

Phyllis Tuchman, "German Artist Kerstin Brätsch Is Redefining What It Means to Be a Painter Today,"  
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## German Artist Kerstin Brätsch Is Redefining What It Means to Be a Painter Today



Kerstin Brätsch. ©KERSTIN BRÄTSCH/COURTESY GLADSTONE GALLERY

Kerstin Brätsch has unobtrusively been redefining what it means to be a contemporary painter. Executing art during a period that's been characterized as "post-abstract figuration" by some scholars, she works with offbeat colors and otherworldly images. Think vivid, visual memories and inventive, imaginary fossils rather than storytelling or portraiture.

Brätsch is looking backward—several centuries, to be exact—at a time when most painters are bent on gazing into the future. She has revitalized methods and practices that could be compared to dead languages. To achieve this, she has located "Old World" craftsmen living in Europe as

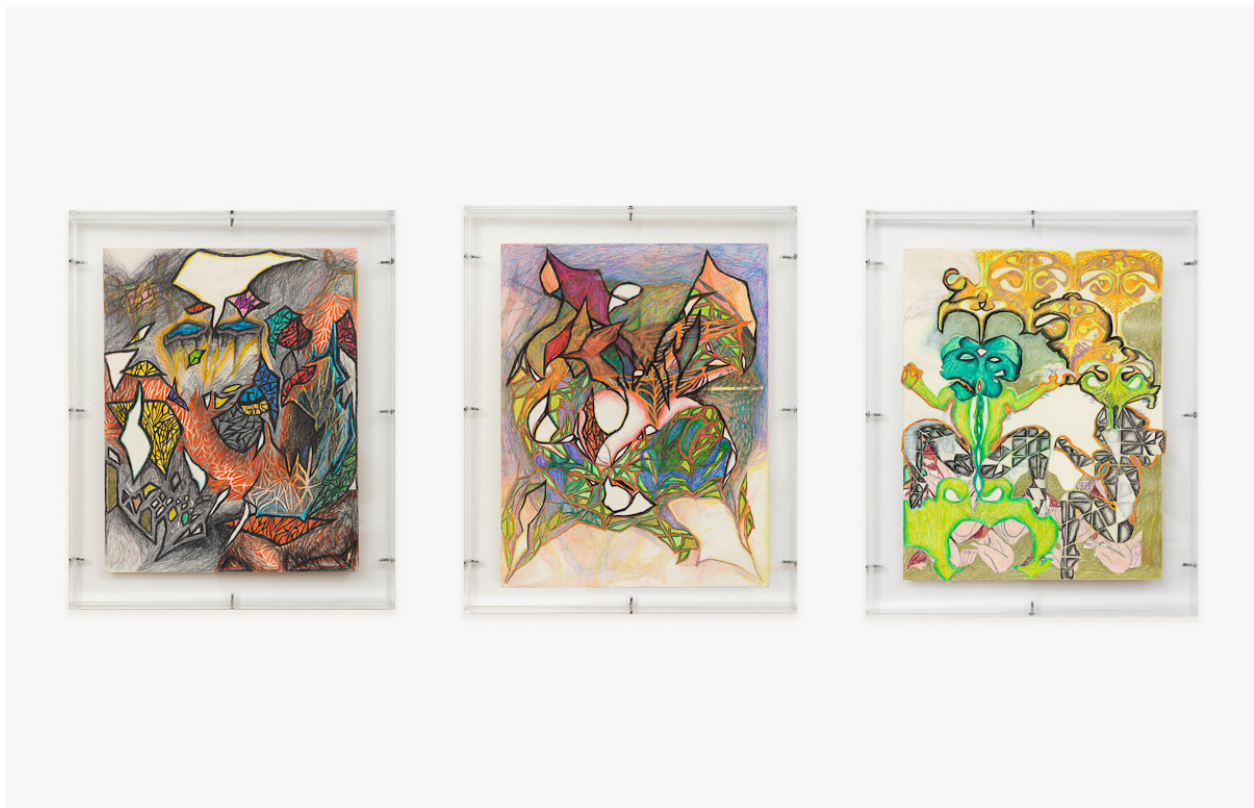
collaborators. As a group, Brätsch admires artisans like these for being “experimental,” as she put it in a recent interview. With their expert assistance, she has reanimated practically forgotten, moribund craft-like procedures.

Brätsch now works skillfully in stucco marmo, stained glass, and marbling. Stucco marmo, a technique that involves relying on plaster, glue, and water to solidify pigment, was what she used to make her haunting reliefs that animate the sixth-floor café at the Museum of Modern Art. The end result appears like painted marble. The paintings together constitute one work, titled *Fossil Psychics for Christa* (2019), its name a reference to her mother.

A transplanted German who has been based in New York since 2005, the artist recently told me, “Sometimes, to build an image, you need four hands, two belonging to an artisan and two to the artist.”

Brätsch has many admirers. Curators have included her in such prestigious group shows as the current Venice Biennale, MoMA’s controversial painting survey **“The Forever Now”** (2014), and the New Museum’s **“Younger Than Jesus”** (2009), the first of that institution’s triennials. Ever since being granted a Fulbright Fellowship to study art at Columbia University, she’s accumulated lots of other awards. Several are named for her well-known predecessors: Helen Frankenthaler, Edvard Munch, and August Macke.

With the sponsorship of the Peill Prize that she won just before the pandemic, Brätsch will be having a solo show at the Leopold Hoesch Museum in Düren, Germany, this September. Simultaneously, in the nearby city of Aachen, at the Ludwig Forum, an entire suite of 100 works on paper that the artist executed during lockdown also will go on display (several dozen were featured in her recent solo show at Gladstone Gallery in New York). Though these dense,



Kerstin Brätsch, PARA PSYCHICS\_Feeling your cells move, you open your eyes, the cells move; \_Next time: thicker, deeper; \_It is quite possible that the energy or phenomenon that glues together a repeatable experience of solidity and materiality on this earth is the pressure of billions of humans beings simultaneously, and in close proximity, believing in what they see and hear. (Frau, Erbin, Essig, Eisen, Eulenmutter), 2020, 2020, and 2021. ©Kerstin Brätsch

unusually colored works have recognizable imagery (birds, bodies, and vegetation), they are surprisingly abstract.

At art school in Berlin in 2001, an anything-goes attitude prevailed. In Brätsch's classes with Lothar Baumgarten, there was a mix of students, each separately pursuing painting, sculpture, photography, printmaking, and the like. She was a painter who took photographs and made booklets.

When Brätsch arrived in New York, she was surprised by the ubiquity of storefront fortune tellers. Finding these psychics—a fancier word that she prefers—to be a curious “contradiction,” she wondered, “How can I translate that into painting?” They became a leitmotif of her art.

In graduate school, Bratsch created her first psychic series as well as a psychic atlas. The large psychics are among her most non-representational paintings; the small ones introduce the heads

to which she has repeatedly returned. Almost two decades later, she used the title “Die Sein: Para Psychics” for the works on paper she recently showed at Gladstone that are travelling to the Ludwig Forum.

As Brätsch , she “is depicting something that’s invisible but exists.” In some instances, this might be energy. In other cases, spirits. How, for instance, do you represent heat or radiation? You end up with a painting that borders on abstraction.

In one body of work, Bratsch applied oil paint to mylar. Then, she tried marbling, which involves a chemical process. Because liquid pigments are in motion, no two prints are ever the same. According to Brätsch, “this invited unpredictable conditions into the making of art.”

As for the large, framed oil paintings on paper at the entrance to “The Forever Now” exhibition at MoMA, Brätsch leaned them against walls instead of hanging them. These paintings’ hazy red, blue, yellow, and green orbs do indeed radiate dynamic force fields.

Working with stained glass offered Brätsch yet another opportunity to engage with a process from the distant past. She did not want to merely paint on glass. Instead, she wanted “to sculpt a brushstroke.”

“The brushstroke,” Brätsch explained to me, “is the expression of the hand; what draws me to marbling and to working with glass is how one can transpose handwriting into matter.” Physical processes such as stained glass and stucco marmo allow her to accomplish this.

In the shaped reliefs on view in MoMA’s café, individual brushstrokes in quirky, artificial hues abound. When viewed as independent marks, they assert the abstract qualities of these works; when they are grouped together, they can look like gruesome mask-like faces or even ghostly fossils. Brätsch suggests these creatures “are being brought back to life.” She compares them to ancient runes.



Kerstin Brätsch's *Fossil Psychics for Christa* (2019) was commissioned for the café of the Museum of Modern Art.  
PHOTO IWAN BAAN/COURTESY MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

The series of “Para Psychics” that Brätsch recently exhibited at Gladstone Gallery are rather intimate. Executed during lockdown, the painter worked with what she had at hand: sheets of paper and colored pencils. Besides partnering with artisans, Brätsch has collaborated with colleagues in the past under the names DAS INSTITUTE as well as KAYA. During Covid, she was isolated and on her own.

At first, Brätsch thought about making tarot cards. Then, she considered creating devotional cards. When she finally installed the completed works in the gallery, she put them on shelves to imply that they could be shuffled. Gallerygoers, Brätsch told me, could conceivably also come and get a reading.

Brätsch spent a long time making each one. They’re dense, unusually colored collages with elements glued on both their fronts and backs. The artist considers them “cut-up paintings.” She introduced hallucinatory imagery (birds, body parts, faces, leaves) as well as abstract elements (circles, networks of lines). For the artist, these entailed “a journey into myself.”

Framed in transparent boxes, “Die Sein: Para Psychics I” float off the wall and hover in space. You might suspect, too, that they encase spirits. But then, that’s one of the mysteries of Brätsch’s art that viewers need to answer for themselves.