

adam gallery

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Interview Alf Löhr with Prof. Dr. Mark Bartlett

M.B. What is it about a painting that might cause us to say that it is beautiful?

A.L. "Whether it is abstract or representational, we find it beautiful if we can see a pattern in it, a grace of line or movement, harmony or proportion. The eye is caught by a pattern of color, the way different colors relate to one another; the eye is caught by the way in which the objects or people inhabit the space defined by the frame; the eye is caught by differentiation and contrast between dark and light, stillness and activity. And yet a painting is lifeless if it is too controlled, too obviously patterned, and organized and its objects too perfect. In truthful art as in a truthful understanding of life there is always a hint or echo of chaos, incompatibility, imperfection and so every beautiful artwork also has an element of pathos.

The more we see of art the more the eye accustoms itself to these things – the more we give ourselves to the work of art the more we go out of or transcend ourselves. Our sensitivity is increased and with the greatest works of art our empathy is engaged, our capacity to care about our world and the people in it is increased – so the act of self-transcendence may also gain an ethical or benevolent quality." [1]

Maybe its is general belief in humanity that lets us see beauty. What kind of beauty are we talking about? Peter Brook said the other week that in Britain there isn't a traditional respect for beauty. Not to have a tradition does not necessarily stop our longing, or does it? I like it that respect becomes part of the contemplation on beauty. You can not see without respect.

M.B. Are your titles important to you?

A.L. Words add value. Look how much has been written about Picasso or Beuys. To be shy and ambivalent does not really work in art but let me assure you there is no evangelic intent. We are all accustomed to look for a narrative. We live in a world that needs to know. Titles are only suggestions to move into a certain direction or to reject the suggestion and find your own interpretation. The title " I see you dancing father" relates to the sense of revelation of the human side behind authority. It also speaks of a closeness – but this is as far as it goes. I trust my viewer not to take it too literally. People who want to be seduced by words from a safe distance turn to novels and rarely feel the need to see it for real which a painting is.

M.B. Am I supposed to read your painting in a particular way?

A.L. There are many ways to approach a painting. Today there is again an existential meaning that a painting represents in contrast to the overwhelming photographs we look at every day. My paintings look at how things evolve and exude, focusing on the rim where nature might start or end. When you step in them you are on the periphery where you are in the here and now but can see another side too. You can swing between doubt and certainty. But you can also approach it in a more literal way and ask yourself what might lie underneath the red in "the sultans garden". What gives these paintings their unique density? Are they like large fields of breathless blossoms? Is the light green cloud woven from the dress of the lover? Being upside or downside will hopefully seem almost annoying coordinates, more interesting might be your assumption that the guest in the sultans garden might be Dervishes. I like you to have a boundless, light step, to fall into the sea of colors where white nets make you wonder, what riches are worth fishing for.

M.B. What inspires you?

A.L. To see transfigured lives in which a divine image shines forth in a human face. Such moments give me strength and a sense of future. Passion can also be inspiring and a particular crazy desire that you can not shake off all your life is also an inspiration.



Photo of the artist with Camill Leberer, Studio

M.B. What do your paintings represent?

A.L. I hope the paintings become a safe place to go to when you need to get in touch with yourself. There is an element of faith in there, not only as a gesture to reinvent yourself but also to be in the here and now. There is no place where time is absent and yet the paintings that I saw as a child are still in the same place. Without any trace of time Paul Klee's watercolors smell as sweet as they did on the first day I saw them and Andy's portraits still flash. Yves Klein's blue still absorbs and Titian's blue engulfs the minute you get a glimpse of it. Leonardo's famous girl still smiles and for more than 500 years we like her too. She has not changed. Art is valued in real terms because it aims to produce a beauty in thought and presence that does not try to please. A smile that wants to please looks different. Sculpture and painting are the last objects in our world that cannot be utilized for practical meaning.

M.B. Last, not least, the question you are trying to avoid. What do your paintings mean?

A.L. I can tell you what I like to achieve and how I go about it but I cannot say what the painting does or what it stands for. Not because the artist and the viewer have different perception it is more that when you make things you are in a different frame of mind of bringing your imagination into reality rather than letting reality infuse your imagination. We should change chairs and I should ask you what you see.

A.L. Do you think that my work is 'abstract?'

M.B. For someone as philosophically inclined as myself, this is a complicated question. In its everyday usage, the word 'abstract' refers to something that is not physical, to an idea like violence or love, say. So while your paintings can suggest these kinds of abstract concepts in the minds of viewers, the paintings themselves are powerful physical acts, or better, events that are concretely material. You expressed this vividly earlier when you pointed out that a splash of milk is a very different thing than a splash of water – your analogy suggests that your work is actually opposed to how abstraction is used in most art historical narratives. I think viewers, including art historians and critics, unknowingly impose the accepted notion of 'abstract art' on your work, and in doing so, completely miss what your work is about. Your work is about events, the splashes of water and milk, and not about form. I'd go as far as to say that your work is anti-formal, in the sense that we find no rigid geometrical figuration in your paintings, no squares, right angles, grids, or tensions between vertical and horizontal lines. So the question becomes: What is it exactly that is 'abstract' in your work? It is not concerned with abstract forms or geometric elements, and so cannot be compared to classical abstraction. Nor does it conform to the tradition of action painting which was motivated by creating a coherent overall formal, static composition. Whereas your painting consists of events, which you have already described in a wide range of vocabulary, but always in verb rather than noun form – breaking open, crashing through, swimming away, chaotic patterns, and the like, that are more akin to the dissonant music of Schoenberg than the Stravinsky harmonics found in Kandinsky. So if your work is to be called abstract, it is to dynamics of events and not to static compositions of discreet forms, that the term must refer. Your paintings are concretely material events that are abstract in that they are not representational or figurative in the sense of a recognizable image. And yet, they evoke references to realistic imagery that floods our mediascape – moving images of war, forest fires, floods, weather, or the melting of arctic ice sheets, all forms of catastrophes that inundate our visual world.

A.L. For me the word abstract means something quite profound. I was brought up to believe that evolution progresses from realistic to abstract. You start with a single real thing, reduce it to its essence and see the wider implications it has by putting this into the world. A meaning evolves that is more than the real thing. Perhaps you could say more about what you mean by saying that my paintings are "events."

M.B. I think this may be more easily understood if I first say more about what they are not. Your paintings, and the type of abstraction you are concerned with, does not conform to the still largely Greenbergian formalist conception of abstraction that frames the picture plane in terms of the "scene," as in a theater scene. The formalist criterion for a legitimate work of abstract painting is that it represents only one form of visibility, the passive gaze. Your work goes in exactly the opposite direction in that it requires an active gaze, one that does not desire the contemplative, meditative state found in Rothko's work, for example. To understand, experience, or feel your work requires something quite different than that because you ask your viewers to use other forms of vision, other lexical registers of visibility that are implied by such terms as glance, look, see, regard, spectate, watch, peer, stare, terms which connote a sense that vision is highly active and dynamic. But your work requires me to step out of the idealizing scene of the gaze and into the event. In effect, it must be understood more in terms of time than of space, and viewers must learn to be readers of time rather of space, or at least to give the time aspect of your work much more attention than to its spatial aspect. Your emphasis on visual velocities of mark-making is the very thing that makes your paintings events, and not static visual objects.

M.B. Your paintings are complex. They are appealing and yet do not reveal all. There isn't a story nor can I admire a certain brushstroke or clever provocation. There is a tension yet there is no way to name the genre. Lines work themselves into a frenzy, or suddenly get hold of themselves to dance a ribbony calligraphy. One moment it is about one thing the next it blows over to be another. Why such chaos?

A.L. To experience the painting "a new" every time you look at it. The world is a visual feast. I aim for poetic and philosophical principals and feel a need to say in one language otherwise you over simplify by juxta positioning. Paintings can be as complex as music and harmony is not always a useful tool. Most people do not think of music as being abstract but when they look at a painting they still make that distinction. I think it is because we do not consciously distinguish enough between visual art and visual languages that communicates instructions.

M.B. How are your paintings done?

A.L. There are always processes and a leitmotif. The large spectrum of colors creates a movement that in turn creates a dialog. A painting is the process or the climax of a conversation.

The color places itself – it finds its way and then finds its place. You can follow it around- sometimes the paint loses its way, it gets covered, dominated by others, then it breaks open, crashes through fields and articulates a clear line. From time to time the paint rests in places only to swim away the next minute into a haze of light.

Colour needs space to be able to move about, sometimes it lies flat, sometimes on top or underneath, sometimes it floats. Lines need to dance but they also fight. Together with rhythms they dominate the picture and are challenged with gestures and accidental coincidences, which test their resilience. Can colour live up to the accidental? Does coincidence create order? Their conduct seems democratic but there is a lot of struggle if you look closer. Some colours have to hold themselves back so much they almost burst.

M.B. How do you structure your composition?

A.L. I start with clarity, then lose it and work hard to regain it by exploring the difference in opposite approaches such as inwardly dovetailing and outward ramification. There is still the question of what the central notion actually means in a global culture. How can I avoid it? How does closeness and distance work, what does a cut through the center mean? A composition is only successful when it bears a question. There is also a fascination of the fragile with many artists who I admire. To see how things can be blown in the wind and yet hold their place is always a revelation. To swing without fear is very desirable, as we know from childhood.

M.B. You mentioned using accidents in your paintings. Is this a free flow of the imagination?

A.L. There is a big difference in knocking down a jug of water or knocking down a jug of milk. I use splashes rather than complicated brush strokes because I want the viewer to associate with the material quality of my paintings. Knocking a jug of milk over, as you will have seen it over and over again in theater, film and painting is symbolically overloaded without escape. That's why people like it, the content is known and we can admire the clever construction of the composition. Not surprisingly such painting is particularly liked in countries that have an admirable talent for engineering. The knocked over jug of water is a lot less dramatic but its consequences leave space to engage. It forms a stain that reveals a certain direct beauty if you allow yourself to engage. The viewer is empowered and not just a consumer. There is just as much precise decision making and content but it is done in a less self-conscious way. I believe it matters how things are done.

M.B. How recognizable are your paintings are they purely abstract ?

A.L. For decades contemporary painting and sculpture has been all about clever irony and we have largely run out of what to say in this department. For me the key issues are movement and the crystallizations of time or even more profoundly the question of what time is. The paintings were once described as "abstract narratives". The term is no contradiction for me. As a child I was mad about Kandinsky, I also remember the time as a child before I could identify letters for what they are. There were a lot of bright colored fields, often lit up from behind, there were buildings where I would see bright red hot metal being cast. The mountains were black, the landscape man made, which gave you a sense of empowerment to shape the world. There was no need to comment on the world. Where ever you looked there were people changing the world for the better. Such experiences sharpen your view to what is desirable and how we may only see how we think.

A.L. An event is also something unique. Even today the material culture seems far more profound than the electronic and reproducible culture. Maybe that's why so many people who make money in IT buy art. What puzzles me is why my paintings are not more expensive than let's say luxury cars. If I smash up my car I can buy another one, exactly the same, there were thousands and thousands made, all identically the same. My painting is completely unique, not even I could make one like it again. There isn't a single moment like that again in the whole universe.

Could you describe in more detail how you understand the spatial aspects of my painting?

M.B. The viewer can approach space by examining how you use scale. If we compare filmic space to the space in your paintings, then I'd say that you resist the spectacular hegemony of filmic expression by slowing it, condensing it into the still frames contained by your canvases and sheets of paper, where movement in all its fragility and mesmeric intensity is caught with great precision and range. I think of them analogously to how a camera works, to slow 'zoom ins' and 'zoom outs' that aim to capture the raw power of the violence that constitutes today's affective visual atmosphere. Almost all of your painting can be interpreted as simultaneously macro- and microcosmic, where the universe is simultaneously both scaled up and down, where spatial rarity becomes spatial density as it compresses, and the super dense becomes super rare as it spatially expands. It is possible to find both types of space in most of your paintings, and spaces in between them, of course. In this way, I think your use of space is subordinate to the temporal character of expanding and contracting events. In other words, to go back to your first question about abstraction, you create a dynamic, highly active, material kind of space that is totally different than abstract space conceived as merely a static receptacle or place in which some event occurs. In your work, space itself is an event, coming into and going out of existence continuously, and taking many 'forms' within the boundaries of a single work.

A.L. Well, I think you've got me there. You philosophers can certainly spin a good tale. Abstraction, events, space, and time are all well and good. But do you have anything to say about what I actually do, which is make images? Do you have any comments on the visual content of my paintings?

M.B. Kant described art as purposeless purpose. I think you have achieved that quite well! And therein lies the reason that art is so important, and in particular, the importance of your work at this historical moment. To be upstanding citizens we are supposed to be avid consumers and workers. We are supposed to occupy all our time with "practical meaning." Art, it seems to me, is a challenge to the kind of dutiful mode of being a good citizen, while at the same time challenging our obsessions with mostly ourselves. It opens up a place in which the unthought of, the unexpected, the unnecessary, might emerge. Art is a promise of what all our endless work is supposed to achieve – a well-lived life. We forget that work is a means to life, and not the purpose of life is to work. That is the purpose of art's purposelessness.

[1] The Rev'd Stephen Tucker



11. The breezes speak | Ink on paper | 150 x 120 cm



4. Rose petals of an internal kind slowly sinking in dark waters pring | Mixed media on canvas | 170 x 200 cm

5. Schein und Wesen | Ink on paper | 150 x 120 cm





14. Youthful Beauty | Mixed media on canvas | 75 x 50 cm



15. Some of the shortcuts she took, she never gave back | Mixed media on canvas | 80 x 55 cm



6. How does the shadow of my hand thread the silk of a moth? | Mixed media on canvas | 200 x 170 cm

7. Soft are the beasts of light but softer still her hand drifting | Mixed media on canvas | 200 x 230 cm





20. As if you would ask me if all things that happen are both good and bad | Mixed media on canvas | 70 x 100 cm

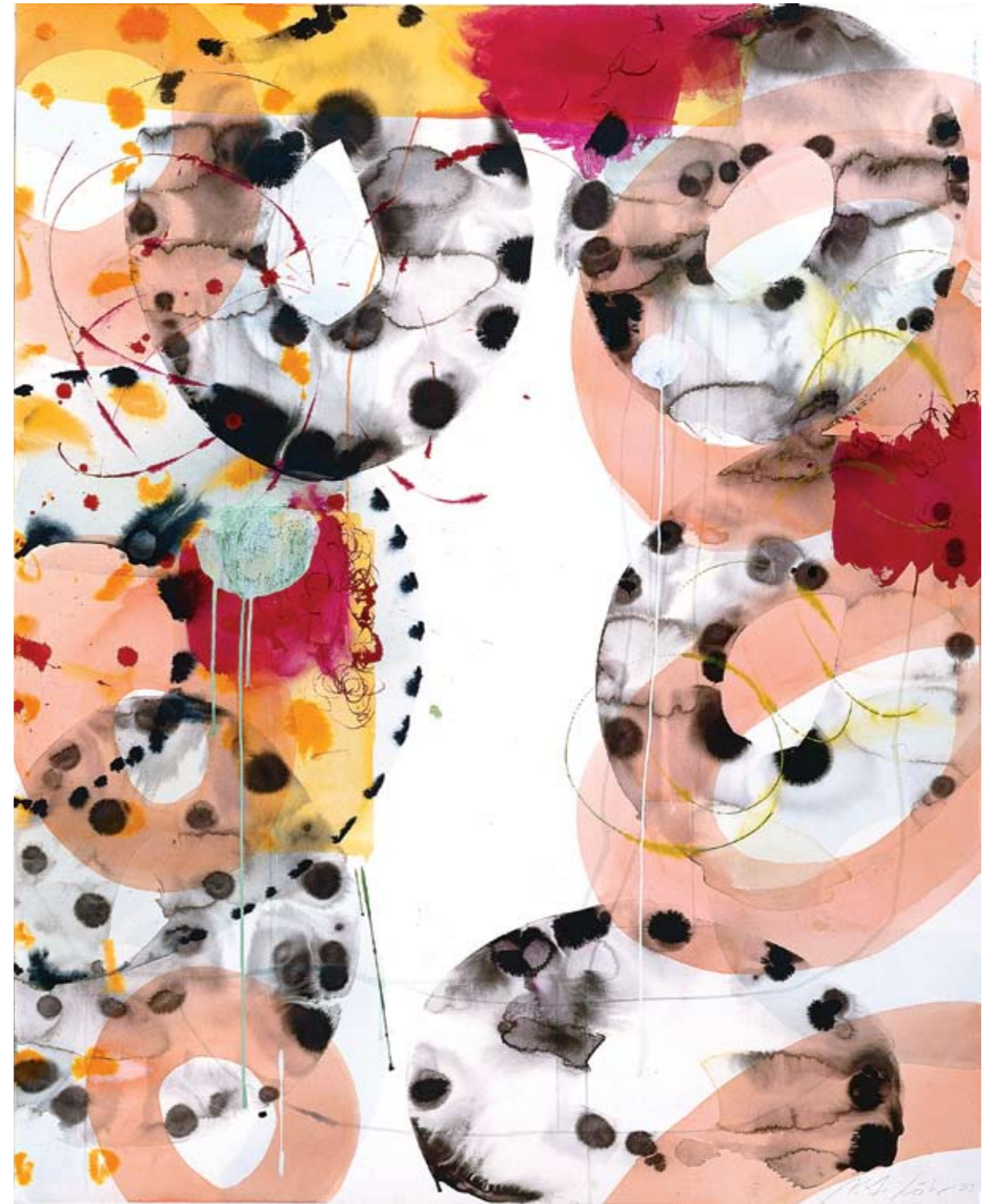


10. Der Wind der von Liebe spricht hat ein unvergessliches Lachen | Mixed media on canvas | 170 x 200 cm

9. At the Sultans Garden | Mixed media on canvas | 200 x 230 cm



11. The wind that speaks of love has an unforgettable laugh | Ink on paper | 150 x 120 cm





18. The sand at the shore paints our body | Mixed media on canvas | 102 x 76 cm



19. Keats when he fell out of his tree | Oil on canvas | 102 x 76 cm





SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 2011 '(in) version', Adam Gallery, London
2010 Galerie Jones, Cologne, Germany
'Between Chance and Determination', Adam Gallery, London
2009 Atelier Aperti, Oriveto, Italy
2008 'Objective Emotion', Broadbent Gallery, London
Galerie Jones und Truebenbach, Cologne, Germany
MUKA Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand
'Bias Bond', Melbourne, Australia
2007 'Looking for the Tasmanian Tiger', Broadbent, London
Victorian Tapestry Workshop, Melbourne, Australia
Gallery Conny Dietzhold, Sydney, Australia
2006 'Einblicke VI', Galerie Witzel Wiesbaden, Germany
'Conversations on Cork Street', Adam Gallery, London
'Quiet strokes of the New Swimmer', Residency Gallery, German Embassy, London
2005 Broadbent Gallery, London
2004 Gallery at the Residency of the German Ambassador, London
'Slow Art', Broadbent Gallery, London
2003 Herbarium der Blicke, Gruppenausstellung
Kunst & Ausstellungshalle der BRD, Bonn
Kunstverein Rastatt
Newlyn Art Gallery, Cornwall
2002 Pumphouse Gallery, Battersea Park, London
Howard Garden Gallery, Cardiff
Firstsite at the Minories, Colchester
2001 Goethe Institute, London
Gloucester Cathedral, Gloucester

- 2000 Galerie Christoph Grau, Hamburg, Germany
Galerie Karl Plotzke, Düsseldorf, Germany
Staatliche Galerie Schloss Moritzburg, Halle, Germany
Neanderthal Museum, Düsseldorf, Germany
1999 Museum Bochum, Germany
Stilwerk, Berlin, (Public Art Commission)
Museum DOKO, Cologne, Germany
1998 Gateway for East Kilbride, Scotland (First prize at international PA competition)
Art and Ecology Research Projects, A.E.R.P., 12 UK Projects
1996 Kunstverein Goslar, (Public Art Commission)
1994 Public Interventions, Edinburgh
1992 'Beharrliche Wahrheiten', Museum für moderne Kunst, Goslar
Gallery Lisbeth Lips, Breda, Holland
M8 - Art and Environment Proposals, Edinburgh

Born 1957 in Bochum, Germany

EDUCATION

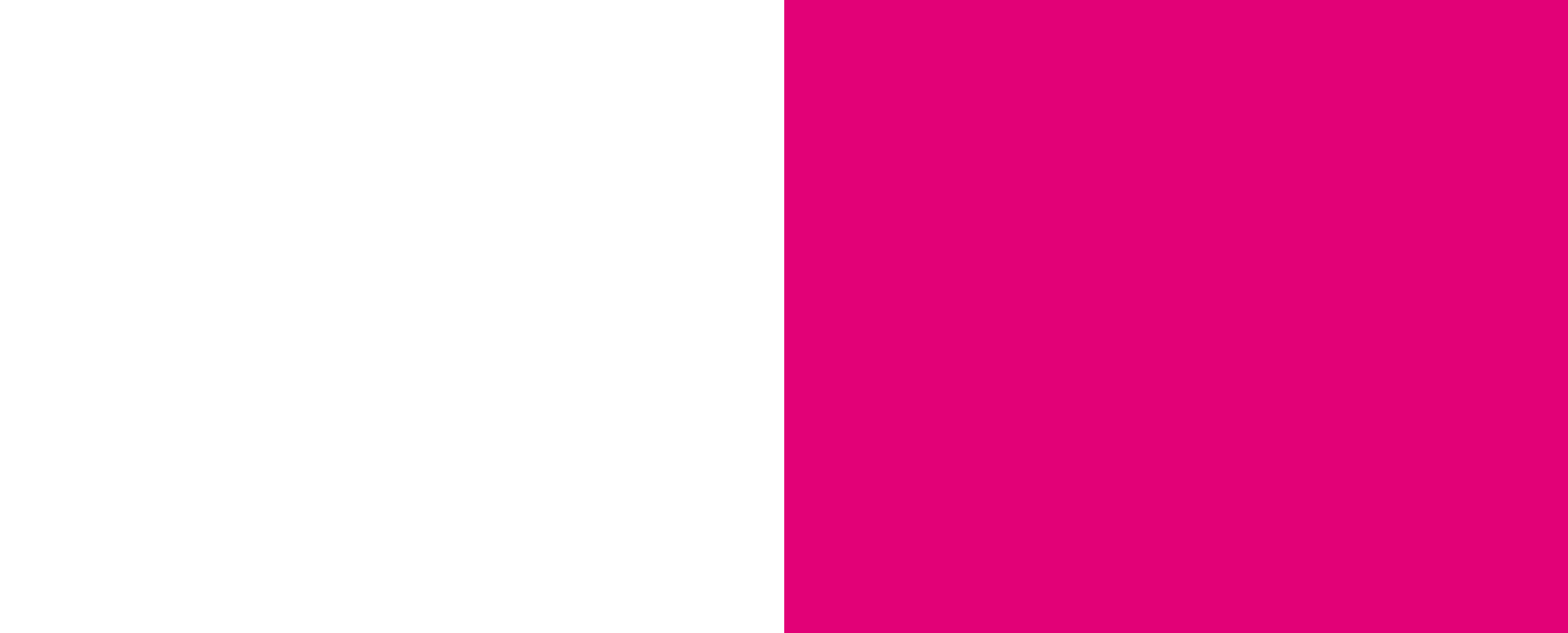
- 1985-88 Ph.D Royal College of Art, London
1977-83 Kunstakademie Düsseldorf
1980 School of Fine Art, Kyoto, Japan
1979-82 Heinrich-Heine Universität Düsseldorf,
1977-78 Kunstakademie, Düsseldorf Abt. Münster

AWARDS and HONOURS

- 2004 Firstsite Board of Trustees, Colchester
Vorstand des Deutschen Künstlerbundes
2003 Kunstfonds, Bonn, Arbeitsstipendium
1996 Senior Fellow, University of Wales Institute of Cardiff
1992 Kaiserringstipendium, Museum für moderne Kunst, Goslar
1989-91 Feodor Lynen Research Fellowship, AvH Bonn
1987 D.A.A.D. (One year scholarship)
1986 British Council Fellowship, London. (One year scholarship)
1985 Heinrich Hertz Stiftung, Ministry of Cultural Affairs, N.R.W
1983-85 Studienstiftung des deutschen Volkes (Two years endowment)

Photography: Mel Yates, London
and Marcus Pietrek, Düsseldorf





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