

Janaina Tschäpe

SEAN KELLY GALLERY

ARTFORUM

Symphonic constellations of velvety color swirled over and through the six paintings in Janaina Tschäpe's solo exhibition here. Immediately commanding attention, they constituted the artist's response to the drama of nature as experienced during the pandemic lockdowns, first in the countryside near São Paulo, and then in the Hudson Valley in upstate New York. Whereas the theme of the elements has run through much of her art, these works, alongside seven accompanying drawings, departed from earlier allusions to the lushness and beauty of the outdoors in favor of a focus on its power, in particular the fugitive line between might and menace.

In an exceptional example of the consequence of materials, Tschäpe introduced oil sticks in combination with oil pastels, ushering a new assertiveness into her engagement with the canvas. Compared to earlier abstractions in water-based paints, here the monumental *Between Veils of Blue and Grey, a Forest* (all works cited, 2021), which stretched nearly twenty-eight feet across, featured an oily fathomless black that effected dramatic high contrast against lighter shades of gray. Nearby, a smaller and sparer painting titled *Pale Yellow Summer* emanated a simultaneously meditative yet fierce stillness, its underlayers of gray and blue pastels heightened by additions of black and forest green.

Painting has grown more dominant in Tschäpe's recent shows, but this new direction is less a departure from her lens-based work—often sensuous portrayals of female bodies in the landscape—and more of a return. She started out as a painter and in a 2018 interview described moving away from her initial focus after earning a BFA from Hamburg's Hochschule für bildende Künste in 1997 (she went on to receive an MFA from New York's School of Visual Arts the following year). "I seemed to be losing myself too much in painting," said Tschäpe. "I couldn't control it, and I couldn't get the distance I felt was needed. Film and photography taught me how to step back." In this, the artist's third exhibition of paintings in New York and her second at this gallery—staged a month after her midcareer survey at the Sarasota Art Museum in Florida—her engagement with line, color, and gesture, and the adoption of oils that unlocked added expression, showed her firmly in command of the medium.

Tschäpe grew up between Brazil and Germany, and ways of conceptualizing the world in both countries inform her practice. In making the new paintings while an out-of-control virus was spreading, the artist drew on German Romanticism as a way of entering into a relationship with this lethal aspect of nature's power. Approaching the canvas with a feeling and then translating that into a color, she worked in a lineage developed around the primacy of emotional experience that emerged in the Sturm und Drang movement of the eighteenth century and deepened during the nineteenth century with high Romanticism. The sumptuously colored *Blue Moon*, with its pulsating field of cool-toned lines that nearly consumes a luminous wine-colored background, suggested an encounter with the sublime. It hinted at the proximity of the overwhelming to pleasure—passages of rusty brown further unsettled an otherwise soothing palette. Tschäpe's paintings captured the psychological unease of this time, when a raging pandemic and an off-kilter climate have confirmed the natural world's dominance over whatever power and agency we imagined ourselves to have.

—Margaret Ewing



Janaina Tschäpe,
Blue Moon, 2021,
casein, oil stick, and
oil pastel on canvas,
9' 8" × 12' 11".