

Art Review:

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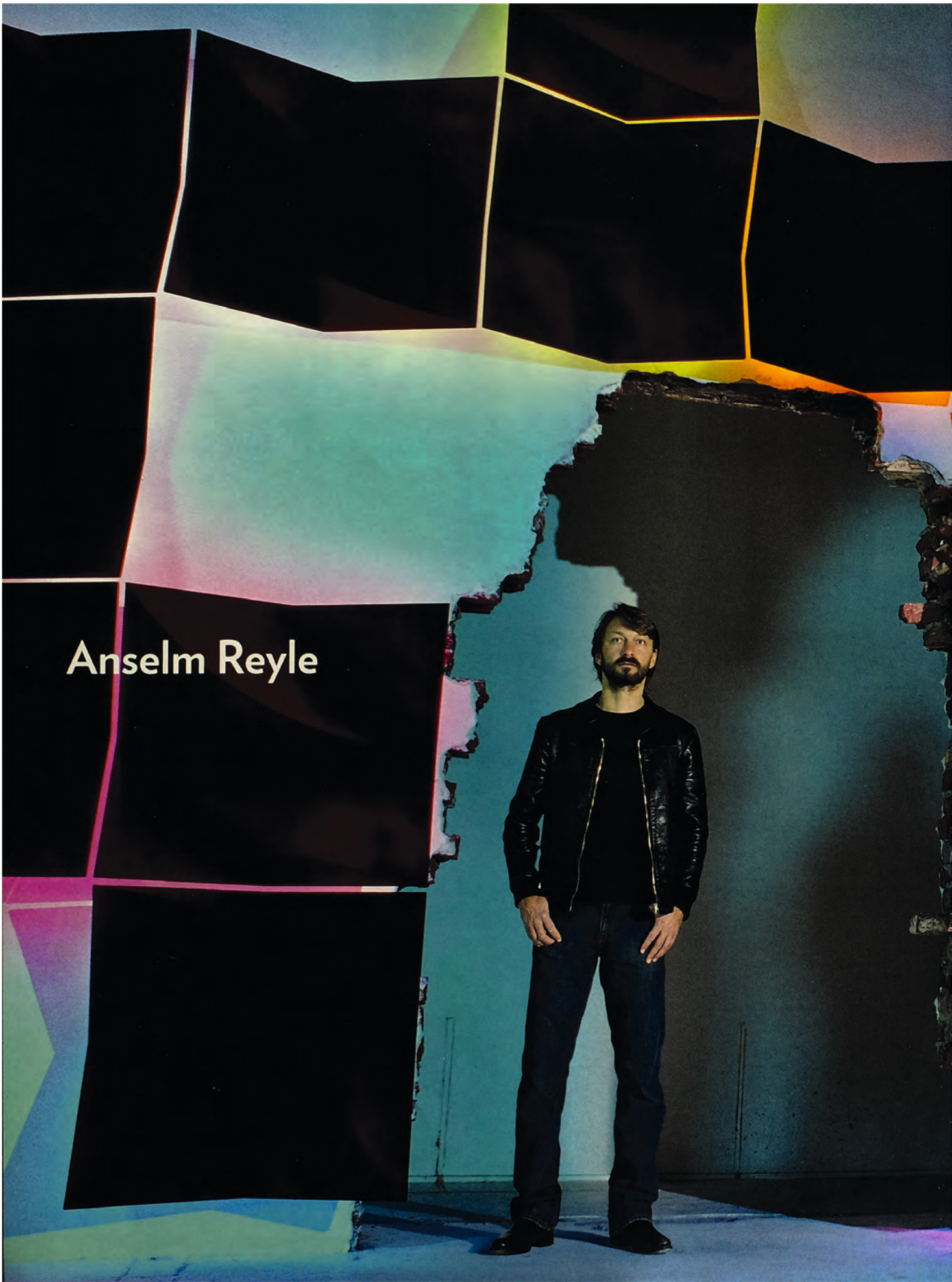
ANSELM REYLE

reveals how he plans to make abstract art popular



Plus: Apocalypse - the art theme for our times?

Anselm Reyle





FEATURE:

The New King of Kitsch?

On the occasion of a big solo show in Brussels, the German artist discusses his mission to make abstract art popular again

interview CHRISTOPHER MOONEY
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FEATURE: ANSELM REYLE

WHILE HIS CONTEMPORARIES IN LEIPZIG are using paint to explore the various forms of figuration that characterise their 'school', over in Berlin, Anselm Reyle has been doing the opposite: revisiting the pioneering abstract work of people like Otto Freundlich, Barnett Newman, Ellsworth Kelly and Kenneth Noland, and giving it a disco treatment of neon, tin foil and glitter. The collectors love it, expressing their adulation in a way that only they can – by creating the kind of demand that has allowed the artist to keep adding zeros to his prices over the past couple of years. The thirty-eight-year-old German is also known for similar reworkings of African carvings, hay wains and lighting, but look him up on Wikipedia and you'll find it's only the money (along with his date and place of birth) that counts. At the opening of Almine Rech's new gallery in Brussels, *ArtReview* caught up with the artist in order to find out what he's really all about.

Anselm Reyle: The paint-blot marking you see here [see *Untitled*, 2008, right] has become a kind of signature. It was a mistake the first time, but I noticed that it loosened up the strictness of the stripes, and it became part of the composition. So now I use it on all of my stripe paintings.

ArtReview: The wagon wheel is also one of your signature pieces.



Anselm Reyle: My professor at the academy said that it was the only thing missing in my work, because he found it so kitsch. This gave me the idea to really try that in my work, to combine it with my painting. Traditional artists would rather avoid using decorative items, but that's exactly what I wanted to do. To risk the danger of being decorative. The wagon wheel has this decorative aspect. It is a similar idea to the steel box with colour-changing LED lights inside, which is related to the Berlin punk scene of the 1980s – or rather, to what people now associate with that scene. When I look at the Tacheles [an art collective in a former department store in Berlin], for example, it has retained the style but is now more for tourists and has become a kind of kitsch. It is this kind of cliché that I'm interested in.

AR: In renovating.

Anselm Reyle: Yes.

AR: Tell me about *White Earth* [2008].

Anselm Reyle: I sometimes like the names that manufacturers give paint colours, like Black Earth or Mystic Silver. So I called the dark series *Black Earth* [2007] and the bright series *White Earth*. The impasto I use, you buy it in art supply stores. I love the idea that you can buy creativity so easily, by the bucket. The impasto strokes are covered with a coat of car finish, like you see on Audi or Mercedes.

White alone would have been too flat, but when I put the car finish on, the colour creates more space.

AR: Does this painting sample a specific painter?

Anselm Reyle: Not really, but there are certain currents in modern art that I refer to. In this case, Art Informel or Abstract Expressionism. Many parts of art history interest me. I try to see if I can really add something to it.

AR: Are those your strokes?

Anselm Reyle: That is not important to me. Sometimes I do the work by myself, but mostly I work with assistants and then react to what I see. What's important to me is how it looks at the end. Just like the stripes, gestural painting is part of my vocabulary. The gesture does not have to be made emotionally for the painting to evoke emotions.

AR: And the sculptures?

Anselm Reyle: They're from little African figurines that my mother has at home. I scan them and change the shape until they look like perfect modern sculptures, a bit like the ones you see when they show modern art in a Donald Duck comic. So, again, a cliché, like a wagonwheel. I don't think that kitsch or clichés are necessarily bad. They can be good because they are always something that people have agreed upon. These are cast in bronze and altered with a new type of 'hologram effect' for car finishers. When you want to pimp your car, you use this kind of paint. I like to combine this with a high-art thing. And the bronze gives it a classical aspect, which I like. The figure would look exactly the same if it had been made of plastic, but you have another relation to it when you know it is bronze. The original figurines were made of soapstone. I later learned that they are not part of any African tradition, but were influenced by Western artists, like Henry Moore. Before, European artists – Picasso and others – were influenced by African artists, and this is the other way around.

AR: These quotations and citations, then, aren't ironic or cynical?

Anselm Reyle: They say that of Jeff Koons, whose work I admire. I don't think he's cynical. His work is more a mirror of our society. My work isn't cynical, either. I just take things that fascinate me, especially when I know that they are deemed tasteless. I'm interested in riding the border of tastelessness. That's where I get my energy. I don't necessarily feel that there is something like good and bad taste. I was raised with so-called good taste. My parents gave me things to play with made out of wood. But

I swapped them to get Matchbox cars. My mother is also an artist. She works more in this 1950s, 60s abstract style. Not at all ironic. Compared to her, I have a bit more distance, perhaps. Some call it irony, but I would call it distance.

AR: I didn't know that about your mother.

Anselm Reyle: She's not well known, except in her region. We had a show together a couple of years ago – it was interesting to see her earth tones juxtaposed with the artificial colours and surfaces of my works. When I was young, my parents took me to museums. This is why I had an early fascination for artists like Victor Vasarely. Nowadays >

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he doesn't have such a good reputation, but I like his idea of doing abstract art for everyone, because abstract art is often hermetic and locks people out.

AR: Did you go through a period of representational work?

Anselm Reyle: I did a lot of that in art school. Every three months I did something completely different. Not as a concept, but because I was unhappy with what I had done before. Later I saw that it was good that I had tried all these different things, because I gained a lot of experience in very different fields. I made oil paintings, which took me about three months each, and I suffered. I wanted to find a way to work that wouldn't make me suffer. I don't think making art should be an agonising chore.

AR: Can we talk about your use of tin foil, which has become, again, a signature for you?

Anselm Reyle: I saw this kind of foil displayed in a store as decoration. I had the idea to connect it with painting. It became a very pure and simple form of painting. When I make them I create quite a lot at once to select from. Those that look too complicated, I throw away. They have to look easy.

AR: How has your studio practice evolved?

Anselm Reyle: I started working with an assistant five years ago. I found it difficult to motivate myself while working alone. And I'm not really that good with crafts, and I've never

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turned down an interesting option for an exhibition. So now there are about 20 employees and about 30 project-related freelancers.

AR: Wow.

Anselm Reyle: Twice as many as last year. We have four departments: painting, crafts, communication and research into different techniques and finishes. The department heads choose the people to hire, not me.

AR: Relinquishing control and involving more people, is that part of your critique of painting?

Anselm Reyle: It's questioning the necessity of authorship. Even gesture painting becomes a system, just like the stripes. The only question becomes, is it a good painting or not, much more than the inner thing of me. My inner side is not that interesting; it's more interesting what's going on out there.

AR: So it's not a form of self-expression any more?

Anselm Reyle: No, not necessarily. I like to show what I discover, and that is how I develop my language.

AR: How many pieces get rejected?

Anselm Reyle: About half. Fewer of the stripes, because you can change them. Of the gestures, 70 percent are rejected.

AR: Your prices have gone way up over the last couple of years. Does this put added pressure on you?

Anselm Reyle: I never would have thought or dreamt of asking for such high prices, but it has given me the opportunity to work in larger dimensions, and with certain materials. It has also given me the chance to build up the studio. Most of the money goes back into the development of the artwork. For me, it's a very interesting experience to have a studio of that size, and all the possibilities within it. Of course, the market can change, and if it does I will have to react. The people in my studio are aware that things can change, that it won't necessarily always stay this way. But I get the sense that they like working there, and having a good atmosphere is the most important thing to me.

AR: And what does your mother think?

Anselm Reyle: She never expected this. I think that at the beginning she didn't exactly understand what was important for me in art, because of this distance I have, which is completely the opposite of what she does. But I think now she is much more into it.

AR: The adjectives historically associated with abstract and expressionist art – 'lyrical', 'poetic', 'transcendental', 'spiritual' and so on – you've distanced yourself from these. But are they still there?

Anselm Reyle: They have to be there. I only distance myself from the necessity of the personal gesture. When the work is not occupied by my person, it leaves more space for spirituality. ■



WORKS
(IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Untitled, 2008, mixed media on canvas, stainless steel frame, 256 x 205 x 8 cm

Untitled, 2008, four objects, 105 cm diameter, 28 cm depth, Photo: Vincent Evesatts

Untitled, 2008, mixed media on canvas, metal frame, lacquer, 256 x 205 x 8 cm, Photo: Vincent Evesatts

Untitled, 2008, mixed media on canvas, acrylic, box, 251 x 200 x 71 cm

White Earth, 2008, mixed media on canvas, metal frame, lacquer, 256 x 205 x 8 cm

Untitled, 2008, mixed media on canvas, metal frame, chrome lacquer, 322 x 222 x 10 cm

Untitled, 2008, mixed media on canvas, acrylic, glass, 100 x 200 x 28 cm

all images
Courtesy Galerie Abramo Rech, Brussels