

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

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An Artist Beyond Isms

He has been called a postmodernist, a neo-Expressionist, an Abstractionist, a realist, a formalist and a Conceptualist. He is all and none of the above. Gerhard Richter is simply a true believer in painting.

By Michael Kimmelman

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Richter at home with his wife, Sabine, and their two children, Moritz and Elle.
Photograph by Thomas Struth

You can't miss the painter Gerhard Richter's studio in a suburb outside Cologne. It is a large white brick-and-concrete shoe box he designed several years ago, an industrial-looking building with a blank wall facing the street. This is a distinguished neighborhood of split-level houses occupied by prosperous families. Richter moved here from a former factory building in Cologne, where many artists live, partly because he wanted to get away from other artists. Just recently, he bought some trees and had them planted in a row to screen the front of the building after he discovered that a few of the neighbors were complaining about its severity. Having built a private Berlin Wall with his studio, he has now decorated it with wild apple trees.

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In the studio, there is an office for a part-time secretary, a guest room, a small kitchen and a workshop for the assistant who stretches Richter's canvases and makes the architectural models by which Richter calculates -- to the millimeter, if possible -- how his pictures should look in prospective galleries or museums. Beyond the workshop and a tidy open storage closet are the rooms where Richter paints: a large studio and a smaller one.

Only operating rooms are this immaculate. Not a sheet of paper is on the secretary's black modular desk. Every roll of tape is kept in color-coded order on designated hooks in the workshop. Brushes are stacked in drawers Richter custom-designed on rolling shelves. After leaving a half-full coffee cup in the smaller studio one morning, I returned a short while later to find it gone and the desk wiped clean, although I never saw anybody enter or leave the room.

When your works sell for millions of dollars, as Richter's do at auction, you can indulge yourself if you are an obsessive-compulsive. Richter's life, like his work, depends upon absolute control, and there is something both elegant and alarming about that condition.

Since the mid-60's, Richter has been celebrated and attacked, pretty much equally, for the extreme physical precision, maddening opacity and daunting intellectual quality of his work, which switch-hits, sometimes almost as if arbitrarily, between realism and abstraction. The realist pictures -- landscapes, flowers, skulls, portraits, candles, among other things -- copy postcards, news photos and his own snapshots in a style that is mechanically exact but calculatedly blurry in parts, daring a viewer to figure out what, if anything, the pictures are about. The abstractions sometimes perversely turn improvisational gestures into deliberate, mechanical-looking, freeze-dried marks. They have the quality of blue ice, pristine and cool. Richter's paintings are disciplined, contradictory, strange, melancholic, even sometimes morbid.

And they are among the great works of the postwar era. At a time when art is full of doubt, Richter is the most self-critical of artists, putting painting to the most extravagant tests and taking nothing for granted. In the process, he makes disturbing and often utterly beautiful art. Other artists, like Jasper Johns, ask what is the meaning of a brush stroke. Richter asks what is the value of art itself -- what is its use in the world.

In February, the Museum of Modern Art will open a major retrospective of his paintings. Organized by Robert Storr, it is overdue. Richter has never been the subject of a museum retrospective in New York. America's leading modern art museum is only now looking at Europe's most challenging modern painter.

Richter's reputation is as a prolific, tricky virtuoso, a deliberately elusive Conceptualist who, it is often said, paints only to prove that painting is dead. The Modern's show should help to alter that view. "He's not playing hard to get," Storr says. "He's doing something that is hard to get." Spending time with Richter, talking to him, you discover that far from being sterile or evasive, he is at heart a traditionalist: in a completely unsentimental, cold-eyed way, he is a true believer in painting. He can even seem old-fashioned when he muses on the decline of modern art and the need for standards. He is a formal man in an informal time.

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His work asks people to think freshly and not romantically about control versus freedom, austerity versus exuberance, faith versus skepticism: about what we can trust in what we see. It raises questions about contemporary politics and German history, which Richter doesn't presume to answer. Having grown up under the Nazis and then in Communist East Germany, he has had his share of dictators and ideologues, in life and in art. He is a solitary man who rarely grants interviews, aware that his solitude also enhances his aura. In private, he comes across as forthcoming, courtly and driven -- a competitive, sometimes thin-skinned artist who, at the end of the day, just wants to be alone in his immaculate studio, painting.

Thirty years ago, Richter painted 48 black-and-white portrait heads copied straight from an old German encyclopedia. The subjects included Thomas Mann, Puccini, William James and Kafka. Dead white males. A pantheon of dour faces.

Richter has never said much about these pictures, but he has talked about the problem of the father figure for Germans of his era. Who were young Germans supposed to look up to after the war? An old generation had been disgraced. A new generation distrusted tradition and all figures of authority. Richter's portraits weren't depictions of his personal heroes. They were illustrations of a dilemma. Deadpan, unlovable and slightly absurd, the heads solicited neither admiration nor disdain, only a vague sense of loss. Richter was poking at a wound, the cultural, political gulf between prewar and postwar societies.

But the issue of the father figure was also personal to him. He was born in Dresden on Feb. 9, 1932. By the time he was school age, like other ordinary middle-class German children with his background, he was enrolled in the German Young Folk, the Hitler Youth for small boys and girls. Parents enrolled their children if they didn't want to be ostracized by the Nazis -- or, of course, if they were Nazis. His father, Horst, was a schoolteacher who joined the Nazi Party because it was necessary and expected if he wanted to keep his job, Richter says. Horst fought in the army, was taken prisoner by the Americans and then returned home in 1946 without prospects, like so many other German men.

By then, his son regarded him as a hapless interloper. "I thought, What do you want here?" Richter recalls over dinner one evening at the Excelsior Hotel in Cologne. He pauses, before revealing something else: "He was not my father anyway. My mother had let me know this in different ways." He doesn't say if he knows who his real father was.

The daughter of a concert pianist who went on to manage a family brewery that went bankrupt, his mother, Hildegard Schönfelder, was a strong-willed woman in a mixed-class, mismatched relationship. She had taken another lover by the end of the war. She made Richter feel special -- fostering his interest in culture and his sense of social superiority -- but he has few warm memories of either her or Horst. When, as a young man, he fled in 1961 from East Germany to West Germany, he left them in Dresden without saying a word and never saw them again. "They died several years later, when it was not really possible for me to go back," he says matter-of-factly, then returns to his dinner.

Among his long-lost juvenilia, there is a portrait of Horst, which Richter keeps in a loose-leaf binder of black-and-white reproductions at his studio. It is an awkward drawing of a bullish man, arms crossed. Horst is blank-faced. In the mid-60's, Richter painted "Horst With Dog,"

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based on a family snapshot. This time, his father mugs at the camera, his frizzy hair sticking out either side of his head. He looks like a buffoon.

There are two other family portraits from this period. Uncle Rudi was his mother's favorite brother, a handsome playboy, the proud Nazi, a familiar German type from that era. Rudi went to war and was killed after just a few days. Richter remembers being impressed by Rudi's bravado as a child. "Although he was very stupid," he adds. The painting of Rudi, in black and white, shows him stiffly posing in his army uniform.

"Aunt Marianne" is the other portrait, based on a different snapshot. Marianne was Rudi's and Hildegard's sister. She was sent to a mental institution when she was 18, where Nazi doctors euthanized her. In the picture, she is a shadowy figure holding Richter when he was a baby.

If you saw Richter on the street, you might mistake him for a country doctor. Small, bespectacled and trim, with cropped gray hair, he wears jackets, button-down shirts and plain knit ties.

He speaks softly, not tentatively but carefully, in ways that can be exquisitely contradictory. Richter's detractors say he is a cynic, though he denies that, preferring to think of himself as gloomy, yes, pessimistic, possibly even insecure -- but not cynical. "By nature I am a skeptic," he says. "I don't dare to think my paintings are great. I can't understand the arrogance of someone saying, 'I have created a big, important work.' I want to reject this pathetic behavior, this notion of the heroic artist." His point is directed at what he sees as a culture of excessive self-regard among artists who should know enough to admit the limits of what they do. "Pollock, Barnett Newman, Franz Kline, their heroism derived from the climate of their time, but we do not have this climate.

"On the other hand," he adds, typically flipping the argument around an instant later, "you do need feelings like they had to some extent. So I am afraid there must be a side of me close to those feelings. Those absurd feelings."

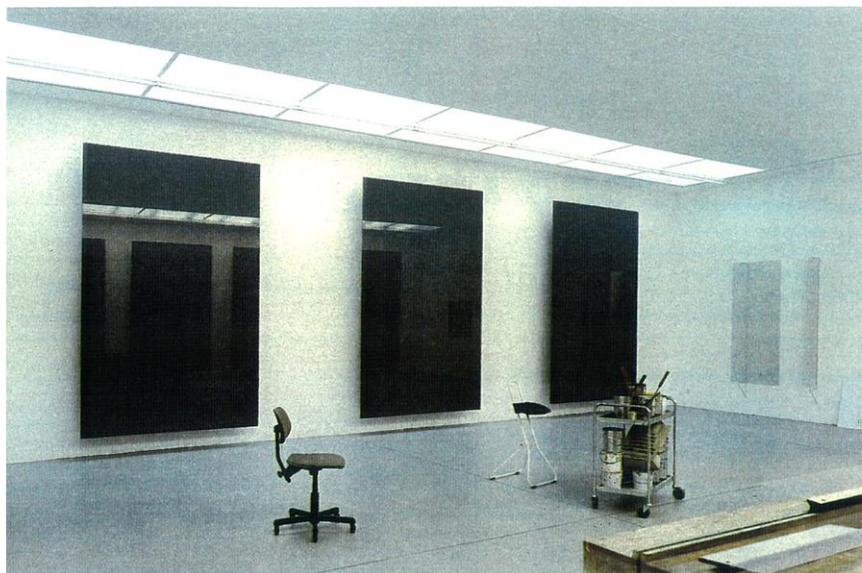
Richter knows he is a great artist.

About to turn 70, he lives with Sabine Moritz, his third wife, and their two children, Moritz, 7, and Ella, 5, in a house behind the studio, which he also designed. Like the studio, his house is a meticulous, perfectly symmetrical concrete-and-glass building, which a friend of his described as a mausoleum. The children's swing set in the garden softens the effect slightly.

He sticks to a strict routine, waking at 6:15 every morning. He makes breakfast for his family, takes Ella to school at 7:20 and is in the studio by 8. At 1 o'clock, he crosses the garden from the studio back to the house. The grass in the garden is uncut. Richter proudly points this out, to show that even it is a matter of his choosing, not by chance. At 1 o'clock, he eats lunch in the dining room, alone. A housekeeper lays out the same meal for him each day: yogurt, tomatoes, bread, olive oil and chamomile tea.

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After lunch, Richter returns to his studio to work into the evening. "I have always been structured," he explains. "What has changed is the proportions. Now it is eight hours of paperwork and one of painting." He claims to waste time -- on the house, the garden -- although this is hard to believe. "I go to the studio every day, but I don't paint every day. I love playing with my architectural models. I love making plans. I could spend my life arranging things. Weeks go by, and I don't paint until finally I can't stand it any longer. I get fed up. I almost don't want to talk about it, because I don't want to become self-conscious about it, but perhaps I create these little crises as a kind of a secret strategy to push myself. It is a danger to wait around for an idea to occur to you. You have to find the idea." As he talks, I notice a single drop of paint on the floor beneath one of his abstract pictures, the only thing out of place in the studio.



In Richter's studio, only a brush bristle is out of place.

Richter has been married continuously since 1957, just not to the same woman. His first wife, Ema Eufinger, was a textile-design student whom he met in Dresden. They had a daughter, Betty, born in 1966, who now lives in Cologne. Richter met Isa Genzken in the mid-70's when she became a student at the art academy in Düsseldorf, where he was teaching; they married in 1982. That was a rough marriage between two intense artists. "My last wife was very competitive, which was hard for both of us," Richter says. Then, in 1995, he married Sabine, a former student of his. A beautiful, unaffected, soft-spoken woman, she manages Richter's strict regime, raises their two children and paints in the studio in Cologne, which they kept after moving to the suburbs. Her paintings -- landscapes and flowers -- are more atmospheric, less photographic than Richter's.

The art on the walls of the house is mostly his own, odds and ends he has not sold for whatever reason. He doesn't collect art. There are also small paintings in the living room by Sabine.

The only other works I notice in the house are two early photographs, from the 1980's, by Thomas Struth. No painter has had a bigger influence than Richter on the current generation of German star photographers that includes Struth, Andreas Gursky and Thomas Ruff.

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Adopting his clinical style, they have noted the ironic uses he made of photography and in different ways paid tribute. Struth -- who has his own big traveling retrospective opening in Dallas in May -- has produced several portraits of Richter (new ones illustrate this article). Gursky has made a photograph of an all-gray carpet, alluding to Richter's all-gray paintings, and he photographed the Rhine river in 1999 -- a big, digitally manipulated picture that consists of wide, thin bands of grass, water and sky -- in so doing recalling how Richter had evoked German Romantic art via postcard photographs.

Richter keeps a catalog of everything he has done, or everything he cares about having done. He has also put together an inventory of almost every source he has ever used: this is his immense, obsessive "Atlas," an ever-expanding compendium of thousands of scavenged news photos, snapshots, postcards and drawings.

When he begins a new landscape or still life, he combs through "Atlas" and through snapshots he keeps in a drawer. Sometimes, he makes slight adjustments to a photograph after he decides to use it: he crops out, adds in or covers over details, so that the painting will not be just a rote copy of the original, although he wants the composition to look as if it comes straight from a snapshot or news photo. He and Sabine take pictures on vacation. Sometimes they are views of a corner of a house, a balcony, anonymous places.

Today, Richter chooses one of these, a snowy scene of the edge of a building, and carries it to the basement of his studio. He puts a canvas on an easel at the end of the room and slides the photograph into a projector. The photo appears, projected onto the canvas, and Richter begins to trace it with a piece of charcoal and a ruler. Tracing each minute detail of a photograph, as he does, usually takes Richter a couple of hours. Then he is ready to paint.

"Idiots can do what I do," he says, although of course he doesn't really think so. "When I first started to do this in the 60's, people laughed. I clearly showed that I painted from photographs. It seemed so juvenile. The provocation was purely formal -- that I was making paintings like photographs. Nobody asked about what was in the pictures. Nobody asked who my Aunt Marianne was. That didn't seem to be the point."

The point, among other things, was to distance himself from the clichés of artistic expression -- all the spontaneous, fiery, warm and fuzzy modes of painting -- so as to make people really look and not reflexively swoon. By using deliberately banal photographs, impersonally mimicked, he was doing the exact opposite of what painting was expected to do, not grabbing a viewer by the lapels but methodically copying an everyday image. In time, some of the pictures have come to look expressively painted, perceptions having changed, but making methodical copies was Richter's intent.

"The abstracts are the opposite to work on," he says. "That process is more like walking, step by step, without an intention, until you discover where you are going. When I paint a landscape from a photograph or an image like this one, I can see the end point before I start, although in fact it always turns out slightly different than I imagined. What I have is not facility, because this really doesn't take skill. I have an eye. I couldn't make a drawing of you sitting here right now. I would love to have that ability, in the same way that I would love to play the piano. Virtuosity is a precondition for pianists, but in addition you have to be good.

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These are not the same thing. This is the big problem for painting today, the terrible side of modern art, because you can now do anything and simply declare it to be art -- with no sense of quality."

In the mid-60's, Richter began painting color charts. They were like the paint charts in hardware stores, only bigger, and the colors were not in any particular order. The charts looked Pop and also Minimalist, but they weren't either, precisely. They weren't even exactly abstract, being adaptations of real objects. But they were catchy and colorful. Richter had found an in-between space -- neither Pop nor Minimalism and not simply Conceptualism -- from which to reconsider abstract art. As a Modern curator, Peter Galassi, puts it, Richter was like the suitor "who expresses the purity of his love by rejecting the tired gestures of romance." He "discovered a way to make big seductive paintings by renouncing what he regarded as the worn-out clichés of abstraction."

The United States, puffed up about its own art for so many years, has condescended toward European art since World War II, notwithstanding the international vogue for neo-Expressionism during the 1980's. Neo-Expressionism was the epitome of heart on the sleeve, gestural painting, with which Richter's abstractions were confused. Richter got a boost financially from that burst of attention: the American art market, above all, made him a rich man. But the vogue lumped him with German artists like Georg Baselitz and Markus Lüpertz, who had more in common with fashionable Americans like Julian Schnabel and David Salle. Richter remembers "all those vile painters and then Tom Krens doing that horrible show," referring to the Guggenheim director's smorgasbord of German art in the late 80's, "Refigured Painting," which introduced some people to Richter's work but left many of them saying that they never wanted to look at another contemporary German painting again, Richter's or anybody else's.

Neo-Expressionism finally sank from the weight of its mediocrity, and Richter was liberated from that connection, but this left many people still puzzling over his art. It refused to fit into pigeonholes. Picasso, the exception to everything, got away with being a chameleon. But critics, not to mention auction houses and collectors, generally prefer painters to be consistent. Richter flaunted his inconstancy, implying that no mode was better than any other -- that realism and abstraction were interchangeable.

This attitude may have befuddled the public, but it made him the ideal man for the postmodernists, who came along by the 90's. They repackaged him as a deconstructivist, one of those conceptual artists dismantling the language of art only to leave it in disarray, the Jean Baudrillard of painting. "I know nothing, can do nothing, understand nothing, know nothing, nothing," Richter said, and it became one of his most frequently cited remarks. To postmodernists, nihilism became the essence of his art. He made his so-called in-paintings by pushing different colors of paint around with a meandering brush, like a bored child, until they made gray slush. What could seem more nihilistic than that?

Meanwhile, the pictures he copied from family photos and newspaper illustrations, while they seemed to owe something to Pop and Andy Warhol, exploited the pathos and banality of the ordinary snapshot: "I was surprised by photography, which we all use so massively every day. Suddenly, I saw it in a new way, as a picture that offered me a new view, free of all

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the conventional criteria I had always associated with art. It had no style, no composition, no judgment. It freed me from personal experience. For the first time, there was nothing to it: it was pure picture. That's why I wanted to have it, to show it -- not use it as a means to painting, but use painting as a means to photography."

Postmodernists, puritanically distrustful of aesthetic pleasure and eager to plunge a stake once and for all into the heart of painting, praised Richter for what one enthusiast called his "thorough demystification of the activity of painting and its pretensions to creativity": Richter "unmasks painting as a dull and nugatory activity." His paintings weren't really paintings; they were rhetorical "statements about ideas for paintings."

To postmodernists, Richter was "the unrivaled anti-master of his craft who could demonstrate once and for all that painting had exhausted its formerly protean possibilities," as Robert Storr writes in his catalog to the Modern's upcoming retrospective.

But, as Storr adds, this view makes sense only if you don't look at the work or listen to what Richter actually says. To Richter, any dogma, ideology or mass belief is abhorrent. Kasper König, the director of the Ludwig Museum in Cologne and an old friend of Richter's, remembers pointing to a big photograph by Andreas Gursky of a crowd at a rock concert. Richter recoiled at the image because it showed mass culture.

Richter now sees the postmodernists mostly as ideologues who want to pigeonhole him as a purely rhetorical, Conceptual painter. "My works are not just rhetorical, except in the sense that all art is rhetorical," he responds. "I believe in beauty." This is exactly what the postmodernists do not want to hear.

But Richter's inclination is often to do what people do not want or expect. Received opinion is always suspect, as far as he is concerned. In the early 80's, he painted images of burning candles -- pictures whose subject recalls old masters like La Tour and suggests religiosity. "Nobody bought any of them," he remembers. "And they were very cheap. Now they sell for a fortune. But they were out of time and unexpected. People knew my abstracts and my landscapes. Then came the candles. So maybe they were therefore necessary. But it was also polemics on my part. You are not supposed to do religious symbols. And when people attack religious symbols too much, this motivates me to react." Not that Richter is religious. He was simply reminding people of their own hypocrisy. We may not be religious but religious images of the past "still speak to us. We continue to love them, to use them, to have need of them."

At the moment, Richter's big studio is dominated by more than half a dozen darkly tinted panels of mirrored glass, each seven or eight feet high, differently cantilevered from the walls on adjustable steel supports that Richter continues to tinker with. Over the years, he has made many works that involve mirrors. You can miss the subtle angles of these cantilevered panels at first, so the works can look mute and drab. But they turn out to be surprising and disorienting.

On the walls of the small studio next door are several unfinished abstract paintings. He always works on a number of these at a time. They feed off one another, he says, and by

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working on several he doesn't get too uptight about any particular one. "At the beginning, I feel totally free, and it's fun, like being a child. The paintings can look good for a day or an hour. Over time, they change. In the end, you become like a chess player. It takes me longer than some people to recognize their quality, their situation -- to realize when they are finished. Finally, one day I enter the room and say, 'Checkmate.' Then sometimes I need a break, a quiet job, like a landscape. But I always need to paint abstracts again. I need that pleasure."

He starts with splashes of color or some geometric composition -- usually something gaudy and generic. Then he employs homemade wood-and-plexiglass squeegees to wipe and drag the paint. The process entails repeatedly building up and wiping off. The effects change depending on where and how he applies pressure with the squeegee. He has become very adept at this, but there is still an element of chance involved. He also pulls brushes through the wiped surface -- fine boar's hair brushes -- and in the end the pictures always turn out to look excruciatingly subtle and calculated.

"I can't say what they are about," he says. "I don't think they are expressionistic. I don't know why people say that. Why not say they are like Chinese paintings or like batik? People also talk about the quality of light in the paintings. 'Ah, the light!' Or 'Ah, the space!' It's phony reverence. It's ridiculous."

To the contrary, perversely, he says he expects people to look for something recognizable in an abstract picture, a chair or a cloud, even in an all-gray painting. It is instinctive to search for something, he says. Abstract art is inherently about the search -- and about not finding anything. "My gray monochromes have the same illusionistic implications as my landscapes," he insists. "I want them to be seen as narratives -- even if they are narratives of nothingness. Nothing is something. You might say they are like photographs of nothing."

He points to a half-finished purple abstraction facing his desk. "This one is too elegant, too shiny, like jewelry. It seeks applause. This is clear to me, but difficult to explain, which is what makes abstraction so fascinating. In one sense, abstract art is absolutely nothing, stupid. In 100 years, maybe people will just think it's garbage. But somehow we see something in it; we have a sense of quality." Searching for an illustration of his point, he leafs through a catalog to find some of the gray monochromes. "I was doing these when I was getting divorced. When you feel totally empty, you do this -- but then I saw that one picture was actually better than another. Both were miserable, but the difference was interesting. I loved this: that there must be something, some higher faculty, some progressive sensibility that we find in abstraction. But it is impossible to describe."

In the 60's, Richter painted several big, blurry, black-and-white aerial cityscapes. Some of them seemed to show bombed-out buildings. Others were pictures of housing developments like those rising across West Germany as part of the so-called economic miracle. Everyone in the new West Germany had been promised an apartment after the war, but what they got were often cheap flats in anonymous housing projects. Richter's paintings, deadpan as usual, conveyed the tediousness and misery, although he says: "I guess I wanted to use that theme, but I didn't want to acknowledge it. At that time, it was kitsch to be a social, political painter. I was thinking I had left that behind in East Germany."

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It had taken him a while to leave East Germany and bombed-out Dresden. The war, he recalls, was "very impressive to me. When I first got my uniform as a child, I liked it." He remembers pretending to dig trenches and be a soldier. "Later, we had pistols and cigarettes and there were big guns around, and you know for a boy, society breaking down is a big adventure."

He started drawing at 15; being introverted and lonely, it was a way to pass the time. "I loved to paint, but Germany was a destroyed country and becoming a painter was regarded as a terrible idea if you were from a bourgeois family as I was. So I thought I might be a stage painter. In the beginning, I didn't trust myself: Could I do it? Did I have the talent? For many years, that was the essence of my doubt. By the time I realized I finally could paint, people were saying painting was dead."

He entered the art academy in Dresden in 1951, at 19. Art in East Germany meant Socialist Realism, the Soviet style, with nods to modernists like Picasso, Diego Rivera and Renato Guttuso because they were Communists.

"In '46, I had started to awaken to the world," Richter recalls. "At first, the Russians nationalized everything. Rich people had their property taken away, and the people got access to their libraries, which was wonderful for me. I read Hermann Hesse. Thomas Mann was a little too heavy for me. But Lombroso, Nietzsche. Materialists, I would call them -- writers who said there was no god, no spirit, that freedom is an illusion. That affected me deeply.

"Until the early 50's, while the East German system was not yet fully in place, we were in limbo, which was fine. Unlike our fathers, we were not ashamed to be German. I thought it was great to be an art student. The art school was half-destroyed. Dresden was still in ruins, so we were obliged to work twice a week clearing away rubble around the city. We discovered the cellars of churches and a system of tunnels under the city. Fantastic. It all seemed perfectly normal. We were very happy. We made jokes. At school, the training was quite severe, different from schools in the West, and I enjoyed it at first. We had to be in class at 8 a.m. We had to study political science, economics, Russian and aesthetics. For a year, you only drew; you weren't allowed to paint.

"But somewhere along the way we all began to notice that there was something wrong. We saw a few art magazines from the West and got a sense of another world. We began to talk about a third way between capitalism and Communism in art. I saw the work of graphic designers from Poland, the only ones I came across who seemed to be doing something for society but in a style that was more modern."

In 1957, he married Ema Eufinger. By then, he was a successful muralist in a more or less Social Realist style, which meant he received state privileges, including the right to travel. On a trip to West Germany, he saw Jackson Pollocks and Lucio Fontanas in Kassel. It was his first firsthand encounter with truly modern abstraction. Meanwhile, a BBC report on East German art chose a dimly modern-looking painting he had done of Dresden as proof that formalism, meaning modern art, was not entirely quashed. Having seen Pollocks, he knew his own picture was not daring. It was warmed-over Picasso.

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"I was called a formalist, and in East Germany that meant you could be denied a chance to exhibit. So I knew I had to leave, not because I was worried about the controversy but because I knew the controversy was about a bad picture. It wasn't good enough to be controversial." He dredges up a black-and-white reproduction of it from his loose-leaf binder. "I was getting all the wrong reactions. Friends said the work was wonderful, and the attacks made it seem more important than it was. I had started to earn money with the murals. I earned enough to get a car. That was a big deal. So it was not easy to give up. But I knew I had to leave."

In 1961, just before the Berlin Wall went up, he finally made the move. As Richter tells the story, on the way back from a trip to Moscow, his train happened to bypass Dresden and went to West Berlin. "I left my luggage in one of the storage lockers at the rail station. All I had was enough for two weeks, a suitcase of clothes. Then I returned to Dresden, sold the car, found someone to drive me and my wife back to Berlin." They pretended to be making a day trip to the West. "I knew it would be dangerous to carry too much with me, so I took almost nothing. Anyway, I was not leaving anything behind except my work, which I didn't want."

He and Ema settled in Düsseldorf. Rauschenberg and Twombly were exhibiting there with avant-garde Europeans like Piero Manzoni and Yves Klein. The Zero Group (Heinz Mack, Otto Piene and Günther Uecker) was founded in Düsseldorf, and it was making monochrome paintings and kinetic sculptures, while Fluxus artists staged the first Happenings.

Richter enrolled at the Kunstakademie, transformed from a drowsy outpost with the arrival in the early 1960's of Joseph Beuys as a professor of sculpture. Beuys, a Luftwaffe pilot during the war, issued oracular utterances and talked mystically about abolishing the distinctions between art and life. A shaman, egomaniac and idiosyncratically gifted draftsman, he was a divisive but charismatic teacher until he was finally dismissed in 1972. ("Where I am, academy is," he said.) Beuys was a conspicuous sign that Düsseldorf, with neighboring Cologne and its gallery scene, had become the vital center of a new European avant-garde.

Richter made friends. Sigmar Polke and Blinky Palermo were students who had also fled East Germany. With Konrad Lueg, they formed a clique. Polke, the wild man among them, for a while acted like Picasso to Richter's Braque, the two egging each other on despite the fact that temperamentally they couldn't have been less alike.

"Lueg and Palermo saw what was good, what was bad, in what I was painting," Richter remembers. "That became the basis of our relationship, that we shared an idea, a sensibility. With Polke, it was different. Our relationship was based on being outrageous." I ask Richter what he thinks of Polke now. He says: "I have difficulties with his work. He refuses all values and criteria, and for that reason I could never talk to him seriously. He refuses to accept any borders, any limits." They rarely see each other anymore.

In the beginning as a student in Düsseldorf, Richter was just trying to grasp what modern art meant in the West. "I was already almost 30, and by then everyone was talking about the

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Americans. Picasso was irrelevant. He was history." Clearly, he associates Picasso with what he was leaving behind in East Germany when he came to the West. "I found myself in this deep pool, and there were all these figures swimming around, like Rauschenberg and Warhol and Lichtenstein. I wanted to go where they were. Seeing Pollock and Fontana in Kassel had given me a sense of what it meant to be a modern artist and take risks, but it was a distant admiration because they were a different generation. This was my generation.

"So I started to paint like crazy, from figurative to abstract. Then after a year, I put it all on a bonfire in the courtyard of the academy. I suppose there was some ritual involved, but I didn't tell anyone before I did it, so it wasn't public, and I felt the work had to be burned because people were already taking things and paintings were starting to circulate. I had to prevent that because I realized it was time to start from scratch. Photographs were the way forward. I'm shocked now that the story seems clear, because it didn't seem clear at the time."

In retrospect, what is clear is that he rejected Beuys. "I'll tell you a story," he says. "In '69, there was a show of 12 Düsseldorf artists in Lucerne -- Polke, Beuys, Palermo, me. We asked a photographer to make a picture of us all for a poster, and we waited for Beuys. It was typical that he made us wait. Then in he comes, poses right in the middle and says, 'Go.' The cult around Beuys can make you ill, to see how successful it is. It was the same with Baader-Meinhof."

As much as anything by him, it is Richter's Baader-Meinhof paintings that made him internationally known. He had been especially startled when he came to the West to find that "every intelligent person was on the left." He once wrote: "Because Marxist intellectuals refuse to own up to their own disillusionment, it transforms itself into a craving for revenge. And so they turn their own ideological bankruptcy into the utter bankruptcy of the whole world -- mainly the capitalist world, of course, which they vilify and poison in their hatred and despair."

In 1988, he painted a series of 15 works titled "October 18, 1977." It shocked Germans. The series was based on photographs of the Baader-Meinhof group, which called itself the Red Army Faction. Andreas Baader was a street hustler; Ulrike Meinhof was a radical journalist and former pacifist. With others -- Gudrun Ensslin, Holger Meins, Jan-Carl Raspe and Irmgard Möller, among them -- they staged a string of robberies, shootings and bombings of American Army bases that ended with the arrest of those six in 1972. A five-year struggle ensued during which other group members, allied with various European and Middle East terrorists, kidnapped hostages and occupied the West German Embassy in Stockholm to extort their release. The jailed members staged hunger strikes. Meins died. Meinhof was found hanged in her cell. The police called it suicide.

On Oct. 18, 1977, a botched plan to exchange the remaining members in prison for hostages on a hijacked plane that had been flown to Somalia ended with the deaths of all but one of the hijackers and the release of the passengers. Later that same morning, Baader was found dead with a bullet in his head, Raspe lay dying of a fatal bullet wound, Ensslin was hanging from a grate in her cell and Möller, the only survivor, was stabbed in the chest. Again, the official verdict was suicide.

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The Red Army Faction members were some of the most violent terrorists among various young Germans protesting, like many young people elsewhere, during the 60's and 70's. They were protesting generally against materialism, the cold war and Vietnam, but more specifically in West Germany against what they saw as the country's smug, complacent refusal to come to terms with its Nazi past. Peaceful youth protests sometimes provoked violent responses from authorities; then violent protests caused even more violent responses. The Baader-Meinhof group became antiheroes to many young people disaffected from their parents who had acquiesced to Hitler. The novelist Heinrich Böll called it a war of "6 against 60 million."

Richter's paintings showed different scenes copied from forensic photographs and clipped from magazines: Meins surrendering to police, Ensslin on her way to her cell, Ensslin's corpse, Baader's bookshelves in prison, the phonograph in which Baader was said to have hidden the gun with which he killed himself, two versions of Baader's corpse, three versions of Meinhofs. The final picture in the series represented Red Army Faction coffins passing through a mob of sympathizers and police. The pictures were black and white and blurry, like something you might see on an old television set with poor reception. You have to struggle to bring them into focus.

And they are aloof. "I was like a gravedigger while I painted these corpses. It was just work. If I felt one of them looked too theatrical, I painted over it." Completed a decade after the events, "October 18" reopened a wound that Richter saw hadn't really healed. They were a national provocation. He thought of the Baader-Meinhof group as deluded, not heroic. But as Storr says, "He wanted to give a human face to the victims of ideology who, for ideology's sake, created victims of their own."

There was perhaps a personal motivation, as usual. He was then married to Isa Genzken, like other people around him a leftist, who encouraged him to make the paintings. But, expressing the difficulty of their marriage, he was also distancing himself from her through them. Richter says that the series was a kind of "leave-taking."

"I was afraid more of the reaction on the left than the right," he says. "It was still very dangerous to deal with this subject in Germany. There was fear that the museum where I showed them might be bombed. All my friends were on the left, but I was not. They said: 'Someone with the right mentality could do this, but not Richter -- he is too bourgeois. He steals Baader-Meinhof away from us.' To me, they were part of the problem. I was standing outside watching how people, on both sides, ignored the truth because of their beliefs, beliefs that made them crazy. That was the point of the pictures."

And for Richter, the subject was also a matter of personal exploration. "I suppose they also had to do with my father, the Nazis, being skeptical of all systems, all manias. In the 70's, political positions were so clearly split in Germany -- the country was so divided over the Baader-Meinhof group -- and I was annoyed by both sides. In terms of what I expressed in the paintings, that seemed my only choice, not because I wanted to be ambiguous but because I myself don't know how to answer these difficult questions. That was what I was conveying."

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Since then, the pictures have functioned as a kind of negative Rorschach of public opinion. People who loathe the Red Army Faction find the works too sympathetic, and vice-versa. After Sept. 11, Richter says he looks back on the Baader-Meinhof group as "childish, naïve terrorists." The men were macho and the women served them, just as their parents had done. "The new terrorists are professionals. Baader-Meinhof were romantics. But I don't mean the paintings are romantic. They are not."

Richter and Sabine are affectionate and playful together. They treat each other as equals. She is no-nonsense. He is learning to be an outgoing parent. Every night, he puts the children to bed with an ever-developing story he makes up. One morning, after spending several days with him, I stop by Richter's studio a last time just before he leaves with his family for vacation.

Tacked to the wall behind Richter's desk are several postcards and snapshots: these are paintings by Chardin, a photograph of the World Trade Center in flames and a picture of the Austrian novelist Thomas Bernhard. "I like the way he repeats and repeats the same idea in different ways," Richter explains. "Also that he sees life so negatively. He is radically negative."

Above Richter's desk hangs a portrait of Moritz as a baby. Having painted his father, uncle and aunt nearly 40 years ago, he has lately turned to his wife and children. In a recent series of works, he shows, in a high chair and bib, baby Moritz with food smeared on his face. Richter painted three versions of this picture; the other two are blurrier. By virtue of its straightforward clarity, this one, the only one he has kept, is the most sentimental. "That was his first day feeding himself as a baby," Richter says. "Yes, it is sentimental. But I'm old enough now to show my love. I have finally discovered what it means to be a good father."

A catalog is open on his desk, to a page reproducing some of his early 60's paintings based on pornographic photographs. "The porno was shameless, a test: how far could I go? I was foolish. I had no girlfriend, so I was maybe too interested in these sort of pictures." He says this half-jokingly, then immediately wants to retract it. "The art was too personal," he explains. "I think I keep a poker face, but I never really do. It's embarrassing.

"Today all artists are expected to be wild, destructive, but this is fashion. In the 60's, I was wild, but then it was not so common. No one even with rubber gloves on would have thought of touching a show of Julian Schnabels back then. Lüpertz had no hope of finding an assistant. Today he is director of the art academy.

"I'm not young anymore," he adds, and at that moment glances at his watch and notices it is nearly time for him to cross the garden to the house for his usual solitary lunch. He says: "I can bear this -- that I am not the young wild guy. I hope that the lust to work doesn't leave me. That would be sad. I am glad to get honors and high prices. But artists are valued today in terms of money, auctions. I wish society would need art more, but it doesn't. So I feel very lonely in this culture."