

PRESS RELEASE

HANS HARTUNG

THE LAST PAINTINGS 1989

Opens Friday 29 October from 6 to 8 pm
Exhibition continues through 30 December 2010



T1989-L14 1989
Acrylic on canvas
76 3/4 x 51 1/4 in 195 x 130 cm

Cheim & Read is pleased to announce a landmark exhibition of Hans Hartung's late paintings, dating from 1987–1989. This is the first showing of Hartung's works in New York since his controversial 1975 exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and focuses on the artistic output of his last years of life. The show will be accompanied by a full color catalogue with an essay by Joe Fyfe.

Hans Hartung was born in Leipzig, Germany in 1904, but is often identified by his artistic activity in Paris and his involvement in the French Art Informel or Tachist movements. His life and work were greatly affected by the political and social upheavals in France and Germany during the Second World War; after fleeing his native Germany (he was considered a “degenerate” artist by the Gestapo) he fought with the French Foreign Legion and lost his right leg on the Alsatian front.

His post-war paintings – emotional abstractions which explored varieties of gesture and mark – were considered reactions to his experiences in battle. In fact, the paintings were surprisingly premeditated, carefully copied from sometimes much earlier, spontaneous drawings enlarged to fit the canvas. Originally an economic decision (predetermined compositions guaranteed successful outcomes), Hartung's exacting realization of his paintings is evidence of the great control, technical aptitude and thoughtfulness with which he approached his work, as well as his understanding of, as Fyfe states in his catalogue essay, “painting as an act of mimesis.”

As a child, Hartung tried to capture the quick flash of lightening in order to contain and comprehend its unpredictable energy. Light, space and shadow proved to be life long themes; nature and the cosmos were influential forces. Photography was a helpful aid – Hartung took over 30,000 photographs, mostly recording patterns of light and dark, which he used as references for his work. Though his paintings were decidedly abstract, with seemingly little foundation in representation or figuration, Hartung spent much of his early career copying works by Rembrandt, Goya and Van Gogh. He felt an artist's single scribbled line could contain enough expressive energy and information for the whole image – such was the authority of an artist's individual mark.

Hartung's career, especially in his home countries of France and Germany, was successful. His shows and awards were numerous; mid-career, in 1960, he won the Venice Biennale's International Prize. This also coincided with his transition from pre-planned compositions to paintings improvised directly on the canvas. Exploration and experimentation with various and unusual tools ensued, and included lithography rollers, plant fronds, wheelchair wheels and gardening paraphernalia. Hartung also began to experiment with sprayed paint, using a set up similar to an auto-body shop and eventually appropriating garden hoses and sprayers originally developed for disseminating fertilizer.

In 1975, Henry Geldzahler, then the Metropolitan Museum's curator of contemporary art, organized an exhibition of Hartung's recent paintings at the museum. Though several contemporary artists, including Frank Stella and James Rosenquist, reported favorably of the show, it was highly misunderstood, and Hartung's work was not shown again in New York until now.

In the last year of his life (Hartung died in December 1989), he produced 360 paintings – a monumental accomplishment, especially given his restricted physical condition. Confined to his wheelchair, he seemed to focus entirely on his creative output; his late work presents a sense of freedom, innovation and ambition that was connected to his previous work. His spray paint technique facilitated productivity – the sensitivity of the sprayer allowed Hartung to exercise control over the canvas without physical strain. The tool also provided exceptional variations in paint layering and effects, from smooth, transparent blocks of color to saturated, calligraphic drizzles of line. These works hint at the natural world, the qualities of light and shadow, and the infinitude of space, while remaining distinct artistic entities, anticipatory of contemporary concerns. Ultimately, they are witness to Hartung's continuous, fearless exploration, even with the looming inevitability of his failing health. Hartung stated: "As for me I want to remain free, mind body and spirit. I don't want neither myself nor anybody else to shut me off it all."

In an adjacent gallery at Cheim & Read, Abstract Works on Paper from a Private Collection will be exhibited in concurrence with the Hans Hartung show. The dialogue between these works by de Kooning, Mitchell, Kusama, Rothko, Tobey, Twombly among others, and Hartung's late work will provide an interesting counterpoint.

For more information please contact the gallery at 212-242-7727 or gallery@cheimread.com.

Cheim & Read 547 West 25 Street