an astounding range of expression based exclusively on color and gesture, the works including objects introduce a narrative element bringing wholly fresh facets of modernist painting, from Surrealism to Rauschenberg's Combines, within her sphere of reference. In any case, however, Grosse's use of color is such that it is no longer an attribute subordinate to the sum total of properties that make up our perception of an object. It is neither the color of a substance nor the color of a surface but color as its own substance acting independently of the surfaces to which it is applied. Just as her work extends a logic in which color was reified *within* painting only to be altogether reified *from* painting, in the works incorporating objects, color is wholly reified from things in order to question what and how we see in a more general fashion. In other words, Grosse's work isn't merely about reified color, it is ultimately about reified vision, one freed from utilitarian ends to an extent and in a manner that makes it hard to imagine the

liberation of vision on terms other than those of color run rampant.

Needless to say, Grosse's use of the spray gun brings her work into direct dialogue with graffiti in terms of spray paint's "tactile associations" which at the time of the above quote from Greenberg were "hitherto foreign, more or less, to picture-making." This is certainly no longer the case as graffiti has been brought well into the fold of easel painting's repertoire of styles from, say, Twombly to Basquiat. Of greater importance with regard to graffiti is the performative aspect of Grosse's work. Her projects, surveyed one to the next, read as the work of a tagger, a stylistically explicit statement to the effect of "Katharina Grosse Was Here." Within the flux of their formlessness, Grosse's moves, like those of a surfer or skateboarder, are best described in the diminutive of radical, i.e., as "rad." Under the aegis of pure color, however, her work is anything but a form of writing as is graffiti. Grosse's color is a form of non sense in the best and truest sense. The work prescribes less to a logic and more to a psychology of color where it is more about the perceiver than the perceived; color as a subjectively irreducible experience. To borrow a quote from *The Meaning of Art*, a 1940 lecture by Josef Albers:

Art is concerned with something that cannot be explained by words or literal description...art is revelation instead of information, expression instead of description, creation instead of imitation or repetition...Art is concerned with the HOW, not the WHAT; not the literal content, but the performance of factual content. The performance—how it is done—that is the content of art.

For Albers, as with Grosse, color is an itch theory could never fully scratch. All the so-called laws of color are subject to interpretation as borne out in each and every individual painting. As *Homage to the Square*, Albers' monumental series of color studies begun in 1950 and continued through to his death in 1976, serves to prove, color is an empirically driven area of endless experimentation. A mere two blocks from the site of the first self sustaining nuclear chain reaction, *Atoms Inside Balloons*, Grosse's Renaissance Society exhibition, is also a response to the gallery's 30 foot high, neo gothic ceiling. As with all of Grosse's work, *Atoms Inside Balloons* is in line with Greenberg's assessment that "Modernist art belongs to the same specific cultural tendency as modern science." And within a history of modernist painting characterized as an evolution towards its own self truth Grosse is indeed a free radical.

### Related Events

OPENING RECEPTION  
**Sunday, April 29, 4:00 to 7:00 pm**  
featuring a talk with the artist  
**5:00 to 6:00 pm in Cobb Hall room 307**  
directly below the gallery

CONCERT  
**Thursday, May 3, 8:00 pm**  
**Ensemble JungeMusik and CUBE:**  
**The Brecht Concerts**

In honor of the 50th anniversary of Bertolt Brecht's death, four German and four American composers were commissioned to write new music based on Brecht's work. Having premiered last year to rave reviews in Germany (as performed by Ensemble JungeMusik) the American debut will be performed by CUBE Contemporary Chamber Ensemble. The bill features works by Lawrence Axelrod, John Eaton, Johannes Hildebrandt, Ellen Hünigen, Janice Mitchell, Anna Rubin, Sebastian Stier and Helmut Zapf. The concert will take place in Fulton Recital Hall, located on the 3rd floor of Goodspeed Hall, 1010 E. 59th St. (two building south of Cobb Hall on the main quadrangle). FREE

CONCERT  
**Saturday, May 5, 8:00 pm**  
**The JACK String Quartet**

John Pickford Richards, viola  
Ari Streisfeld, violin  
Christopher Otto, violin  
Kevin McFarland, cello

With ringing endorsements from the likes of Helmut Lachenmann and Matthias Pintscher, The JACK Quartet has emerged as one of the country's premier string ensembles. Performing works by Kirsten Broberg, Helmut Lachenmann, and Iannis Xenakis. This event will take place in the gallery and is FREE.

CONCERT  
**Saturday, May 12, 8 pm**  
**Orpheus in China**

Organized by Gene Coleman this concert represents the combination of two programmatic strands that Coleman has been working on intensely for the past several years. One category, "Eurethos," has identified the ongoing influence of European aesthetics on American culture. And the second, "Transonic," has featured cross-cultural programs involving East Asian traditions. The result is a bill going under the title Orpheus in China with Seth Josel (guitar), Hong Wang (Erhu), Carmel Raz (violin) and regulars from Ensemble Noamnesia playing music by Richard Barrett, Peter Ablinger, Chao-Ming Tung and others. This event is FREE and will take place in the gallery.

PANEL DISCUSSION  
**Saturday, May 19, 2:00 pm**  
**Front Forty Press:**  
**Doug Fogelson**  
**Dan De Los Monteros**  
**David Castillo**  
on *Graffitecture: Chicago Graffiti Artists Attack Photographic Spaces*

Describing their process as one of "blind collaboration," Front Forty Press recently invited a host of Chicago graffiti artists to work on top of photographs of architectural interiors and exteriors. The result is a very handsome, straightforward publication entitled *Graffitecture: Chicago Graffiti Artists Attack Photographic Spaces*. Featuring a range of styles and approaches, *Graffitecture* is at once a thoughtful, expressive and aggressive project that gives pause to the relationship between graffiti and architecture as it is mediated through photography. Please join us for a discussion with Front Forty as they discuss the development of this project. This event is FREE and will take place in Cobb Hall Room 402, down the hall from the gallery.

LECTURE  
**Sunday, May 27, 2:00 pm**  
**Sarah K. Rich**  
*Jules Olitski: Trouble in Paradise*

This overdue reassessment of Olitski is sure to garner some new converts. Sarah K. Rich is Assistant Professor of Art History at Pennsylvania State University. She received her doctorate from Yale University and was awarded a J. Paul Getty Postdoctoral Fellowship to assist completion of her forthcoming book, *Zip! Barnett Newman in the Sixties*. This lecture will take place in Cobb Hall room 402, down the hall from the gallery. FREE

LECTURE  
**Sunday, June 3, 2:00 pm**  
**Lane Relyea**  
*The Work of Katharina Grosse*

*Allover and At Once* is Relyea's staunch polemic that still has painters (and curators) in this town on guard. Relyea is currently an Assistant Professor in Northwestern University's Department of Art Theory and Practice. The list of artists on whom he has written for monographs and magazines constitutes a seminal account of the trends and currents defining the field of contemporary art. Relyea will address Grosse's practice as painting in the expanded field. This lecture will take place in Cobb Hall room 402, down the hall from the gallery. FREE

LECTURE  
**Sunday, June 10, 2:00 pm**  
**William Braham**  
**Associate Professor of Architecture**  
**The University of Pennsylvania**  
*Modern Color/Modern Architecture*

What is the historical grounding for a discussion of how Katharina Grosse's work relates to architecture? That is the question inspiring this lecture. While Braham will not discuss Grosse's work directly he will give a backdrop for considering the implications of her work as it relates to modern architecture. In addition to being an Associate Professor of Architecture at The University of Pennsylvania, Braham was elevated to the College of Fellows of the American Institute of Architects in June 2006; he is a member of the International Association of Lighting Designers, and principal of Studio Luxe, a design and consulting practice. His book, *Modern Color/Modern Architecture: A Genealogy of Color in Modern Architecture* was published in the Spring of 2002. This event is FREE and will take place in Cobb Hall Room 402, down the hall from the gallery.

*Katharina Grosse: Atoms Inside Balloons* has been made possible with generous funding from The Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts and the Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen.

Additional support has been received from Alhawood Foundation; the CityArts Program of The Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs, a municipal agency; Christie's; The Danielson Foundation; the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency; The LLLWW Foundation; The MacArthur Fund for Arts and Culture at Prince; The Peter Norton Family Foundation; the Provost's Discretionary Fund at The University of Chicago; The Pritzker Foundation; The Siragusa Foundation; the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts and our donors.

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[ opposite side ]

**Katharina Grosse**  
***Untitled***  
**2007 (detail)**  
**acrylic on vinyl**  
**24 x 36 inches**