

## **Art as A Playing Field**

A conversation in the artist's studio near Hamburg about the power of painting, working processes, inspirations and the significance of Patti Smith.

### **Let's start at the beginning: you studied illustration in Hamburg. How did you get into painting?**

I have always painted. It was my expression as a child. As a teenager, I sat on a folding chair in a cabbage field behind our housing estate and tried very seriously to draw landscapes. I started studying Cultural and German studies, and in the meantime I worked as an assistant on several film and theatre productions in Göttingen, Bremen and Hamburg, until I realized that I wanted to design for myself all the time.

### **That was the moment when you moved to Hamburg.**

Yes, after my basic studies in Bremen, I started studying Illustration in Hamburg. During that time, the applied work never gave me the kick I felt from painting. Painting became more and more important to me. After graduating, I continued to work with a painting group led by a previous lecturer for another four years. It was very

important for me to keep going, because by then I was a mother of two small children.

### **Where were your first exhibitions?**

In 2008 I had my first solo exhibition at SKAM on the Reeperbahn in Hamburg. It was an important step for me into the independent art scene. This was followed by group exhibitions in Hamburg, Berlin and a nomination at the Scope Art Show Miami Beach.

### **What fascinated you about the world of painting?**

The feeling of freedom. To really be able to determine everything myself, even to destroy it. And to see that I am able to create something, and that in the process of painting something emerges that I had never imagined before. So several things happen at the same time and the tension of how far I can push things never ends. At a certain point, paintings develop a life of their own and I am constantly challenged to make decisions.

### **How do you develop your pictures?**

In principle, I believe every artist always has their own inner theme. This “primal mood” probably always resonates, whether you want it to or not. In the beginning, I often focus on either landscape or figure. Color combinations I’ve just seen or books I’ve read always flow into it. Figures are often the focus for me and I really work my way through them. A lot is destroyed at the beginning, many things seem banal to me at first.

### **What happens next?**

Later, some things are brought back or left standing and then added to the rest. It’s often a balancing of your own mood—sometimes it changes radically and that results in sharp shifts.

### **What is an important quality in this process?**

I have to be able to “throw things out of kilter” so that moods find a place that perhaps weren’t there before or weren’t tolerated by me.

### **Your visual language is made up of comic, graphic and painterly elements. Canvases can be populated by gestures, magical beings and spiritual places. Your pictorial spaces are reminiscent of windows to another world, a world of dreams, of the subconscious. Are you involved in psychoanalysis and dream interpretation?**

Not directly. I like ambivalence in art, when it’s not immediately clear what it’s about and I’m given space to think for myself. I like being able to look at a painting for a long time, where confusion is allowed to reign. Some works are overflowing, where new details are constantly emerg-

ing, where the eye can wander, like on a mural or a wall where words, signs and shapes have been left behind. Not everything is formulated. There are also paintings which are quieter. I want to open up a space that is not immediately ‘recognized’. Nothing is what it seems at first glance, there are always several truths. The picture behind the picture, these ambivalences and the simultaneity of things interest me in life, and that’s one of the things I try to express. In painting I want to be free, I like to throw rules overboard.

### **And in dreams?**

In dreams, the most absurd things happen at the same time. I dream a lot and often remember them. I think this world always resonates.

### **How do the comic-like elements come into play?**

Comical figures have the appeal for me that in their reduced, concentrated form they have an ease in depicting difficult emotions.

### **Do you see yourself in the painterly tradition of surrealism and art brut?**

Not really. Surrealism, of course, was groundbreaking at the time, and I’m happy about the wildness and experimentation that came out of it. Everything was influenced by everything and a lot of things followed. I find the term Art Brut rather difficult, it seems a little helpless to me, like someone who wants to categorize things at all costs and devalues them in the process.

### **What role does the format of the canvas play?**

Perhaps it’s because I need a certain amount of space when painting due to my size. My arm is long and I sometimes use my whole body. The larger formats simply give me more resistance to work with. And of course more space, more freedom for my ideas.

### **What criteria do you use to select your colors?**

It evolves, I don’t have a specific concept. I’m always “on the air,” so to speak; if I notice a color combination that I see in other works or in advertisements I like, I remember it. It’s important to look closely, to analyze how this or that effect came about, what are the colors actually doing there?

### **Where else do you observe this play of colors?**

I notice this especially in nature, the most subtle and craziest gradations of color. I find that very inspiring. When the colors develop a creature-like quality in the painting, when they become independent, it becomes exciting for me.

**Painting is often also a process of deceleration, tempo and rhythm. How quickly or slowly do your works develop?**

Very different: there are stages of development where I clearly feel I have to keep at it, where the pace and intensity tend to increase. At other times, it tends to be slower and very fragmented which depends on my state of mind. In the meantime, I can feel more when I'd better leave it alone because I don't have the concentration and I want too much in too short a time. Painting also requires a mental attitude. It doesn't come immediately and needs to be put in the right mood.

**Do you follow certain strategies when painting?**

It's a consistent process. At the beginning there is arriving, settling in, often sitting, reading and/or listening to music in front of the canvas for a long time—space has to be created. At some point it's time for the first step. If the painting is already further along in its development, then I literally carry it around with me the whole time. I then move details around in my head, the work is always present. When I lie down, I sometimes feel like I'm in a concentrated waking state with my eyes closed. There isn't always a perfect solution, but I can often sense what I'm still missing or where I still want to go.

**How much destruction is involved?**

I experience a lot of destruction. Anger is sometimes a helpful emotion when painting. Having the freedom to destroy and to be angry is a good driving force at work. Sometimes I take it to extremes; I build up pressure on myself and this results in more radical decisions than I would have previously thought. If things go very smoothly, I tend to be suspicious of the result. Breaks are important to me. It shouldn't be too smooth, too perfect—that bores me. There must be some openness in the picture—that gives balance.

**How open and curious do you have to be in the process of working?**

I always have to be willing to let things go, no matter how beautifully painted they are—sometimes it just doesn't serve the purpose. Painting requires flexibility.

**When do you feel a sense of happiness?**

When the mind stops thinking so much and the painting process itself dictates the next steps—when it flows. And when I realize: "Now there is a balance, nothing more can be added".

**Gerhard Richter, who recently turned 90, always emphasized in his abstract works that the paintings**

**“do what they want”. Do your works also have a life of their own?**

Yes, absolutely. The life of their own develops over time. It is beyond our control as artists and things emerge that are or were not planned that way. Painting with this risk is what interests me.

**Are paintings only relevant to you when they convey a kind of “residual mystery” something unknown that you can't necessarily resolve in your mind?**

Absolutely. For me, it creates a space that gives the viewer freedom—at least I hope so. I also feel very drawn to literature and film when I am given something in the language and image that remains suggestive, that leaves room for my imagination. For me, a good picture must be able to withstand such open “spaces”—these are often the most interesting parts.

**Do you see image-making as a way of approaching the mysteriousness of our time without ultimately deciphering it?**

Yes, perhaps. But for me, there is no such thing as “decoding”. Everyone has their own way of going through the world, seeing, categorizing, drawing conclusions—and that's exactly where art can be a playing field for me, an offer in which it provides freedom, allows, endures and hopefully inspires new ways of looking at things.

**What heroes do you have in your life? Which artists or works inspire you?**

There are many. Actually, whenever I feel that someone has risked something, that there is such an unconditionality that it can't be helped. That fascinates me. An important artist is Patti Smith. I didn't really get to know her until I was in my mid-30s. I really like her attitude, her authenticity in art and in life, and the way she presents herself as a woman. Her themes, lyrics and music reflect an atmosphere which is very familiar to me, an urgency and seriousness in her work that I can relate to.

*Julia Rosenbaum*