

Janaina Tschäpe: piruetas de olhos abertos

Apr 9 — May 30, 2026

Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel | Barra Funda

Luiz Zerbini: Perhaps we can begin with this material change: it seems to me there is an important question here — the introduction of the oil stick, for example, which is more of a technical aspect —, but I also feel that there is a change in the outlook on painting as a whole, something that appears in a very different way now.

Janaina Tschäpe: I guess this question begins when I transition to oil in a broader way. Oil painting introduces other layers — in the material sense, but also in attitude — that are very distinct from casein, which functions almost like acrylic paint. With oil, you open up lots more possibilities: you can build, go back, remove paint, recreate paths. In turn, with water-based paints, there is a different understanding of layers that is more direct, more definitive. With oil, on the contrary, you can remove a layer and reveal something underneath, reactivate the surface, keep the painting moving longer.

And that makes a big difference because you now operate in a different place, where what is underneath is also actively involved in the work. The painting comes together in this game — as if you were shuffling and dealing the cards differently each time. You lay down rules for yourself as you go, delimiting who gets access, and combining these elements, invariably in new ways. With this possibility to go back, to rediscover what had already been there, the painting opens up to further paths and takes on a complexity that might not have come up otherwise. Deep down, it's almost like you're challenging yourself — a minor additional obstacle that ends up tensioning the process and pushing the work out to other places. And I find that that's precisely where new paths emerge and grow stronger and stronger, and then they become paths in the true sense of the word. At first, they are just discoveries...

LZ: In your work, gesture has always been a central thing. Now you have this new question that is the proportion of this gesture, especially in terms of the scale of the brushstroke. In the past, you used to work with a finer brush. The drawing used to be more delicate, the gestures more restrained. In your current works, there is this kind of violence that is much different. There are areas somewhat out of focus, a sense of depth and a sharper density. I guess this quest for density had been there earlier, but now it really spreads across the painting. Maybe it has to do with oil itself, with this ability to apply and erase, to build and undo. There are bits that almost seem erased, and then you go back over them with the gesture — at times more direct, more automatic. In one of the paintings, for example, you have these rounder gestures that impart a different quality upon the surface.

JT: Such is the challenge of imposing certain conditions on yourself to see where it leads you, how far this thing can go. I find that when the scale of the work grows, the drawing and the painting have to grow along. It's not the case that you're just making a new painting and just doubling its size. The gesture has to grow accordingly. And in these works, this shows up in a more precise way. When faced with a larger sheet of paper, the drawing must also expand; it must respond to the dimension of the support.

LZ: I would really like to see you paint. I'm curious because of the size of the works.

JT: When I get ready to paint a large canvas, I must get everything out of the way, or else I will bump into things. It's a jog, a run, it becomes a workout. It's an exercise because everything must be orchestrated in a way that stays true to the gesture. It must come out big from the get-go.

LZ: It's a performance-like thing.

JT: Very performance-like, and there's this certainty about it. I've been thinking about this urge to paint. I was just in Bocaina and I was thinking of the difference between painting in nature and painting in the studio back in New York, where there are nothing but white walls around you. And I guess that during this time there, it really dawned on me that nature gives you a more aggressive sense of urgency because just by walking to the studio, which is in the middle of the woods, I slipped on mud, I saw a fallen tree, I saw this strange orange, this absurd green, and it all stays in your memory and wants to come out, like a scream. It's a shorter filter, so you get to the studio with a different urgency because it's all much fresher in your head, it hasn't gone through various filters, it hasn't turned to memory yet. And you try to figure out how it can come out without becoming an illustration of reality, but more like a gesture.

LZ: It's more like the feeling of the thing. It's not the illustration, it's a reflection of that feeling.

JT: It's the experience of it, along with the observation. There's the experience of slipping that also comes up when the time comes to paint.

LZ: I remember when I stayed at your house in Bocaina, and I remember this tree halfway between the house and the studio. On the right-hand side there was this really wide tree all covered up in this pink lichen, full of little dots. I even have a photo of it — it made a deep impression on me.

JT: That's because certain colors get etched in your memory in a very immediate way. You see that pink and you know you will remember it years later. It wants to leave that place of observation somehow. It doesn't matter exactly how it will find its way into the painting — but it does. When I returned to New York, that was part of it: getting here and wanting to have all that around me. The big red and blue painting, *dando piruetas de olhos abertos* [spinning, eyes open], came from that moment, to a great extent. The title came to me as I was painting and it kept resonating the whole time. What made me interested in it is precisely the fact of putting someone into the sentence. It's a verb, an action. It doesn't describe a landscape or an abstraction; it isn't just about giving a name to an image — it's almost about inserting yourself into it. That was one of the first paintings I made for the exhibit and, in a way, it wound up setting the tone for the others. In these paintings, the idea of movement appears more clearly, as if a presence was being suggested here. The spectator is invited to enter the canvas, to participate in this dislocation. There is figuration, but it looks like it's being absorbed, dislocated: the horizon is no longer stable, it sits kind of sideways, kind of inverted, as if the painting itself were in motion.

LZ: Do you turn the painting upside down or spin it around as you paint it?

JT: I don't go so far as to spin the canvas around, but at times I will paint with it upside down. I also paint with both hands. And so there is this movement that ends up becoming a part of the process because when you work with both hands, there's almost this impulse to mimic, with one hand, the movement that the other hand just made, or to repeat that gesture on the other side. I feel like it's almost a natural thing in my body. I started doing it out of necessity because, if you go up a ladder to paint all the way up there, in order to paint the other corner, you must come down, move the ladder, and then go up again. When you do it with both hands, you can reach both sides.

LZ: It's great, these kinds of solutions that evolve out of practice. If you hadn't been on that ladder, you would never have thought of it.

Working with both hands, you're very close to the painting, so you're doing it at your own scale, and when you do it, these people appear. You notice there are these people in there, the gesture, a body, a human body. You don't see the figure; it gradually comes together through the tracks of your gesture, through the extension of your arm.

JT: While I was working on the paintings, I also made this series of watercolors I call *Conversas com o mar* [Conversations with the sea] (2025). They're about 15 sheets of paper and they all stem from a repetitive gesture that keeps changing in pressure and color. I named it thus because I reckoned a lot of it is about this movement of trying to understand what the movement of the water is when a wave breaks. Just the other day, I was reading Leonardo da Vinci, who made several studies on water, the movement of water, which are really fascinating. He wrote about the theory of water movement. He would put geometric objects on water to figure out how the water moved around that object. That got me thinking because the description is beautiful, the drawings and just the fact of thinking about it, trying to imagine what the movement of the water will be with a triangular object on it, or a round one. How will the water move around it?

As I worked on these watercolors, I kept thinking of this water movement, which is a very abstract movement. If you think of it as a whirlpool, if something gets inside it and clogs it up, if a tree branch falls into it, then it changes completely. And so I like this idea of thinking of a movement and trying to draw that movement. It's like trying to draw a cloud, because the wind is blowing it away and you are running after it to figure out what the movement is, what the color is, and how, in the meantime, the cloud can dissolve; it can grow denser. The trajectory of this movement is what I find interesting.

LZ: Listening to you speak, it becomes clear how important movement is to your work. You spoke more clearly about it when you referred to the watercolors, but it's all about movement. It's like a still from a film. You grab a moment from that movement. And it's as if the movement could continue. And so you photograph a single instant.

JT: One thing I like to do is I do not hide the history of the painting. I keep that history very present. You can see what was painted over. I'm not hiding it; I didn't paint it over to hide it, I just painted it over to partially hide it. I always leave a bit of the history in there. You're confronted with an attempt, yet instead of hiding that attempt as though it were an error, you accept it.

LZ: I have a harder time getting loose in large formats, but when I'm painting small things, I can do it. I let go, I'm taken away by the flow of the thing, and that's the time when I'm happy, when I understand and see that it happened. Because it's a phenomenon; it's this thing that happens and I don't know what it is. I cannot control it. In the small paintings, with one brushstroke, I can cover the entire painting, so in this movement I can let go and experiment in a completely carefree way. And the landscape acts as a support because you're in touch with nature. You're involved in it. All the small paintings are made where I am now, looking at the landscape. This alone creates an atmosphere. You're moved by nature, by the light, by the color, by everything. I'll put myself in this situation hoping that it all will help me loosen up and achieve a magical result, let's say.

JT: And it is, because when you're looking at something in nature, a small creek, a stone, you see the light shining, you hear the sound, you understand the movement. The vibration is much greater. If you're painting in the studio and you try to remember the small creek or the light, you end up thinking of many other things, and you might end up trying to illustrate that small creek. Soon enough, you're painting the small stone, the small creek the way you think they looked rather than painting that light hitting the water, the movement, which is what loosens you up when you're painting in nature.

LZ: Time also changes —the sun changes, the light changes, everything is transforming all the time. And so what you are doing here is never exactly what is going on out there because these are distinct moments. You cut out an instant from something that is really a continuous flow, a duration that is constantly transforming into something else. The landscape ends up functioning more like a support. You look, you notice something, but it isn't exactly a tree that you find — it's a brushstroke, it's the light, it's a color. And based on that, you take ownership of these elements and you build a story that is no longer directly related to what you had in front of you.

JT: You create all the magic — the ray of light that comes in, that somewhat odd green light that appears underneath the leaf... I really like working on series, like these watercolors, for instance, because it's almost like doing a still-life. You put together a still-life not exactly because of the mug or the fruit, but because you want to observe how light hits those shapes, what type of shade is created, how the colors relate to one another. Ultimately, it's not about the fruit or the mug; it's about color, volume, relationship. And this series, *Conversas com o mar*, some of it came from that: thinking about the movement of the water — how it breaks, what the color of this movement is, what the speed is at which it happens. Then one watercolor leads to another, like a continuity of this thinking, where each piece of work tests out little variations, unraveling that same exploration.

LZ: And what do you do to loosen up? How do you start?

JT: I listen to a lot of music. I shut the door. I don't let anyone in because I look like a child in the studio. You even get a bit self-conscious. I move around a lot.

LZ: Do you start and end the painting on the same day?

JT: It really depends on the “game” that is at play. At times I will start with a background that needs to dry up before it receives another layer; in other cases, I will make a drawing that I know I will smear beforehand, so it all must happen at once. Wet-on-wet work is a completely different logic than wet-on-dry — each choice implies a different kind of timing, of gesture, of decision. It also varies depending on the starting point and the “ingredients” I want to activate. At times the painting happens all at once — I will be in the studio for 12 hours until I finish. The anxiety to see that thing resolved is such that you don’t want to stop because you are immersed in that process. When a painting is made in one day, you compose it from start to finish, starting from an empty space, a white surface. But if you start and then you stop and resume it the following day, then you are no longer dealing with that same empty space. Now you’re composing over something that already exists, an ongoing painting. The following day, you already have a blue backdrop, a splash of orange down the middle — and you are thinking based on that. The painting imposes new conditions, and with them a different attitude arises, a different type of relationship with what is being done.

LZ: And so there was a time, many years ago, when I would force myself to start and finish the painting on the same day. Those would be large paintings, very watered down, made with acrylic paint — and precisely for that reason, there wasn’t much of a chance to come back to them. They had to take place all at once, from start to finish. You couldn’t come back the next day.

JT: Right. So there is almost a structure, a certain severity, really, in laying down the game rules — where I am, where I’m going to, what I want to activate. And, of course, unexpected discoveries happen along this process: sometimes, out of anxiety, because you don’t want to wait until it has completely dried up, you end up painting on a still somewhat damp surface — and then you realize that this “half-dry” produces something else, a different quality. Nowadays, it takes me less time to finish a painting, or at least to be satisfied with it. Twenty years ago, I hadn’t discovered certain things yet — and these experiences add up with time. Many of them come up by chance, almost like errors, but then they get incorporated in a more conscious way. As a result, you begin to achieve a certain mastery — but it’s a mastery that’s born precisely from error, from the attempt, from the unexpected. It’s almost like control from lack of control, built out of everything that didn’t work out and still ended up paving the way.

LZ: You acquire experience as you go, you figure yourself out better — you figure out the work, the material, even the gestures. Over time, something becomes attuned: you begin to attain different possibilities, to do things you couldn’t before. And everything you’ve learned stays with you in some way. It doesn’t go away. At times you find yourself resuming things from long ago — and all of a sudden you realize: how is this still here? How is this gesture, this solution, this approach still present? It is as though the work had accumulated layers of memory that come back and rearrange over time.

JT: And there is pleasure in it because you start doing it with a different firmness. After repeating it so many times, something sets — you begin to master it. What used to make you insecure no longer throws you off like it did. Thirty years ago, you might have tried to correct it, to paint it over, and you would end up “blowing it,” getting that somewhat indecisive result, that mixture that doesn’t go anywhere. Over time, that happens less and less. Not because the risk goes away, but because you learn to deal with it — to recognize boundaries, to own certain decisions and to trust what you’re doing more.

LZ: Yes. But even now, I will occasionally get the feeling I've ruined the work. Then I get depressed, but I keep going and going, and then it eventually works out. Whenever that happens, whenever I get the feeling I've ruined it, I really suffer. Then I get happy again.

JT: There's suffering involved, isn't there? You're facing the canvas and you go: I could stop now; it's perfect. But the doubt soon comes — isn't it too perfect? Too pretty? Is that why I'm liking it? And then an inner struggle begins. Because it seems resolved, but it was easy, it was too quick — so it can't be so. Then you go and interfere; almost on purpose, you make a “mess” of it; you destabilize it. And then the frustration comes: I ruined it, it was good, it was done. But these misgivings are important. Without them, you get into a place of repetition, of doing the same thing the same way each time — and it all begins to function almost automatically; it becomes “perfect.” But then it begs the question: is this perfection interesting? Is this the result you want? Probably not.

LZ: Yeah, that doesn't work. And there's this solitary thing here: no one will hold you up to it. If you don't hold yourself up to it, probably no one will notice, no one will demand it from you, and there is no escaping it. If you notice it isn't done, if you intuit there is still something to do, then you must go and do it. Or else it will come back every time you look at the work. It's like you owe a debt to the painting itself, an unmade decision. And it's unforgivable because you know you stopped too soon.

JT: Why continue if it's already “good,” “perfect,” “cute”? That is now what it's about. If it was, it wouldn't make sense to go on painting. When you look back at artists' oeuvres, you can clearly see this movement: the work gradually unravels, it unfolds, it changes direction — at times simplifying radically, at times growing more complex — until, at one point, it seems to arrive at a core, at something essential within it all. To see this trajectory is to understand the quest behind the practice. Because deep down, that's what sustains the work: a drive to be surprised, to get to something that hasn't been seen yet, that has not been experienced yet. Maybe it is not exactly “the new” — or maybe it is —, but it is this drive that leads you to make a painting, and then another one, and then one more. And there's pleasure in it all. I guess in the end, we are lucky to be painters —really lucky. Because there is this possibility to play with yourself, to experiment, to surprise yourself within the work itself.

LZ: One thing that always comes up in these conversations is a discussion of influences. You referenced Da Vinci just now.

JT: About two years ago, I was talking to a friend, a French painter, about painting. He mentioned an artist I didn't know about, August Strindberg. He did photography and painting and he used to write a lot. And the writing is super interesting because he mentions this quest of the image, of the landscape, and he used to always paint by memory. He put together entire landscapes in his head, landscapes that do not exist, but you look at them and you feel this longing. This artist was a super fortunate find because I realized this is someone who, 100 years ago, was searching for a similar thing.

LZ: It is great to read artists talking or writing about painting or about their work in general. Have you always written?

JT: I write in German. My languages are all a bit mixed up, so now that it's a bit easier to translate, I can write in whatever language. At times I find it difficult to write in Portuguese, mostly because I lack the vocabulary. The language I studied art in is German.

LZ: Writing is an exercise, isn't it? It feeds into your work. To think and write about what you are doing is great.

JT: You end up questioning yourself throughout the process. A key point is that when painting starts to become sort of a decoration of itself — when the temptation arises to add something just to “solve it” or to please the gaze, that is where the decision comes to own the gesture the way it is, with no ornaments. To perceive this boundary — between building and decorating — is also to define the extent to which you want to be faithful to what the painting calls for, even if it means letting go of “beautiful.”

LZ: It is as if the work were about getting rid of things, getting rid of a bunch of stuff and getting to the essence of what really matters. You must be really brave to do it.

JT: Right. I think it's about courage.

LZ: It does take a lot of courage, but also an enormous will and resistance to keep going, believing it will lead somewhere. Because if you allow yourself to be seduced by the image, by the figure, that is always the easiest way. When I picture you painting alone in the room, in the studio, working from gestures, it seems to me that is precisely where the work really happens. The painting stops being just image and becomes the process itself — and the fragment that remains is almost a snapshot of an experience you had while making it. There is something really beautiful about it, really beautiful.

JT: Yes, right. I guess little by little, you get happier about having the courage to take this thing up to a certain point — and not give in to this urge to please. Because to please, deep down, is always a temptation. And as a woman, there are even more layers to it: there is this history, this upbringing, really, that pushes us toward this place of wanting to be accepted, to be “cute,” to be “pleasant.” That inevitably informs your painting too. And so part of the work becomes a constant exercise of testing yourself — of avoiding this comfortable place where everything seems to work and everyone finds it pretty. Because ultimately, of course you want to hear that. But if the idea is to have the work grow and go farther, you must keep that tendency in check and learn to curb this need to please.

LZ: If you think about it, the vast majority of female painters have an absolutely revolutionary attitude.

JT: A lot of it is about that attitude. I guess many female painters start from that place, conscious that they must confront this expectation — because it is a given; it is projected onto you. And it sometimes leads to a more radical outlook from the get-go, a very clear-cut decision of owning up to what you want to do. There is this strength, this attitude, really. But that doesn't mean it isn't hard because the temptation to please is constant. It is easy to slip into this place of wanting to correspond, to hear that it looks pretty, that it is working. And of course you want to hear that. But then comes the question: what exactly is this “pretty” doing? What does it produce within the work? And this is the kind of questioning that keeps the painting moving, that keeps us painting.

This conversation between Janaina Tschäpe and Luiz Zerbini took place in March of 2026.