

## ***Chiaroscuro***

by Eva Meyer-Hermann

The contrasts could not be more striking. A church, whose patron saint also watched over the guild of pastry makers, and two charitable confraternities, who dedicated their lives to the needs of prisoners condemned to death. And there is another source of astonishment: a magnificent, lavishly decorated Venetian building dating to the late sixteenth century and an exhibition with vivid, large-format paintings by a German artist working in the twenty-first century. The building in question is the Scuola Grande di San Fantin, which looks out toward the nearby Renaissance church of San Fantin and the renowned Teatro La Fenice across a typically complicated Venetian square in the heart of the Sestiere San Marco. In the late fifteenth century two confraternities—Santa Maria della Consolazione and San Girolamo—both of which were attached to the church of San Fantin, like the guild of *scaletteri*, built a home of their own, which was reconstructed a hundred years later, following a devastating fire, by the architect and sculptor Alessandro Vittorino (1525–1608). The three-axis, two-storey façade of Istrian stone is clearly articulated with rhythmic columns and fanciful window pediments. Between the two floors a deep, richly molded cornice wraps around the building. Three large freestanding statues crown the tympanum with its bas-relief and volutes. The central door leads into a hall, with bench seats around its walls and clad in marble to well above head-height. The mysterious atmosphere of this meeting room is intensified by the sight of the somber cycle of paintings in its deep ceiling coffers and on the walls. Here and there dramatically illuminated, moving bodies loom out of the brownish-black figuration of the images, which cannot initially be discerned in any detail. *Chiaroscuro*: “light/dark” — a strategy for reinforcing spatial impact and bodily expression favored by painters in the Late Renaissance and in the Baroque era.

The exhibition architecture, with walls in a muted Venetian red, pushes its way in front of the geometric order of the interior, which is almost imperceptibly not quite rectilinear. On the display walls there are new paintings by Daniel Richter, who was born in northern Germany in 1962. The saccharine colors of the scarcely nuanced hues of the paintings are openly provocative; they clamor for attention, calling out almost aggressively into the stillness of the meditative space. At the same time the thick, ruggedly applied paint propels the bodies in these paintings even further out from the canvas. Their vitality and garish tones eclipse our initial sensations as we entered this Early Baroque space. There is no avoiding what now greets us, elbowing its way into the foreground. But then our eyes become accustomed to the light and the dark and our rational minds seek enlightenment, relief, maybe even reassurance. What is the connection between these paintings and those others that were made over four hundred years ago?

The paintings in the Scuola depict the compassionate vocation of the two confraternities and are dedicated to their patron saints, Mary, Consoler of the Afflicted, and Saint Jerome. The Marian paintings were originally mainly in the sacristy on the ground floor, with the scenes from the life of Saint Jerome on the upper floor. Although there have been some changes over the centuries, such as the relocation of the altar by Alessandro Vittorino to the Basilica Santi Giovanni e Paolo, the interior of the meeting hall is still largely as it was in the seventeenth century. Here, as in other rooms in the Scuola, leading Venetian painters created the decorative scheme. The poignant scenes from the Passion of Christ, on the walls of the meeting hall, served as an aid to meditative contemplation. The drastic events they depict with such palpable vigor leap out from the darkness at the viewer. The artists were Leonardo Corona (1561–1605) and Baldassare d’Anna (ca.

1560–after 1639). In 1973 Leonardo Corona’s striving for immediacy and authenticity was described by Pietro Zampetti as “rash and reckless, but honest”—attributes that might now be associated with the unfiltered contents of reality TV. Zampetti describes the painter’s “long, powerful brushstrokes, floods and flashes of light, improvised movements” as he pieced together the narrative as if he were building a stage set. And the same style was taken to extremes, slightly later, by Antonio Zanchi (1631–1722) in his two paintings of parables from the Gospel According to Saint Luke, which are placed above the doors to the sacristy and the stairwell. In both scenarios the background sinks almost completely into darkness, while the figures spiraling toward us are picked out with bright, carefully placed highlights. Everything is out of kilter here; the painter has moved right in—close to the action—and there is little hope of standing back. We are in the midst of things, and it is not only the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan who are met with the expressive gestures of the crowds around them, we also feel their force. Late Mannerist painting has reached a dramatic turning point. There is no scope for more here: not more drama, nor chiaroscuro, nor viewer participation. We lose sight of the narrative underpinning the paintings, and what we do see does not require considered reflection on the source text but instead vehemently tells a story that draws directly on our own conscious perception and our emotions.

Meanwhile, in the ceiling coffers, the images of Purgatory—with their promise of purification and cleansing—also exhort the sinners awaiting death to examine their consciences. During the Counter-Reformation the theological doctrine of Limbo as a place somewhere between Heaven and Hell regained its earlier importance. Purification of the soul could lead to Salvation. The depiction of Purgatory by Jacopo Palma the Younger (ca. 1548–1628), which still survives today, replaced an earlier pictorial scheme by Tintoretto. In the center we see Pope Pius V, previously a Grand Inquisitor, who ascended to the papal throne in 1566. Above and below him are two rectangular panels forming a Saint Andrew’s cross. They depict sinners desperately writhing in billowing flames. Their greatly foreshortened, naked bodies with deep shadows convey the hopelessness, the bitter reality of their situation. In the corners and around the edges of the coffered ceiling there are double portraits of saints with books or papers as symbols of their scholarship. One remarkable scene depicts Saint Ambrose and Saint Jerome. As always with a lion by his side, Saint Jerome—in a striking red, flowing robe is turning unexpectedly away from us, toward a menacingly brooding sky. His role leading mortals through Limbo symbolizes that of the charitable confraternity whose members accompanied condemned prisoners to their execution and on to their burial.

Some two hundred years after the closure of the Scuola, its popular name—*Scuola della Buona Morte* (Scuola of Good Death)—has a macabre ring to it. Who is to say what a good death is? And, in any case, which human beings are allowed to kill other human beings? With what justification? There could not be a more existential question. And yet it cannot be discussed in either moral or relative terms. Daniel Richter recently described his latest paintings as “beautifying ugliness.” Clearly he was referring to their underlying motifs, which—not for the first time in his career—invoke heinous crimes or theaters of war. Is that permissible? For instance, was it acceptable during World War I for German soldiers to pose in front of shot-to-pieces houses on the Western Front in once tranquil villages in Flanders, to smile into the camera and to send those pictures by the military postal service to their families at home? Daniel Richter has often included ephemera of that kind in his exhibitions and publications, alongside books (literature, or on philosophy or politics), documents, and pop-culture paraphernalia. Around two years ago his attention was caught by a certain item in his collection of war postcards: the image is a photograph taken in the town of Haparanda on the Swedish-Finnish border. In the foreground there are two German soldiers on their journey home—each

with a leg missing. The postures of the two impaired figures, side by side, and the crutches each man is using in place of a leg seem to turn them into a single organism. At the same time the lines of the simple orthopedic aids look like graphic symbols in a cumulative, almost surreal body-figure. What kinds of bodies are these, what sort of homunculi is the war sending back? Nothing else so effectively visualizes the cruelty of war as images of the war-wounded. As early as 1924 the pacifist Ernst Friedrich published terrible photographs of war and the victims of war, with distressing captions, in his book *War against Wars* (reprinted several times in four languages).

The Haparanda postcard led Daniel Richter to produce an extensive series of drawings. In the spring of 2020, during the first long months of lockdown in Germany due to the global Covid 19 pandemic, he largely withdrew from daily life and concentrated on his plans for an exhibition of twentieth-century collages, starting with political works by John Heartfield made in and after 1924. For the first time in a long while Daniel Richter began drawing again. Using a pen and [Scribto drawing ink on high-quality paper](#) he executed countless line drawings of the two wounded soldiers pictured on the postcard. The ink marks cut finely and incisively black into the white ground, or they coalesce in ominous, dark stains and unmistakable accents. In their sheer number these sheets demonstrate the impossibility of fully containing one's grief and horror. The two invalids become all invalids. Daniel Richter also dissected drawings he had done, extracting figurative elements from them, at the same time as using motifs from glossy magazines and health-and-wellbeing brochures for other works on paper. In the ensuing collages he juxtaposed elements that supposedly do not belong together yet make sense on a subliminal level. These surprising glued combinations create a world as it is yet should not be. Advertisements for wellbeing in a time of contradictions and paradoxes are cut up using a pair of scissors. And of course nothing beats the human body in advertising. A beautiful body, a manipulated, immaculate body. As fate would have it the first serious forays into plastic surgery exactly coincided with the time when soldiers in World War I started having their faces shot off and losing limbs, like the wounded men in the postcard. Now there was an urgent need to develop prostheses and to establish a new form of restorative surgery. Rank beauty higher than ugliness. Who has the right to play Frankenstein? Who is the pact for "wellbeing" made with, and at what cost? Because no make-up lasts forever.

The elements of drawing, which had previously had more of a subordinate role in Daniel Richter's work, had a distinct influence on the paintings he produced in and around 2019–20. The black lines seen in Daniel Richter's paintings since 2015 were initially intended to obfuscate areas of paint that had been hand-applied with a palette knife, treating them like penitenti—cutting across or revealing bodies only to deny them again, endowing them with a mucky, unlovely and hence unavoidable presence or plunging them deep into the canvas. Black oil pastels always came into play when colors or a form were either too obvious or too ambiguous. The grim lines traced bodily gestures and facial expressions, suggested empty eye sockets and bodily orifices, or reinforced an almost comic-like, colorful play of muscles or a tenderly brutal pas de deux. At around the same time as he was working on his ink drawings, Daniel Richter also created a series of paintings on the idea of skinning, going back to the myth of Marsyas, who was skinned alive by Apollo for his hubris in issuing a challenge to a god. And now the line in Daniel Richter's paintings took on a life of its own. Like a whetted knife it runs along the painted figure; its sweep could almost be described as mannered. The line slices and dissects the motif yet is also pleasingly reminiscent of the Soft style of clothed Gothic figures or of the erotic appeal of the line in drawings by Pablo Picasso. In Daniel Richter's most recent paintings, from the last twelve months or so, lines still have the same vigor: they act as separators, easily pushing aside actions and scuffles like images on a stage curtain, but they are also vectors (like the spokes of the crutches used by the homeward-bound soldiers in Haparanda) that hold the weary paint-flesh together—turning,

twisting, supporting, or even impaling it. The bodies in these paintings are present, but they are also tragic, because they can no longer support themselves. They are shoved together, they are too bold, they fake beauty, but what is inside them is ugly, existential, unstoppable. It is impossible to recount their contents, no narration in the world could provide them with a moral basis. These are paintings that operate beyond language.

Daniel Richter has frequently referenced the history of painting. Not to imitate earlier styles or to pursue them, like a learner, but rather to use them to develop his own autonomous position. He embarked on his career as a painter relatively late, having previously lived out his urge for autonomy in a different social sphere. For a good ten years he was part of the autonomous, left-wing underground scene in Hamburg and although, contrary to popular opinion, he never lived in a squat as such, he did not hesitate—despite his beliefs as a conscientious objector—to resort to violence to defend his political convictions. In the early 1990s, after the Berlin Wall had come down in 1989 in a spectacular demonstration of the failure of a communist-socialist worldview, Daniel Richter reacted by withdrawing from the leftist scene and enrolling at the Hochschule für bildende Künste in Hamburg to study painting in the class of Werner Büttner. Since then he has felt that social change will more likely be brought about by painstaking political work plus a sense of responsibility than by brute strength. Nevertheless, his art is not a call to action; it is free of well-meaning commentaries, advice, or even propaganda. Which is not to say that it is not political. At odds with the current trends and the legacy of German Expressionist painting, which had flared up again in the 1980s as “hunger for paintings,” in the 1990s, Daniel Richter concentrated exclusively on abstract paintings. The autonomy of their pictorial language was not a conceptual construct of some kind; on the contrary it was striving for a utopia but also launching a subversive attack on painting without abandoning it. Daniel Richter wanted to deliberately overload his paintings and to overwhelm his canvases in a kind of painterly “rampage” (D. R.), duping and asking too much of himself and the viewers as a way of testing the limits of painting. What art critics like to proclaim as his “change of direction” (toward figuration) in 2000 was, on closer examination, not as abrupt as that suggests. Each change of direction, which always ensued when the latest new ground had largely been exhausted, in fact constituted yet another exploration of the potential of painting to engage with reality.

The misinterpretation of Daniel Richter’s *Phienox* (one of the new figurative paintings he produced in 2000) as a response to the tenth anniversary of the Fall of the Berlin Wall, sparked a debate on Daniel Richter’s canvases as history paintings. He soon reacted—indirectly, metaphorically—with the painting *Eine Stadt namens Authen* (A City Called Authen). His penchant for corrupting titles by tampering with individual letters is another clue to his thinking here. The mythical bird that rose unharmed from the ashes of defeat is alluded to in the title of one painting; meanwhile it is not only the birthplace of democracy that resonates in the other but also an allusion to the authenticity of the place and the action. But Daniel Richter specifically does not refer to “Phoenix” or “authentic Athens,” because the paintings are not representations of the Fall of the Berlin Wall or of fisticuffs at the agora in Athens. In fact the source materials for these monumental paintings were tiny images in a newspaper report on the truck bomb detonated by Islamist terrorists outside the US Embassy in Nairobi and a photograph of drab large-panel-system blocks that had been built in East Berlin. So maybe history paintings after all? No, because their subject matter and materials open up a much wider horizon. They transpose topics onto the stage of painting, relieving them of any direct historical or symbolic meaning and rendering them independent and universally applicable like allegories. Even broader interpretations, which equate *Phienox* to a medieval pietà and *Eine Stadt namens Authen* to the cleansing of the Temple in the Bible story, do not provide any definitive truths.

Many of the figurative compositions Daniel Richter painted during the decade up until 2011–12 are based on found contemporary images; but images and stories that originated in his own mind also found their way onto his canvases. When the pictorial protagonists do not dissolve into an abstract environment they appear in demarcated pictorial spaces that look a little like anonymous stage sets. Later on, hackneyed melancholy romantic landscapes also served as settings. Well before this phase could lead to a routine style, Daniel Richter once again unexpectedly changed direction. The question that accompanied every figurative painting—concerning the relationship of its motifs to reality—also led to more fundamental questions about reality. What is our world? How can a painting embrace the world? How can it say something about the world, yet not descend into clumsy commentary? How can it convey a political message without turning into agitprop?

Around 2015 the stage sets and the landscapes disappeared from Daniel Richter's paintings. Now the ground and the background consist of meticulously gradated, translucent strata with motifs pushing in front of them—motifs that can be interpreted in the broadest sense as groups of human beings. In other instances the concept of a background no longer applies; an initially figurative ground is so resolutely scraped and painted over that it is not only no longer recognizable, strangely abstract compositions now accumulate on it, making no reference to anything human. What had happened? In the paintings with stratified backgrounds, such as *Hello I Love You*, abstract lines—as in a diagrammatic temperature chart or a stock market index—foreshorten and symbolize actual life issues. Perhaps the jagged lines also represent fleeting memories of earlier associations with the landscape, with characteristic silhouettes and serrated mountain ranges. However, the corporeal dramas of two or three people roughly palette-knifed onto the ground and reworked with oil pastels allowed the artist to specifically avoid conjuring up some carefully painted, winsome scene on the canvas. The subject matter came from the expanses of the Internet—which seems all the more inexhaustible when it comes to erotic images that embody not only a certain reality but also a peculiarly standardized alienation of a real world of feelings, images that not infrequently involve an invidious liaison of desire and violence. Meanwhile abstract paintings with amorphous, planar compositions were inspired by political maps, that is to say, cool scientific abstractions of worldwide human suffering triggered by displacement and persecution. In recent years these two strands in Daniel Richter's paintings have increasingly converged, although the way he paints has barely changed. The backgrounds are now in just two colors with no additional elaboration. But the events in the foreground have become ever more physical and compelling. Whereas Daniel Richter's earlier multi-figure compositions gave him a reputation for depicting anonymous human figures (recalling figures photographed using a thermal imaging camera) that merge into their surroundings, there are no more crowd scenes of that kind. Now the drama is individual and yet universal.

In his most recent works Daniel Richter has left the realms of narrative representation and of things translucent, ghostly, or disembodied that he so often returned to with his brush and palette between 2000 and 2014. His most pressing wish is to unite the world on canvas with painting. With hindsight it seems as if his earlier paintings were the playpens where the present works could grow in safety. The decision largely to dispense with a paintbrush as a narrative tool harks back to an early phase, when Daniel Richter challenged painting as a system by creating an endlessly abundant vocabulary of patterns and almost psychedelic scenarios. And now, too, the palette knife in his hand gives his paintings an experimental immediacy and allows the figure—that previously wrestled so ferociously with the picture ground—to depart altogether. The figure has become a body, but not the body of a human being, the body of painting. The motif (the returnees in Haparanda) becomes a pretext to go on painting. Yet the motif is not irrelevant but rather the key to an

unabashed, an endlessly and desperately enacted trivialization of something that we lack the words to express. A still life, a vase, or a dog could not be expounded like this. There must be something harsher behind it. Maybe Hell or mundane cruelty: “The optimism of young people who set out and then just get slaughtered” (D. R.) cannot be told in some narrative. And the *Life* magazine report on a Jewish plumber, Isadore Greenbaum, who charged onto the stage in protest at an anti-Semitic rally attended by 20,000 thousand Nazi-sympathizers at Madison Square Garden in New York in 1939 and was nearly beaten to death for his actions—a report of that kind cannot be retold, but perhaps it can be understood and represented on a more universal level. The motifs in Daniel Richter’s latest works—distantly reminiscent of human figures—do not signify specific people or events but have been freely painted as the bodies of painting. Their dancing, their wrestling, their attacks on others are like any form of human resistance to an overwhelming force. Violence and love, like obsession and submission, are close bedfellows, and then there is also the furor—the rage—that comes across in the way Daniel Richter voices his convictions. In his recent paintings thick lines of red oil pastel and red welts have become the driving force. They blast empty space into the composition and curtail its plastic illusion; they thrust bodies to the edges or pierce them on all sides. Painting hounds itself until it no longer knows up from down. As it struggles with itself it performs acrobatic contortions that are barely imaginable, yet one sees them with one’s own eyes: as if a hyper-flexible, endlessly powerful body were bending right back—like a Caribbean limbo dancer—squirming its way under an impossibly low pole.

Once again: this is not about morals, Daniel Richter does not presume to judge the world, he fights for the world as it is. Like the Christian images that the members of the Scuola would contemplate in meditative devotion, in our own time Daniel Richter’s paintings present us with a vision that derives, on a meta-level, from historical, literary, and philosophical scholarship but that is also comprehensible as art, with no need for background reading. A possible approach might involve “wonder beyond belief” (Navid Kermani), which would allow us to locate the dance of the (painted) bodies and their struggles, their colorful history, their contrariness, their uncertain existences in a mid-way state that might be called limbo. Somewhere between life and death, between Heaven and Hell, burning in Purgatory, very close to purification and catharsis.

Translated from the German by Fiona Elliott

Secondary Reading:

### **Venice**

Chiara Traverso, *La Scuola di San Fantin o dei «Picai»: Carità e giustizia a Venezia* (Venice: Marsilio 2000).

Pietro Zampetti, *Guida alle Opera d’art dell Scuola di San Fantin*, ed. Ileana Chiappini di Sorio (Venice: Ateneo Veneto 2003) [rev. version of the 1973 edition]

Petra Reski, “Brüder des Todes,” in *1200 Jahre Venedig: Von der Seemacht zum Sehnsuchtsort*, no. 3 in the series *Der Spiegel: Geschichte* (2012), 86–89.

Barbara Tasca, “El Scaleter oder die Kunst, Süßigkeiten herzustellen, in *bestveniceguides.it*, December 17, 2021.

**Daniel Richter**

*Daniel Richter: Billard um Halbzehn*, ed. Beate Ermacora, exh. cat. Kiel: Kunsthalle zu Kiel 2001. Essay by Beate Ermacora.

*Daniel Richter: Grünspan*, ed. Julian Heynen, exh. cat. Düsseldorf: K 21 Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen (Bielefeld: Kerber 2002). Essays by Julian Heynen, Fritz W. Kramer, Olaf Peters, and Jan-Hendrik Wentrup.

*Daniel Richter: Die Palette, 1995–2007*, ed. Christoph Heinrich, exh. cat. Hamburg: Hamburger Kunsthalle (Cologne: DuMont 2007). Essays by Christoph Heinrich, Dietmar Dath, and Kitty Scott.

*Daniel Richter: Chromos Goo Bugly*, ed. Beate Ermacora, exh. cat. Innsbruck: Galerie im Taxispalais (Cologne: Snoeck 2014). Essays by Beate Ermacora and Cord Riechelmann.

*Daniel Richter. Hello, I Love You*, ed. Katharina Dohm and Max Hollein, exh. cat. Frankfurt am Main: Schirn Kunsthalle (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König 2015). Interview with Daniel Richter conducted by Katharina Dohm; essay by Eva Meyer-Hermann.

*Daniel Richter: Lonely Old Slogans*, ed. Michael Juul Holm and Poul Erik Tøjner, exh. cat. Humlebæk: Louisiana Museum of Modern Art 2016. Essays by Roberto Ohrt and Paul Erik Tøjner.

*Daniel Richter: Furor I*, exh. cat. Paris: Thaddaeus Ropac 2021.