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For Janaina Tschäpe, Painting Is a Relationship that Evolves With Time

The work in her new exhibition at New York's Sean Kelly gallery marks an exciting evolution in her artistic journey and is the result of profound personal exploration.

By [Elisa Carollo](#) • 09/11/24 5:24pm



Janaina Tschäpe has traversed mediums from photography and performance to installation and sculpture over three decades. © Janaina Tschäpe Courtesy: the artist and Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles

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While many artists hesitate to completely alter their style, Brooklyn-based Janaina Tschäpe embodies the spirit of relentless exploration and continuous evolution in her art. Her journey is one of growing self-awareness as she delves deeper into her identity, her body and her creative process. On the occasion of her upcoming show at Sean Kelly in New York, Observer visited with Tschäpe in advance of her paintings departing for the gallery, and our discussion revealed how her artistic odyssey has inspired her latest series of vibrant gestural abstractions. Titled “a sky filled with clouds and the smell of blood oranges,” the newly opened exhibition showcases the latest progression in Tschäpe’s painting technique. It demonstrates her complete control over the canvas, where she physically and psychologically channels sensations through the juxtaposition of lyrical traces, vigorous signs and bold movements in a fluid process of mark-making.

Born in Munich in 1973 to a German father and a Brazilian mother, Tschäpe was named after Janaina, the Brazilian sea goddess from the Candomblé religion—a nod to the oceanic landscapes of her mother’s homeland. These landscapes have subtly and ancestrally woven themselves into her pictorial language, evoking the vastness and wildness of inner landscapes.

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An installation view of “a sky filled with clouds and the smell of blood oranges” at Sean Kelly. Photography: Jason Wyche, Courtesy: Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles

Over her three-decade career, Tschäpe has explored various mediums, including photography, performance, installation and sculpture. Speaking in her studio, she reflected on her beginnings in the male-dominated, conceptual art-focused environment of her German academy. This setting influenced her early works and compelled her to carve out a unique voice as a woman artist. “It was tough as a female student because most of the artists were men—the big stars like Beuys or then Martin Kippenberger. Male artists are much more involved in their ego and an expression of the ego and male ego, which also goes into the work,” she explained.

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From the start, Tschäpe embraced a distinctly feminine approach, initially focusing on a discourse on the body, much like her contemporaries. This perspective first manifested in a series of densely material paintings that emphasized her physical engagement with the canvas. “I would get very emotional. My paintings were already very emotional and gestural. But then I would paint over,” she recalled.

Tschäpe later transitioned to creating large-scale murals, a domain where she noticed a significant absence of women. “I looked at the history of murals, and there were no women,” she says, highlighting her drive to assert her presence and vitality on the canvas viscerally and vigorously. “I would manage to do a brushstroke from down here to up there. That was my challenge, you know, to be able to convey in both a physical and spatial way a gesture and feeling as an expression of myself.”

At one point, Janaina Tschäpe’s growing dissatisfaction with her paintings coincided with a scholarship that allowed her to pursue a master’s program at the School of Visual Arts in New York. This opportunity led her to abandon painting in favor of ephemeral performances, which were then documented and preserved as photographs. “I didn’t have money for a studio, so I had just a room, and I started to work with a camera and performance,” she explained. “I wanted to create art in a more poetic way. So, progressively, I started moving away from the self and began using other people or objects. They were very raw and made in the middle of nature. I would dress up my friends in inflatable costumes and shoot.”

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Janaina Tschäpe's pictorial, abstract language evokes the vastness and wildness of inner landscapes. Photography: Jason Wyche, Courtesy: Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles

Creating a dialogue between the organic and conceptual, Tschäpe delved deeper into themes of nature, identity, the body and the human condition, which became central to her work. This artistic output aligned with the feminist aesthetics of the era. Upon her return to Germany, she immersed herself in the works of female artists a generation older than her, such as Marina Abramović, Isa Genzken, Hannah Wilke and Rebecca Horn.

Despite these shifts, the themes of nature and identity remained pillars of her research when Tschäpe returned to painting. With a renewed approach to the medium, she brought a different consciousness to the canvas and her body after these conceptual explorations, which she felt were overly technically mediated. "It was a process that needed other people. You didn't get the same feedback as painting a canvas from scratch to finish on your own, in your own time."

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The exhibition also showcases her delicate watercolors and pastel works, creating a dialogue between the different mediums. Photography: Jason Wyche, Courtesy: Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles

Watercolors were pivotal in Janaina Tschäpe's return to painting, offering her an intuitive approach to using colors, despite the medium's inherent challenges. "You've got to master the brushstroke," she explained. "You can't add layers and go over again. So, it's very gestural, but you also have to train a lot to do a nice watercolor, as it's very liquid."

Some watercolors feature in this show, but these pieces represent a further evolution and experimentation, as Tschäpe has been incorporating pastels into her process. "You get all the colors, the most beautiful pigments with pastels," the artist said, showing us a box of pastels. Initially reluctant to use this medium, she started to apply them and then brush the color away, playing with new

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ways to create depth and atmosphere on the surface. The result is a series of extremely poetic works characterized by nebulous and suspended atmospheres that will be displayed in a separate gallery room. “They’re very light,” she commented, showing us some pictures of them as they were already with the framer. “They have very sort of different traces, which on the paintings are much heavier.”

Reflecting again on her journey, Tschäpe noted that it was her newfound confidence in painting and the connection between mind and hands fostered through the use of watercolors that eventually led her back to the canvas. “I started going back into drawing, doing small watercolors, and then they started growing. Five years later, I was painting again. I think the challenge was that I always wanted to go back to painting with the maturity of not losing myself and being able to do the paintings as a more mature artist.”

As Tschäpe herself pointed out, there is a rich history and intense emotional and intellectual inquiry behind the powerful abstract canvases she paints now. “It’s a new space I’m entering with this show. It’s the result of a bigger combination of experiences of my dialogue with the paintings, as the marks are removed now and then reinforced in layering and mixing up, creating a harmony between the background and foreground.”

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As Joachim Pissarro states in his essay, “Tschäpe’s canvases serve as arenas wherein the visible intermingles with the visceral, inviting us to traverse conceptual depths through layers of paint and memory that subtly insinuate rather than explicitly reveal.”

Photography: Jason Wyche, Courtesy: Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles

Today, Janina Tschäpe’s confidence in the interplay between her body and the canvas allows for a free and fluid yet aesthetically precise transfer of sensations onto the canvas. This dynamic process involves a continuous interplay of accumulating and removing marks, ultimately achieving a final aesthetic harmony. “It’s all about the gestures, the size, and that freedom of physical expression that you have as you carve out even more space in a painting, expanding its surface with an accumulation of experiences.”

From her words, it’s clear that Tschäpe’s approach to abstraction is deeply physical, embodying movement as she navigates the space between intuition and reason, and between intention and the subconscious on the canvas. “It’s like a thinking hand,” she told us... “a brain that translates to your hand and gesture, allowing emotional

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expression to become fluid—as it’s your mind. I’m very interested in trying to find that image that sometimes is composed of the gesture, the quickness with which you paint. It’s not merely an illustration of an image, but a culmination of all these accumulative experiences.”

In Tschäpe’s paintings, marks and signs build up like verses in poetry, creating assonances, metaphors, hyperboles and allusions that suggest and evoke realities, experiences and sensations without fully defining them. Fittingly, all the titles of her works are inspired by poetry, underscoring the lyrical and elusive nature of her artistic expression.



This exhibition highlights the different types of mark-making and mediums Tschäpe has incorporated throughout her work, spanning bold and dynamic brushwork to fine, drawing-like strokes and expansive, gestural applications of oil paint and oil stick.

Photography: Jason Wyche, Courtesy: Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles

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Janaina Tschäpe has recently become fascinated with August Strindberg's work and is particularly drawn to his mystical ability to revive entire landscapes through paintings created entirely from the mind. "He was painting out of memory, and really, he did a whole series of clouds and imaginary landscapes. It was all about this imaginary landscape and challenging that emotional gesture and experience," she said.

Although her paintings are intentionally detached from any objective subjects, they still evoke an organic inner landscape, tapping into a primordial nature that seems ingrained in our ancestral memories. "I think it's a search for a landscape inside us all. We all carry those landscapes because we have emotional attachments to situations connected to nature, like sunsets and watching the horizon. It's like this eternal longing," Tschäpe noted, referencing the Portuguese word *saudade*, and its German counterpart, which express a deep longing for the distant and the past, suggesting that we project emotions and memories onto these landscapes.

In this context, Tschäpe's abstractions also resonate with the concept of the Sublime as conceived in German Romanticism—a deep engagement with a spirit that intense and overwhelming natural events can activate, compelling us to question and explore the limits of human experience. Her works, with their overwhelming energetic dynamism and lyrical engagement reminiscent of a

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musical composition prompt viewers to contemplate the limits of rational thought and surrender to the infinite possibilities of the imagination. In that way, Tschäpe's abstractions serve as portals, allowing access to deeper emotional and spiritual levels of our minds and uncovering untapped energies within us.



This exhibition marks an exciting evolution in Tschäpe's artistic journey and represents a profound personal exploration. Photography: Jason Wyche, Courtesy: Sean Kelly, New York/Los Angeles

Janaina Tschäpe's "a sky filled with clouds and the smell of blood oranges," is on view at Sean Kelly, New York, through October 19.