

Franz Gertsch
Alex Katz
Billy Childish

Opening
February 3, 2018
6 pm

Exhibition
03.02 – 31.03.2018

Gallery Hours
Tuesday – Saturday
3 - 7 pm

We are delighted to announce an exhibition by three prominent contemporary painters, who in their work have tackled and redefined the theme of the landscape.

Swiss artist **Franz Gertsch** (*Morigen 1930) is known for his monumental hyperrealist paintings, that he began in the Seventies, depicting scenes and people in the lifestyle of the time with great impact, later making impressive large scale portraits and landscapes. In the Eighties, in search for a more abstract and purist style, he started making hyperrealist monochrome woodcuts - something nobody had ever done before - and thus completely reinvented the medium. We will show the recent monumental woodcut *Winter*, 2016, that depicts trees and bushes covered with snow in the heart of the forest, as well as some smaller works representing grass and leaves.

Franz Gertsch participated in Documenta 5 in Kassel in 1972 and the Venice Biennale in 1978, 1999 and 2003. In 2002 the Franz Gertsch Museum was founded in Burgdorf near Bern to accommodate a permanent exhibition of the artist's paintings and monumental woodcuts. Retrospectives of his work have been held at Kunsthaus Zürich (2011), Kunstmuseum Bern (2005-06) and the Albertina in Vienna (2006). Recent solo exhibitions include Musée Jenisch in Vevey (2016 - 2017) and Museum Frieder Burda in Baden-Baden (2013).

American artist **Alex Katz** (*New York 1927) is one of the leading figurative painters of our time. Since the 1960s he has developed a highly innovative style unlike any of his contemporaries. His landscapes and figures excel in their simplicity of line, form and colour. His brushwork is light and confident, the compositions subtle and simple, the dimensions majestic. Katz creates powerful images. With his huge canvases, selective palette and two-dimensional surfaces he creates paintings that have both realistic and abstract elements and refuse to allow themselves to be pigeonholed.

We will show the recent large painting *Untitled (Beach Scene)*, 2012 depicting bathers in a vast expanse of turquoise water in Maine, as well as some smaller paintings on board. The work of Alex Katz is widely represented at museums in the USA, including MoMA, the Met and the Whitney in New York, as well as in European Museums, like Tate in London, the MMK in Frankfurt, the Albertina in Vienna and the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao.

Celebrated for his vibrantly expressive portraits and landscapes British artist **Billy Childish's** (*Chatham 1959) work is thematically expansive, but draws strongly on the autobiographical. His use of broad loose strokes and translucent colour-fields shows a profound connection with the rich history of painting, as an acknowledgement and observation of those painterly traditions. A highly prolific painter, musician, poet, and writer, Childish has been working extensively in these fields since the mid 1970s.

Often drawing on the autobiographical, the artist depicts real locations and people related to his past and present, as well as what he describes as 'dream' landscapes - often of California and the Pacific North West - places that the artist has direct connection with through his wife. An other-worldly sense of place emerges in this landscape, where the viewer can join the artist on his journey of discovery. Time stands still, yet the hilltop and lake serve as ciphers for a place of significance to be speculated about in both narrative and psychological terms. Recently Billy Childish has exhibited at the Goss-Michael Foundation in Dallas (2017), Aachener Kunstverein in Aachen (2014); at Dockyard Museum, in Chatham (2012) and at White Columns in New York (2011).

Franz Gertsch | Alex Katz | Billy Childish
Hans-Rudolf Reust



“Landscape” is not an event of nature and neither is it pure invention. In the continuum of the grown and built world, we fix our gaze on a portion of that world, or rather on the limited totality of views that we call “landscape,” for which reason the visual arts have a special relationship to the landscape. Three striking forms of landscape perception are presented in the unexpected, patchwork rooms of an old Engadin house. Instead of referring to the familiar, all-encompassing forms of nature as their point of departure, the three artists share the common strategy of generating scenarios through the side-by-side of single, sharply delineated elements.

We have often read about the fascinating, richly detailed scenes **Franz Gertsch** creates when viewed from a distance, such as an intimate snowbound forest or a small universe of leaves and blades of grass, while in close-up, his compositions break down into rhythmic clusters of dots, generating a whole new universe of micro worlds. How these two forms of perception relate is more difficult to understand: does the one view reverberate in the other even though they are separate and distinct, or are there perhaps even moments when the nonfigurative events seamlessly morph into figuration? The most exciting response as a viewer is to surrender to the simultaneity of two mutually exclusive conditions as if there were no hierarchy of perception. The stasis of the dots in the woodcut, united in the monochromatic sphere of a single color, could as easily be an unceasing process of scenes liquefying and coagulating in a single picture,

whose subject matter is not predetermined, but rather the vanishing point of permanent approach. “Grasses” and a “wintry forest scene” are keywords in seeking the solid shapes of a momentarily unpeopled world. And it is only by looking at this world that we understand ourselves, as we bow to the crucial role played by our subjective experience of time: the venerable, intimate technique of the woodcut, rendered in large format, calls for unusually prolonged concentration and contemplation both in the making of the work and in its appreciation.



Painting in combination with words and punk sounds inhabits the pluriverse of the art created by **Billy Childish** in his steadfast attempt to subvert expectations. “Stuckism,” the artist’s concise collective statement about art that belligerently champions modernism, is a distinguishing feature of his landscapes as well. Childish paints pictures that represent landscapes much like those familiar to us in the work of, say, Edward Munch, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner or Ferdinand Hodler. But the light of his moon and Sirius is slightly different, enigmatic as if it had been extinguished. Hard contours outline the elements of the compositions, lending rhythm to scenes of cloudy skies, trees, mountains, water and stone, and framing the entire portion of what is seen. The stylization is reinforced by the subtlety of the artist’s palette and his tendency to emphasize the plane through division into horizontal stripes. Sharply outlined spots on the trunk of a tree or ornamentally agitated furrows across snow-covered fields acquire a life of their own as abstract elements within the overall figuration, but then, all at

once, the clearly circumscribed natural scenario morphs into a loose association of painterly forms only to reassert itself again as an image of trees lining the water.

Current forays into landscape painting are no longer motivated by the wish to find romantically transfigured compensation for the loss of pristine nature. The virtual continuum within the framework of a painted “landscape” comprises and unites complex structures. At the same time, it reveals the dissonance between independent, free-floating elements all the more clearly, laying bare how fleeting and fragile their mutual contact may be.

Environmental concerns regarding the exchange between humankind and nature, between nature and nature have finally trickled down into the media-dominated consciousness of politics and now influence the way many people think. The debate on the environment leads Bruno Latour to conclude that nature *per se* and politics *per se* must be abandoned for the sake of a dynamic process that he describes as a “political ecology.” In his book *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (Catherine Porter, transl., Harvard University Press, 2004), he calls for mononaturalism to be replaced by a “multiplicity of nature”, a “pluriverse”: “Instead of going back and forth between nature and the human, between realism and constructivism, we can now go from the multiplicity that no collective yet collects, the pluriverse, to the collective...” (p. 40). In representing the associations between human and nonhuman (p. 41), the new “collective” pays particular attention to constantly shifting forms of speech.

Thus, painting and the graphic arts have always visibly attended to the forms of their own signs. The relationship to the “nonhuman” is a fundamental factor in the “landscapes” of art, just as every painted or carved mark relates to the next one. Artists have always probed forms that will permit the human and the nonhuman to find a place of their own, to congregate on a plane, to inhabit the same space without forfeiting their own mode of being. A praxis of that kind is not mimetic; it does not lay claim to representation or, at the least, to an adequate rendition of “nature.” It does not aim to create a “second nature” that stands for harmonic correspondence with natural orders in the field of art. Nor does it take a nostalgic, compensatory, or ideologically critical view of a “second nature” that is reified and at a remove through alienation. Instead, that praxis seeks to surmount all notions of objectified “nature” and to produce a dynamic “pluriversum” beyond the dichotomies of nature and culture or subject and object. Nowhere is this perspective exploited with such mastery as in the paintings of **Alex Katz**.

Maine, Manhattan: Katz’s capacious formats feature arrangements of people and things, façades subdivided by the lights of a city at nighttime, a brushstroke that accentuates trees and woods in motion, and scenes at and in the sea. The canvas is a silent stage, his screen. *Beach Scene* is a radical composition that unites a light blue expanse of calm water with a flowing, filigree line of bathers with linear sketches of white boats in a horizontal row just above or beyond them. The light-flooded expanse of water is framed to the right by the sharply outlined profile of Ada’s face in close-up. She is wearing a white sun hat on which we see the play of stylized shadows. The astonishing immediacy of the composition suggests a photographic impression or even a film still that shows the beginning of a moment remembered or a brief narrative, as if the scene had just been going through the woman’s mind. This clearly geometrical, yet playfully detailed beach scene shows a world in which what we see in close-up maintains an aloof detachment while the more distant figures attract our lively attention. The all-embracing blue defines the sphere of a painting, temporarily populated by a diversity of things.



Back in 1966, the writer Frank O'Hara already pointed out that an inimitable scheme characterizes Alex Katz's landscapes, in which the extremely personal coincides with the general without resorting to either formalism or expressionism. Both artist and viewer contribute to the composition of these paintings when they are viewed as a pluriversum. In the dynamic pull between cool detachment and intimacy, the act of visual appreciation settles intently but unobtrusively on one element after the other.

While Alex Katz's beach scene confronts us with vast but still comprehensible expanses, we are drawn into Franz Gertsch's meticulously detailed grass and leaves in extreme close-up until the photographic impression disintegrates into a fascinating, intricate structure of notched dots and a digital grid of bits of light and delicate colors. The picture is physically at home on the slightly sculptural plane of the large sheet of paper and yet it seems to be afloat, much like a virtual, projected image in the middle ground between perception and imagination, reminding us that **"landscape" is not an event of nature.**

Translation: Catherine Schelbert