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Catherine Wagley

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Art

# Janaina Tschäpe's Journey from Painting to Performance and Back Again

Catherine Wagley

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Portrait of Janaina Tschäpe by Vicente de Paulo. Courtesy of Sean Kelly Gallery.

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Janaina Tschäpe prefers to paint in long, uninterrupted stretches, focusing on just one painting at a time. “I mostly try not to stop until I’m almost done,” she said, “until the painting can breathe again.” The New York-based artist made her Los Angeles debut last month at Sean Kelly Gallery’s West Coast outpost. On view through March 4th, the solo exhibition consists of seven large paintings, all completed in 2022 and made in conversation with one another—the momentum from one painting carries over to the next.



Janaina Tschäpe  
*Irrlicht (Will-o-the-wisp)*, 2022  
Sean Kelly Gallery



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The title of the show, “Restless Moraine,” conjures the specter of landscape that nearly always hangs over Tschäpe’s work, and also refers to the restive energy that courses through her paintings. “Whenever I work on a body of work, obviously one painting is never done. There is the other one coming,” she said. “For me, all these paintings are an accumulation almost of a language that you acquire over years, an understanding with the canvas.” The language in this body of work is defined by bold, expansive marks and gestures. For instance, in *Irrlicht (Will-o-the-wisp)*, thick, burnt red, vertical lines travel from left to right and back again, drawing the eye across a dense marsh-like terrain of blue and green hues.

These newest paintings represent a shift: For years, Tschäpe has worked with a larger range of media — watercolor, crayon, and colored pencil — that resulted in many smaller, drawing-like marks, even on her largest canvases. This time, she limited herself to oil paint and oil stick, though she does not consider it a constraint. “I see it rather as an opening, because you obviously can create more layers,” she said, acknowledging the freedom that comes with oil’s slow-to-dry lushness. “With paintings, every time you put yourself into a more challenging place, you’re opening up more doors to create new dialogues.”

Tschäpe was born in Munich in 1973 to a German father and a Brazilian mother who longed to return to Brazil. The artist’s name, Janaina, means “mother of fish” and reminded her mother of her homeland’s ocean shores. Tschäpe, who has painted since childhood, grew up primarily in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, but returned to Germany and attended art school in Hamburg in the 1990s. It was a fraught time for young female painters in a country where the giants who had established themselves in the previous decade — Georg Baselitz, Sigmar Polke, and Martin Kippenberger — still reigned.

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Janaina Tschäpe  
*Himmelhoch (In the sky)*, 2022  
Sean Kelly Gallery

“When you think of all the painters in Germany in the '90s, it's hard to find a female name,” recalled Tschäpe, who found herself getting stuck in the studio. “Painting at that time was just so loaded with emotions and history that I would get to that place [of stuckness] very fast, and it created an anxiety.”



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Immersing herself in the work of female performance artists like Marina Abramović, Rebecca Horn, Ana Mendieta, and Hannah Wilke gave her other models. For a while, she turned away from painting altogether. In 1997, she began her series “100 Little Deaths” — photographs of herself lying prone, face down, on park paths, fields, and rocky shores. Her figure occasionally looks like a dead body, but more often, like someone who had opted out for a moment and disappeared into herself.



Janaina Tschäpe  
*Purgatorio*, 2022  
Sean Kelly Gallery

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“For me, it was a way of creating a universe around me, in a dialogue with my surroundings,” Tschäpe explained. “It wasn’t about being a great photographer; it was about capturing actions.” She continued to work in this vein across the next decade, documenting actions in photography and video. She found it gave her some distance and, as she put it, “a different mindset to deal with art as a whole.”

As her performance productions got larger—growing to involve casts, elaborate costumes, on-location shoots, and hours in front of a computer with an editor—Tschäpe began to long for the immediate, emotional experience of painting. “I started missing a little bit of that intimacy, of being in the studio alone with your work,” she said. Painting and drawing began to infiltrate the rest of her artmaking practice.

When she exhibited her 2004 video *Blood, Sea*—one of multiple experiments with underwater photography—she installed watercolor paintings and drawings as well, because she saw her two-dimensional explorations as part of the same world. “The process of the performances is very similar to the process of painting,” she said, “because I would go into the landscape with whatever there was, and improvise.”



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Janaina Tschäpe  
*Chorale*, 2022  
Sean Kelly Gallery

In “Restless Moraine,” the influence of landscape is more subliminal than explicit. *Purgatorio*, among the largest paintings in the exhibition, was also one of the first Tschäpe completed. Strong shades of blue, green, and dark red dominate the background, and a gash of exposed, primed white canvas draws the eye to the lower right. The oil stick marks on top are vigorous, swirling, and almost storm-like. At first, Tschäpe thought the title—with its references to eternal limbo—might be too intense. “But then I looked at the painting and there is a lot of angst,” she observed. “I did let myself be more aggressive towards the canvas because the canvas was also aggressive towards me.”

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*Chorale*, another large canvas, came next, but painting it did not involve the same kind of struggle. Much of the painting remains in the range of brown-orange tones; it's "harmonic," as Tschäpe put it. Or it was until she went in with the strong, light blue lines that come over the top like lithe alien figures invading a somber ecosystem.



Janaina Tschäpe  
*Menetekel*, 2022  
Sean Kelly Gallery



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One of the last paintings Tschäpe completed for the exhibition, *Menetekel*, is also one of her favorites. It's smaller than the others, but has a commanding presence. The fluid composition appears to still be in flux—an effect Tschäpe achieved by erasing parts of the background, allowing it to be infected and altered by the foreground, and vice versa. Meanwhile, near the top of the composition, an arc of deep pink recalls the intense glow of a sunset.

“That painting still pops up in my mind sometimes, because there are things that I’m very interested in [about it] that I can’t quite pinpoint. And that’s the beauty of it in a way,” Tschäpe said. “I don’t want to know absolutely where I’m going because it’s what I create in the process that can always bring [me] further—the surprises.” ■

Catherine Wagley