

Trunk Road and Branch Roads

Aug 26 — Oct 25, 2023 | Long Museum (West Bund), Shanghai, China

Opening on 26 August, Long Museum (West Bund) presents the first major solo museum exhibition of Günther Förg (1952 – 2013) in Asia. Using the language of abstraction in his painting practice, Förg appropriated tropes from modern art and architecture in his unceasing transformations of color, form and composition, both imitating and reacting against gestures or principles of picture-making, which he pushed to its limit and employed anew.

Titled 'Trunk Road and Branch Roads', this ambitious presentation brings together 76 paintings made throughout the artist's career, focusing entirely on Förg's painting practice and combining hallmark series, such as his Spot paintings, Grid paintings and Gray paintings. Additionally, rarely shown works will be on view, including a group of paintings using air varnish from 1993, surveying the breadth of Förg's expression. Moving confidently between times and epochs, between laconic minimalism and expressive abundance, Günther Förg paved his own unique path into art history.

This exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue, containing essays by art historian and curator Christian Malycha, Dr. Jiang Jun, and a conversation between artist Zhang Enli and He Xiao on Günther Förg.

About the Exhibition

The exhibition opens with two of Förg's largest paintings: triptychs both dated from 2005. Unfurling horizontally and appearing like a massive wall of color, these mature examples from his iconic series of Grid paintings are at once nonrepresentational and evocative of a landscape. In the monumental 'Untitled' (2005), the gray priming coat is exposed in broad, cloudy bands. Bold crosshatching in bright green, pink, and apricot pushes out of the depths into the open. Though its scattered fragments do not form a whole, each part is carried by its counterpart.

The Grid paintings first emerged in the mid-1990s when the artist was reevaluating his painting practice, and became a hallmark of Förg's visual lexicon. In this series of works, he moved towards expressive and gestural mark-making, shifting away from his previous color field and monochromatic works. The Grid paintings operate between calculus and intuition. Through the lively interplay of disparate but equivalent elements, Förg masterfully balances rational structure and expressive gesture.

Between 1993 and 1998, Förg worked on a series of paintings featuring asymmetrical checkerboard grids in black, white, gray, and red. Created at the same time as his Grid paintings, this series shows an entirely different approach toward the grid. Inspired by the dust jacket of a Paul Klee monograph, the paintings' overlapping and interwoven blocks of color embrace spontaneity and irregularity. Showcasing Förg's painterly responses to the tenets of modernism, the series was immediately recognized as a significant new development in the artist's practice, with several works shown at the 45th Venice Biennale in 1993. In 'Untitled' (1993), Förg's black and gray blocks build up into a warped, chessboard-like grid, yet the monochromaticity is suggestive of a considered allocation of tones. 'Untitled' (1998) is completely in color, with subtle gradations from bright red to brown.

The exhibition also includes Förg's rarely seen Air Varnish series from 1993, an extended investigation of materiality, with geometric compositions painted using pigmented, semi-translucent varnish applied with irregular, fluid gestures. These works were rooted in a new phase of Förg's painterly experimentation in the mid-1980s, after pursuing a purely photographic practice for several years. Using unconventional supports and materials for his painted works – such as fabric, lead, molded copper, aluminum, and air varnish – the artist blurred the line between painting and sculpture.

Thinly applied, Förg's colors have a specific tonality which reveals each their intrinsic light, as seen in his set of works using translucent polyester in which pigment is applied on to still-liquid lacquer. Floating on the surface, airy streaks of pigment are juxtaposed with concentrated areas of color in overpainted sections. The paintings appear like immaterial bodies of light, transcending their material ties. 'Untitled' (1993) is intersected by a brown vertical column, separating blocks of honey-yellow pigment that swirl up in vertical strokes. In 'Untitled' (1993), pine-green and velvet-red pigments meet in the center of the plane, and ambient light radiates through the paint's delicate membranes, like a diaphanous stained glass window.

Moving on, visitors will find themselves in a window-less room, surrounded by a number of Window paintings. Windows became a recurring motif for Förg since 1985, who focused on their geometrical qualities by depicting panes filled with dark, opaque fields, including 'Untitled' (2002). Windows such as these make one expect vistas; however, in Förg's panes, the gaze does not pass through. Instead, the viewer's focus is on the pictoriality of the image itself and is turned inward in self-reflection.

Architecture-related motifs such as brick walls, handrails, and curtains remained a part of the artist's practice until the early 2000s. The matte gray color blocks held together by violet joints in 'Untitled' (2002) look like an abstract composition at first but, next to 'Untitled' (2002), they reveal themselves to make up a dense wall. In the latter, deep-red blocks reach up to a black night sky whose gloom creeps into the masonry—only a few ochre bands in the bottom part remain untouched.

The human body—its appearance, perception, and sensation—is continually, though subliminally, present in Förg's painting, through which he reconfigured abstract modernism. In 'Untitled' (1994), he lifts the vertical stance of the woman and the diagonally draped corpse from Edvard Munch's 'The Death of Marat I' (1907). Instead of Munch's horizontal format, Förg draws the composition together into a dense upright format and transforms the bodies into vague shapes in flesh tones, with figures as phantoms of memory.

The exhibition also includes a series of color field paintings created after a two-year break from painting until the mid-1980s. Composed of monochromatic sections of acrylic paint on materials like lead, wood, and canvas, these works engage in a complex dialogue with art history. Whilst their color and composition conjure up the metaphysical aspirations and chromatic experiments of painters such as Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko, their quickened gestures and raw appearance challenge and undermine Modernist notions of transcendence and the sublime. Seriality and individuality continuously play into each other, as in 'Untitled' (1989), 'Untitled' (1989), and 'Untitled' (1989). Förg divides these works into two equal planes, a relationship is formed between the color fields, culminating in the center line where they blend into each other, hold each other, or contract head-on.

Next to these, a room painted red is dedicated to Förg's Miniature paintings from 2003 to 2007, which can be described as 'miniatures' of his already existing large-scale paintings. Self-reflection was an essential part of this series, occurring in a period when Förg was looking for new ways of working and was reconsidering his artistic practice. By translating his existing large-scale paintings to small-scale works on wood, Förg converted conventional artistic procedures that start with the smaller draft or the maquette.

Finally, Förg's Spot paintings – the last series made from 2005 until he stopped painting after suffering a stroke in 2010 – are showing alongside the Gray paintings, the first series that grounded Förg's early practice and laid the foundation for the artist's entire oeuvre. They demonstrate the beginnings of a lifelong commitment to a conceptual and serially oriented approach to artmaking.

Förg's Spot paintings mark a bright, buoyantly light but, above all, open ending. In these works, the brushstroke itself becomes the main protagonist, as Förg transforms the lattice structures of his Grid paintings into rhythmic, gestural marks that appear to float across the monumental canvases, doing away with any previous sense of order. No longer restricted by any grid, colors came into their own, as in 'Untitled' (2007). Freely and empathetically, the colors appear to their fullest. Amid their abundant dispersion, the colors appear their fullest with each hue holding its own. Spots, flecks, and hatchings constantly challenge each other. They repel each other, lean back in, and raise each other up.

During his first three years at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich (1974 – 1977), the artist produced one gray painting each week. Coating a variety of materials with the same gray paint, Förg examined and compared its impact on different surfaces. In the late 1990s, Förg once again returned to the color gray, creating a series of paintings that departed from his earlier investigations of the color. Instead of experimenting with the textures of different materials, Förg created structure by applying the paint with gestural brushstrokes. In 'Untitled' (2009), Förg covered the entire surface of a Spot painting in grey paint, indicating a completion of sorts – a full-circle arrival at painting as a synthesis of experimentation, rooted in art history.