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Jan Holthoff

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Comprising a series of painterly explorations, Jan Holthoff's images chart a landscape of gestures, capturing the fluctuating light and rhythm of their urban surroundings. Stepping out from the artist's studio, the streets of Bushwick, Brooklyn stretch haphazardly into the distance. Under a wide sweep of azure sky, lofts and warehouses dissolve into a patchwork of brick facades and metal roll-gates traced by the looping arcs of spray-painted graffiti. Nature here becomes an experience of mobility and space, a sensory landscape that unravels in all directions amidst a shimmering haze of asphalt and concrete.

Born in Duisburg, Germany in 1977, Holthoff's paintings channel a playfulness that mitigates the sober formality of the artist's education at the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie, notably under the mentorship of the Swiss painter Helmut Federle. This formal rigor is discernible in the artist's paintings, which engage with the thematics of a craft still firmly indebted to the legacy of mid-century Art Informel and Abstract Expressionism. Holthoff cites Robert Motherwell, Pierre Soulages and Christopher Wool as a triumvirate of artistic influences; to these one might also add Cy Twombly, although the absence of text-crucial to the semantic operation of that artist's work - denotes an important distinction. By contrast, Holthoff's paintings are more purely abstract, departing from his earlier 'Broken Vistas' series (2006-2013) in which foregrounded representational elements emerge and recede from their expressively rendered settings.

The interweaving of abstract and representational themes initiated in 'Broken Vistas' gives way to a more subtle dissolution of structure and form in the artist's most recent 'Frozen Gestures' series. The paintings exhibited here explore a vocabulary of formal techniques, notably in the layering of surface effects to achieve textural variety. In works such as No.27, blockings of horizontal brushstrokes hover over a yellow-green ground, the deft play of density and lightness making for a rhythmically dynamic surface. While the handling of paint and the apparent looseness of its application suggest a degree of unchecked spontaneity, there is also a sense of deliberation in these works, as in the superimposition of compositional forms in No.28. Indeed it is this mediation between expressive impulse and exercised restraint that makes these paintings so visually satisfying; these are images at the cusp of harmonic resolution, the gestural traces of their execution frozen in time.

How then do we reconcile images of such formal abstraction with the notion of landscape, if by that term we mean the traditional practice of representing an external reality, whether truthful or idealized? Yet it is another landscape that is the real subject of these paintings: namely the field of the painted canvas and the attendant psychic space of the artist. Invoking pastoral themes and Arcadian visions, the beauty of nature has long served as a mirror to humanity in which the individual's sense of self is variously intensified and diminished in the face of an overpowering experience of the sublime. Emerging out of the discourse of eighteenth century philosophical thought, this notion of the sublime became associated within the Romantic tradition with the individual subject's acute experience of 'being in nature', a form of solitary communion with the world. In this way, nature and landscape were collapsed into the expression of an artist's own subjectivity, abstraction accordingly opening out into its own field of signification.

Holthoff's travels to distant locales, from Hawaii to India and Israel, certainly affirm this vision of the Romantic wanderer. Yet his inspiration appears less an explicit sourcing - the mental scrapbook for instance, or a contemporary version of the Grand Tour - than the awakening of a set of internalized gestures. While his paintings remain formally grounded, shying away from any particular form of symbolic association, they offer instead a vision of nature grounded in optical experience and sensation. In No.19, aqueous blues and greys conjure up an atmospheric meeting of air and water, rivulets of color dissolving into softer earth tones, whilst in No.24, bright neon and lime streak into a wash of deep blue. The elemental forms of No.28 are similarly suggestive of verdant vistas, albeit one in which our vision is partially occluded by the horizontal pull of paint across the canvas' surface.

Here the portrait-landscape dichotomy is significant, since in formal terms the canvas' orientation - figured through the vertical/horizontal axis - is crucial to each painting's legibility. Hung portrait-style, these vertical images defy conventional expectations of the landscape format, leading us to reflect upon the interrelationship of subject, medium and process. As paintings they register in both directions - as markers of the artist's material trace, just as they simultaneously summon something outside of themselves. Landscape consequently assumes a more conceptual definition, hinging on a notion of confrontation between artist and canvas in which the distinction between subject and object effectively dissolves.

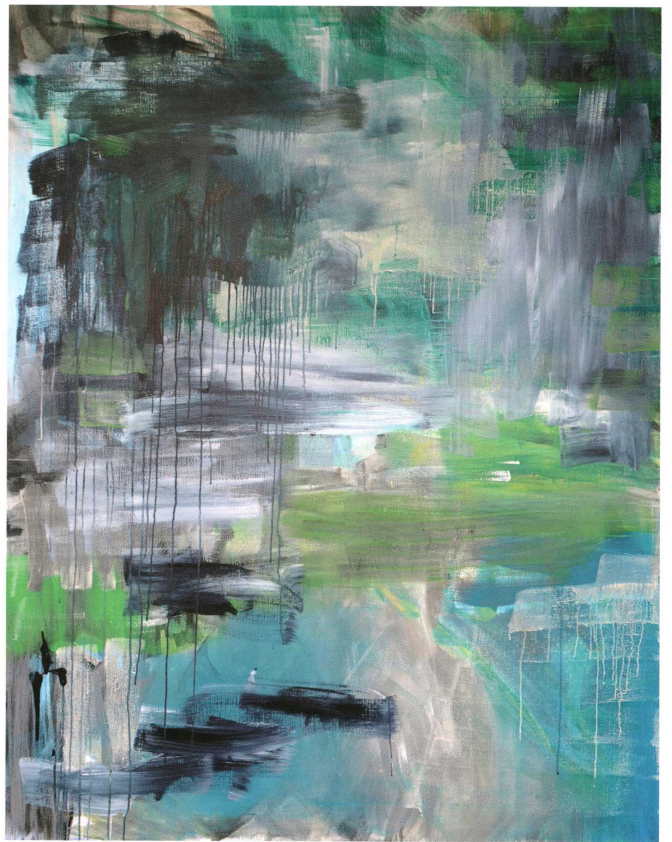
Ultimately, Holthoff's works affirm the view that painting still holds a capacity for expressive revelation, an attitude that runs clearly counter to the ironic guise often apparent within more conceptual modes of production. In this instance, the conceptual appears at the opposing end of a spectrum in which painting of this particular vein has occasionally been mischaracterized as outmoded, mannered or otherwise representative of a method of working at odds with the widespread turn towards the digital and other forms of new media. But is painting truly anathema to the logic of a conceptually orientated practice? Here again, Cy Twombly offers a point in case: the artist's classical motifs - poetic snippets, scrawled texts and Bacchanalian exuberances - impart a noted degree of self-reference, while Jasper Johns' targets and maps instigate a sophisticated semantic play that disassembles the grammar of painting through the staging of iconic symbols.

While the intrusion of language provides the most evident marker of a conceptual turn in painting, its absence is not to say the medium retreats into itself. The paintings present here are works of expressive depth and formal intelligence, revealed through the skillful handling of color and balance of compositional structure. Each image offers a moment of reflection in which the eye is never still but rather dances from one event to the next; their verticality confronts us and we in turn peer inside and beyond their many surfaces. In Holthoff's 'Frozen Gestures' the return to nature and the sublime resonates as a kind of 'field painting'; not in the sense of plein air or an Impressionist immersion into optical sensation, nor the 'all-over' expanse of canvas described by Clement Greenberg in his famous treatise *Modernist Painting* (1960) but somewhere between these two poles - as the meeting of mind, hand and eye.

Text: William Helfrecht



No. 2, 2013, 190 x 150 cm, Pigment, Acryl auf Leinwand



No. 5, 2013, 190 x 150 cm, Pigment, Acryl auf Leinwand



No. 9, 2013, 190 x 150 cm, Pigment, Acryl auf Leinwand



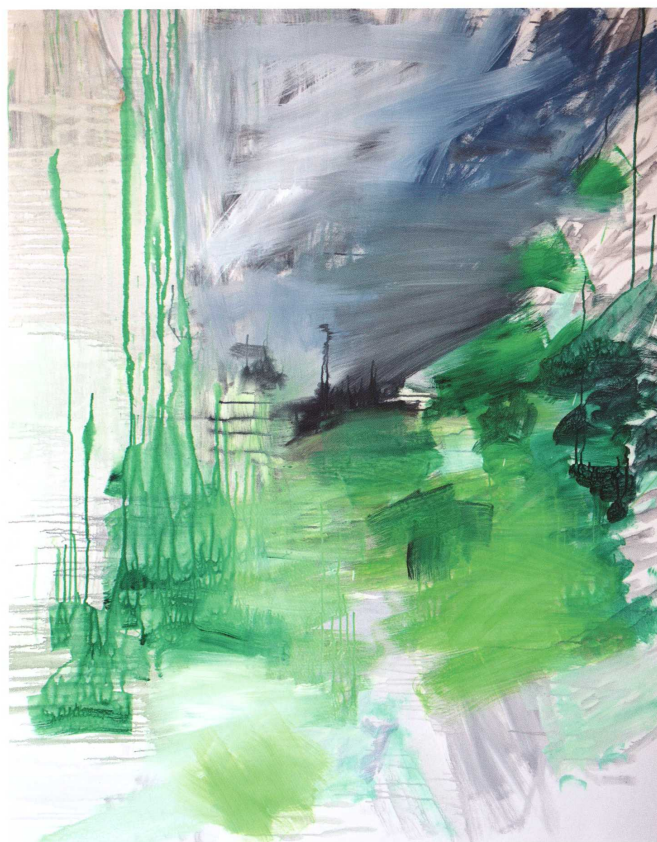
No. 10, 2013, 190 x 150 cm, Pigment, Acryl auf Leinwand



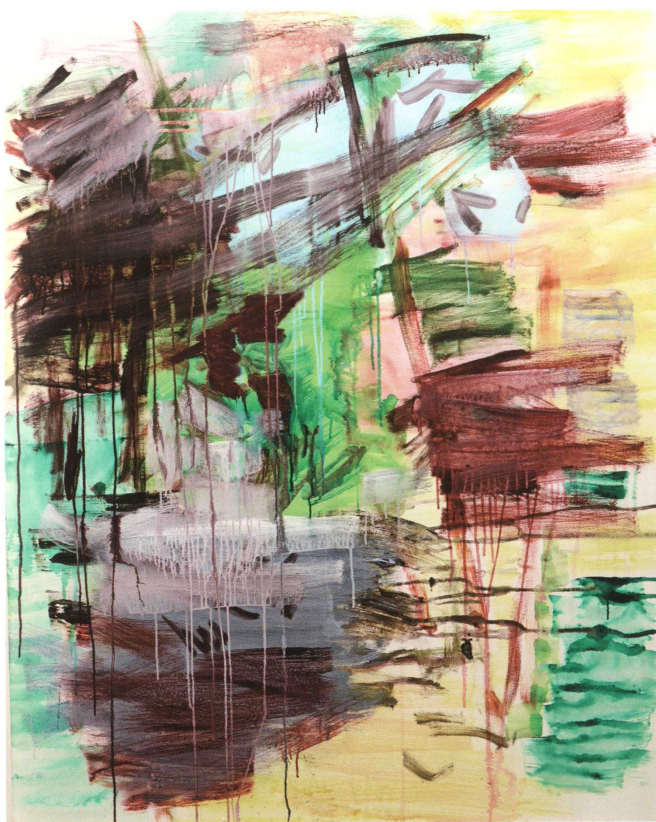
No. 13, 2013,
150 x 190 cm,
Pigment,
Acryl auf Leinwand



No. 19, 2013, 152 x 122 cm, Pigment , Acryl auf Leinwand



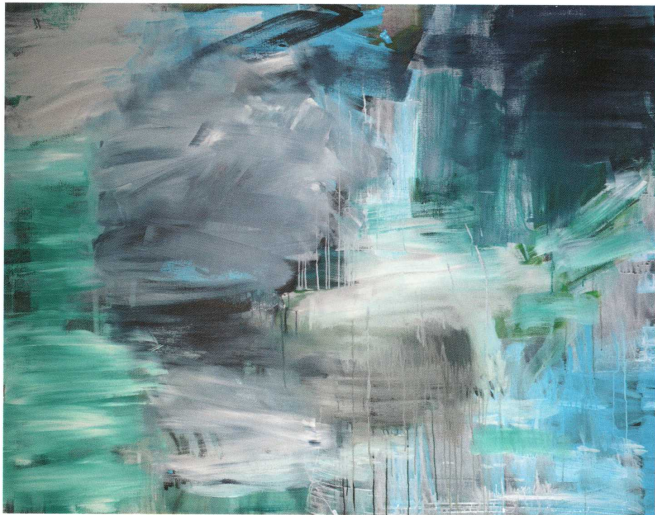
No. 24, 2013, 152 x 122 cm, Pigment, Acryl auf Leinwand



No. 27, 2013, 152 x 122 cm, Pigment, Acryl auf Leinwand



No. 28, 2013, 152 x 122 cm, Pigment, Acryl auf Leinwand



No. 3, 2013, 150 x 190 cm, Pigment , Acryl auf Leinwand

Jan Holthoff

- 1977 Born in Duisburg, Germany
- 2002-2008 Jan Holthoff studied Visual Arts at the Staatlichen Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, Germany under professors Gerhard Merz, Helmut Federle and Herbert Brandl. After completing his initial studies there, he became a Master Student under Herbert Brandl.
- 2013 Douglas Swan Art Award, Bonn, Germany
- 2012-2014 Studio in New York City

Jan Holthoff lives and works in Düsseldorf.