

THE PARKETT SERIES WITH CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS / DIE PARKETT-REIHE MIT GEGENWARTSKÜNSTLERN

# PARKETT

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*MARKUS DÖBELI, UNTITLED, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 121 1/4 x 107" / OHNE TITEL, Acryl auf Leinwand, 308 x 272 cm.*

*(ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND GALERIE ISABELLA CZARNOWSKA, BERLIN)*



# Absolute Otherness:

## On Markus Döbeli's Paintings

*ORY DESSAU*

Forms are rare in Markus Döbeli's paintings, which are devoid of figures, shapes, lines, or any other characteristic of drawing. Instead, his paintings feature diffuse, contourless fields of color with open edges that intermingle and chromatic dispersions of light that seem to fade in and out from one transparent layer of paint to another. Döbeli's paintings cannot be described in terms of a correlative organization of elements, or an execution of preconceived ideas. Suggesting an unclear equation of chance and authorship, of accident and deliberate effect, the paintings are not wholly composed; they reveal a gesture that is more reactive than active, responding to the expansion of free-flowing paint by skillfully manipulating it to its own ends.

To write about Döbeli's paintings is to trace their refusal to be defined. Döbeli never titles his works other than to denote each as painting, withholding any potential comment on content. The works are fundamentally mute—isolated, non-semantic visions that are turned inward as much as outward. The

writer, then, must stay close to the colors, the year, the technique, and the size of each work. In an additional challenge, the paintings cannot be placed into periods: An overview of Döbeli's body of work would find no development of technique, no evolution of style over the years; it is as if Döbeli were born the artist he is today. Each one of his paintings is historically and existentially detached, rejecting the possibility of memory and acquired experience.<sup>15</sup>

In 2001, Döbeli created his first sewn painting. Perhaps the most conceptual—and, to some extent, the only repeatable—painting he had made up to that point, this work clarifies the core of his painterly practice. After covering a blank stretched canvas with a coat of thinned maroon acrylic, the artist removed the painted canvas from the stretcher and cut it into nine rectangles; he then sewed them back together in a grid configuration and remounted the canvas. The resulting work is framed by an unpainted area of canvas, where the sides were once fastened onto the stretcher. This frame within a frame returns to ideas of self-reflexivity in twentieth-century art, and turns the work's own material support into a figure; at the

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same time, the sewn grid configuration magnifies the interlaced network of threads that comprise the fabric of the canvas. Intervening in the actual material, Döbeli transforms the act of painting from something that takes place *on* the canvas into something that occurs *inside* the canvas.

With later sewn paintings, such as *UNTITLED* (2002) and *UNTITLED* (2003), Döbeli cut a white-painted canvas into non-uniform patches, then stitched them together in an organic configuration. The irregular lines of these paintings create the illusion that the white patches are superimposed onto the picture plane, intermittently hovering in front of the white canvas and withdrawing into it. Rather than thematizing the material of the support, these works thus thematize the material of the paint itself, which Döbeli applies to the canvas by means of injection, soakage, and layering. Moving away from the transcendent resonance of Lucio Fontana's *TAGLI* (Cuts) or the critical playfulness of Blinky Palermo's *STOFFBILDER* (Cloth Pictures), Döbeli does not destroy the picture but instead confirms its irreducible foundation as an interaction between fabric and paint.

This affirmative approach to the conditions of painting is key to Döbeli's painterly universe. His large-scale, watercolor-like paintings oscillate between mural and picture, as they come close to assimilating the expanse of wall upon which they hang, but then always diverge from it. The painting undergoes dematerialization, but then again reaffirms its objecthood and its contingency. Paralleling the verticality of the canvas and the wall, downward pours and drips of paint manifest the effect of gravity, whereas dispersions of radiant color articulate a weightlessness or incorporeality.

Döbeli's painterly abstraction is total. His paintings are neither an equivalent to landscape, nor to nature. On the exceptional occasion that his works invite depictive signification, they simultaneously confuse it, undermining language. Take, for example, a painting from 2007 that first appears to be a seascape; after a moment, we might note a distant allusion to Hans Holbein's *THE BODY OF THE DEAD CHRIST IN THE TOMB* (1521), or perhaps an homage to Jacques-Louis David's *THE DEATH OF MARAT* (1793). The blue brushstrokes and yellow stain that



initially reminded us of waves beneath a sunset suddenly seem to resemble the head and body of a corpse.

Some writers have described Döbeli's washes of color as "clouds" or "cloud banks," a description that conjures images of haze and fog, and a sense of visual disorientation.<sup>25</sup> In this reading, the paintings analogize transitions between the phases of matter, including processes of evaporation and condensation; they become signifiers of unsignifiability, unstable images of constant change. As a result, we might





MARKUS DÖBELI, UNTITLED, 2007, acrylic on canvas, 106 1/4 x 202 3/4" / OHNE TITEL, Acryl auf Leinwand, 270 x 515 cm.





MARKUS DÖBELI, UNTITLED, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 106 1/2 x 149 1/2" / OHNE TITEL, Acryl auf Leinwand, 270 x 380 cm.

be reminded of Northern Romantic painting and the concept of the sublime.<sup>3)</sup> Thinking of Döbeli's diffuse washes as clouds at once places his paintings outside the map of reason and within the confining context of art history, re-historicizing it.

Döbeli's paintings indeed bring us closer to boundlessness, but their sublimity does not mean imperceptibility. The paintings exist beyond oppositions such as perception vs. cognition, or impressions vs. concepts, from which the philosophical discourse of the sublime stems; they have no logical structure to undo. Preverbal sensations, activity marked by unlearning, experimentation that does not culminate in method and does not produce knowledge—the paintings promise all of this, while offering a pecu-

liar integration of immediacy and transcendentality. They open onto an alternate universe: an ahistorical, existential space of agitation and suspension that is both mutinous and controlled, indivisible and complex, evocative and self-contained.

1) Ulrich Loock, "De-Conceptualized Reality," in Ulrich Loock, ed., *Markus Döbeli: Paintings and Watercolors*, exh. cat. (Winterthur, Switzerland: Kunstmuseum Winterthur, 2010), 64–71.

2) Dieter Schwartz, "Looking into the Center of the Clouds: The Paintings of Markus Döbeli," in Loock, 10–20; Hans Rudolf Reust, "Clouds, Cloud Banks, Figuration: Markus Döbeli's Watercolors," in Loock, 96–101.

3) For thoughts on the cloud as sign throughout art history, and as an index of the painter's brushstroke, see Hubert Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/: Toward a History of Painting* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).