LOT 12
PROPERTY FROM A DISTINGUISHED PRIVATE COLLECTION
GERHARD RICHTER
B.1932
WAND (WALL)
signed, numbered 806 and dated 1994 on the reverse
oil on canvas
240 by 240cm.; 94 1/2 by 94 1/2 in.

ESTIMATE Estimate Upon Request
Lot Sold: 17,442,500 GBP

The present lot will be included in volume 5 of the forthcoming official catalogue raisonné of Gerhard Richter, edited by the Gerhard Richter Archive Dresden, as no. 806, to be published in 2016.
PROVENANCE

Collection of the artist
Wako Works of Art, Tokyo (acquired directly from the artist in 2010)
Acquired directly from the above by the previous owner

EXHIBITED

Edinburgh, Royal Scottish Academy and The Fruitmarket Gallery; London, Hayward Gallery, South Bank Centre;
Munich, Haus der Kunst, The Romantic Spirit in German Art 1790-1900, 1994-95
Jerusalem, The Israel Museum, Gerhard Richter - Paintings, 1995
Nîmes, Carré d’Art, Musé d’Art Contemporain de Nîmes, Gerhard Richter: 100 Bilder, 1996, n.p., illustrated in colour
Prato, Centro per l’Arte Contemporanea Luigi Pecci, Gerhard Richter, 1999-2000, p. 137, illustrated in colour
Sakura City, Atlas, Kawamura Memorial Museum of Art; Hiroshima, Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art;
Oita, Oita Art Museum, Gerhard Richter, 2001, p. 119, illustrated in colour
New York, Museum of Modern Art; Chicago, The Art Institute of Chicago; San Francisco, San Francisco Museum of
Modern Art; Washington D.C, Smithsonian Institution, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Gerhard Richter: 40
Years of Painting, 2002-03, p. 245, illustrated in colour
Dresden, Galerie Neue Meister, Albertinum, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Gerhard Richter im Albertinum
Dresden, 2004-05, front cover and p. 71, illustrated in colour
Dusseldorf, K20 Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen; Munich, Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau,
Gerhard Richter, 2005, p. 214 and p. 269, no. 806, illustrated in colour
Kanazawa, 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art; Kawamura, Kawamura Memorial Museum of Art, Gerhard
Richter: Painting as Mirror, 2005, p. 101, illustrated in colour
Dusseldorf, K20 Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, 20 Years of K20: Art of the 20th Century, 2006
Munich, Haus der Kunst; Cologne, Museum Ludwig, Gerhard Richter. Abstrakte Bilder, 2008-09, p. 103, illustrated in
colour
Tokyo, Wako Works of Art, Gerhard Richter: New Overpainted Photographs, 2010

LITERATURE

art Das Kunstmagazin, no. 12, December 1999, front cover, illustrated in colour
Robert Storr, Gerhard Richter: Malerei, Ostfildern 2002, p. 245, illustrated in colour
Joost Zwagerman, Transito, Amsterdam/Antwerp 2006, pp. 160-61, illustrated colour

CATALOGUE NOTE

As professed by the title, Gerhard Richter’s Wand is a magisterial wall of resonating colour: vertical bands of vibrant
cadmium red intercepted by horizontal strips of diaphanous cobalt blue and magenta constitute the glorious end-point
of a destructive painterly process. Continuing the Twentieth Century’s legacy of erasure and radical reduction as a
mode of interrogatory image-making – at once redolent in the work of Giacometti through to Minimalism and Abstract
Expressionism – Richter’s Abstrakte Bilder confront the contemporary currency of painting against a prevailing doubt
over its artistic claims to ‘truth’. It is with this meta dialogue in mind that the present work is utterly without parallel in
Richter’s oeuvre. Nowhere are the painterly contradictions that structure Richter’s practice more obvious: caught
between the inadequacy of Abstract Expressionist idealism and the mechanical mimesis that bestows upon
contemporary culture a ‘photographic face’, Wand delivers a desublimation yet glorious affirmation of the practice of painting itself. Where Richter has unwaveringly voiced his criticism of Modernist abstraction’s transcendent idealism, this painting embodies an explicit confrontation and recapitulation of this particular abstract modality. Possessing the expansive power of a Mark Rothko that has been channelled through or buried underneath the distortive fuzz of some kind of painterly static, Wand truly epitomises Richter’s pioneering operation within, to cite Peter Osbourne, a “new kind of postphotographic painterly image space” (Peter Osborne, ‘Abstract Images: Sign, Image and Aesthetic in Gerhard Richter’s Painting’ in: Benjamin Buchloh, Ed., October Files: Gerhard Richter, Massachusetts 2009, p. 109). Unambiguously conversing with the annals of twentieth-century abstraction, Wand undoubtedly embodies among the most striking and direct articulations of Richter’s essential artistic directive: to unpick and reformulate historical modes of painterly expression in order to establish new relevance for painting in the present.

Executed during a year in which Richter produced some of his most powerful grand-scale abstract pictures, Wand irrefutably stands alongside the large number of these paintings presently housed in major museum collections worldwide. Indeed, that Wand significantly resided in Richter’s own collection since its execution in 1994 until 2010 is testament to its singular importance. Proudly exhibited no less than nineteen times during this sixteen-year period, it is as though Richter specifically reserved this piece for public exhibition, protecting it from anonymity in order that it might widely disseminate the furthest limits of his pioneering achievement. Alongside major exhibitions staged at some of the most important institutions across the globe, Wand appeared in the landmark Richter retrospective Forty Years of Painting at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, thereafter travelling to the Art Institute of Chicago, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C. during 2002-03. Previous to this, Wand was chosen as one of only three abstract paintings to accompany the monumental exhibition of Richter’s Atlas throughout Japan in 2001, and in 1999 was conspicuously captured as a monolithic wall of enveloping colour behind Richter when a photograph of the painter was chosen for the front cover of the German contemporary art journal, art Das Kunstmagazin. The high public exposure of this painting is evidence of its striking talismanic effect: monumental in scale and unusually structured in regimented strips of dazzling colour, Wand is unlike any other painting within Richter’s body of defining abstract work, it’s singular nature indicated by its individual name and status as the sole work classified 806 in the artist’s cataloguing system. Where works numbered in series with a sequential suffix indicate the Richter’s serial method – many paintings simultaneously in progress at any one time – the whole number, alongside the work’s title, intimate that this is a painting of focussed effort and individual merit. Though many works from this eminent phase in Richter’s production were executed in series, this painting stands complete and alone as a masterpiece of unique importance.

Possessing an astounding chromatic intensity, Wand appears to quote the dissolution of boundaries through fields of luminous colour associated with the work of Rothko. In an address to the mind and spirit of the beholder, Rothko created an iconic body of abstraction in which profoundly diaphanous colour and luminescent surface strove for new planes of aesthetic experience. Rothko’s was a mystical project that looked to pure colour and diffusive effects for a transcendent and pure visual language beyond referent and normative meaning. Where red invoked the highest degree of emotional portent of any colour on the spectrum for Rothko, red in Richter’s 1990s production also represents a pronounced engagement. Following the esoteric corpus of Blood Mirrors and antecedent to the cycle of six monumental diamond shaped canvases housed in the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Wand’s towering field of alluring red variegation directly invokes the kind of tonal stacking idiosyncratic of Rothko’s exploration into the sacred space imparted by colour. Though unmistakably, and most likely intentionally, possessing a chromatic resonance and commanding structure to evoke such sublime projects as No. 14 housed in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art or the immersive portent of Rothko’s famous Seagram Murals, Wand is nonetheless ruthlessly anti-idealistic in its dispossessment of such sacred claims to visual supremacy.

Richter has frequently spoken of aspects of his work as “cuckoo’s eggs” in that his paintings are often mistaken for something they are not, or not fully. Where this most aptly applies to the artist’s take on the sublime landscape, it is also at stake within his response to the sublime abstraction of the Twentieth Century’s great American painters. Though comprising seemingly infinite tonal variations and intimations of abyssal layers beyond picture plane, Wand is
nonetheless a cancellation of the kind of transcendental sacred image space pioneered by Rothko. Ineluctably
glorious in its enveloping celebration of colour, a pure Rothko-esque experience of boundless chromatic affect is
nonetheless disrupted and offset by an enshrouding static drone. As outlined by Benjamin Buchloh: “if the ability of
colour to generate this emotional, spiritual quality is presented and at the same time negated at all points, surely its
always cancelling itself out. With so many combinations, so many permutational relationships, there can’t be any
harmonious chromatic order, or compositional either, because there are no ordered relations left either in the colour
system or the spatial system” (Benjamin Buchloh, ‘An Interview with Gerhard Richter’ (1986) in: Benjamin Buchloh,
Ed., op. cit., pp. 23-24). Much like a palimpsest in its fervently scraped back surface and repeated working over, Wand
resembles a restless confluence of many paintings at once. The exuberant strata of paint bear the ghosts of previous
accretions and colour juxtapositions applied, erased, remade and obliterated over again. Such chromatic and
compositional negations represent Richter’s rebuttal of the bold idealism of 1950s abstraction: “Pollock, Barnett
Newman, Franz Kline, their heroism derived from the climate of their time, but we do not have this climate” (Richter
n.p.). Rather, the climate we do have, and the climate Richter’s entire production concerns itself with, is our
contemporary age of the photographic.
The dialectic between photography and painting embodies the crucial driving force of Richter’s lifelong artistic
investigation - a practice that since its incipit has searched for a new conceptual space for painting not just in spite of,
but reliant upon the conditions introduced by photographic representation. Art historian Peter Osborne has identified
“photography as the means for painting” in Richter’s work by positing a suspended double negation: painting negated
by photography and photography negated by painting (Peter Osborne, ‘Painting Negation: Gerhard Richter’s
register the disavowal of painting’s representational function via an emulation of a photographic model, whilst making
photography the subject and object of painterly rumination concerning its varying social functions and representational
forms – a remit that extends the whole expanded photographic repertoire of the classical painterly genres, spanning
landscape and still life through to newspaper adverts and the amateur snapshot (Ibid.). By practising painting “in the
manner of photography”, Richter circumvents the problematic notion of painterly representation by forging a new
objective mode of painting through the interrogation of photography as a cultural form (Ibid., p. 106). Herein, idealistic
painterly autonomy is circumvented, whilst creative ingenuity and intent is evacuated via photographic mediation. It
was only via a qualitative leap from a photographic model that Richter came to produce the first ‘pure’ abstract
paintings circa 1980.
Prior to the full realisation of the Abstrakte Bilder, Richter made a series of paintings from photographs depicting
thickly applied oil paint and smaller painted brushstrokes. Monumentally blown up yet painted with photorealistic
veracity, these zoomed in details took on the appearance of strange landscapes or sfumato abstractions. Camille
Morineau cogently illuminates this period of Richter’s career as informed and propelled by the ‘Blow-Up’, the stylistic
means through which “the figurative can become abstract and the abstract figurative through being enlarged or
reduced” (Camille Morineau, ‘The Blow-Up, Primary Colours and Duplications’ in: Exhibition Catalogue, London, Tate
Modern, Gerhard Richter: Panorama, 2011, pp. 126-27). To this end, it was directly following the execution of one of
Richter’s largest works, Stroke (on Red) - a monumental photo-realist enlargement of a yellow brushstroke for a
school in Soest - that the role of the squeegee advanced Richter’s dialogue with abstraction. At this point the
squeegee was a totally new and unfamiliar device. Experimentation with its scrape and accretion of paint across the
canvas’ surface imparted disintegrating veils and exposures that for Richter directly correlated with the appearance of
the enlarged brushstroke at Soest. As explained by Morineau: “Richter would have noticed that the squeegee
produced an image that looked like the blown-up stroke: a veil of colour that partially hides, partially reveals what is
underneath… In other words, the first squeegee painting mimics the appearance of a ‘blown-up’ stroke even though it
was made completely differently. From this point onwards, Richter would have understood this lesson: an abstract
painting could be made without any starting image” (Ibid., p. 127). Using the squeegee as a means to achieve
photographic verisimilitude without a source image, the ensuing years witnessed an extraordinary progression
towards a validation of pure painting and picturing of, as posited by Osborne, a “new kind of postphotographic painterly image space” (Peter Osborne, ‘Abstract Images: Sign, Image and Aesthetic in Gerhard Richter’s Painting’, op. cit., p. 109).

Glowing in laminates of fiery cadmium and icy blue, a schema of diffused and fractured layers imparted by the operation of the squeegee lend a miraculous and somewhat otherworldly appearance. Totally independent from any photographic model, these works exhibit a quasi-mechanised reproducibility and objective, photographic opticality that is nonetheless resolutely painterly. Wand’s monolithic expanse registers the slick fluidity of surface associated with cibachrome prints. Herein, Wand is an affirmation of Richter’s overarching aim to paint “like a camera” even without a photographic source. In 1972 Richter explained: “I’m not trying to imitate a photograph; I’m trying to make one. And if I disregard the assumption that a photograph is a piece of paper exposed to light, then, I am practicing photography by other means: I’m not producing paintings of a photograph but producing photographs. And, seen in this way, those of my paintings that have no photographic source (the abstracts, etc.) are also photographs” (Gerhard Richter in conversation with Rolf Shön (1972) quoted in: Hans Ulrich Obrist, Ed., Gerhard Richter The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings 1962-1993, London 1995, p. 73). As outlined by Richter, where the camera “does not apprehend objects, it sees them”, the Abstrakte Bilder elicit the capacity to reflect the true semblance of painting within a photographic climate (Ibid.).

As many scholars of Richter’s work have pointed out, it is apt to note that the collective title for the abstract paintings, Abstrakte Bilder, is not a straightforward translation; rather, the closest equivalent to the original German is Abstract Pictures. By his own admission, Richter is not creating paintings but instead making images. The abstract works thus picture a postphotographic painterly image space nascently forged within the blur of the Photo Paintings and fully articulated in the large-scale squeegee abstractions. As Osborne outlines: “Richter’s abstract images are images of this image space itself. In this respect they are still ‘photo paintings’, but in an ontologically deeper sense than the phrase conveys when used as a designation for the earlier, more particularistically ‘photo-based’ work – a sense which is compatible with a compositional productivity, which places them closer to the video image and the digital image than the photographic image as such, as some works from the mid-1990s start to register, explicitly, in their videotic inflection of the famous blur” (Peter Osborne, ‘Abstract Images: Sign, Image and Aesthetic in Gerhard Richter’s Painting’, op. cit., p. 109). Wand is a consummate example of the type of ‘videotic’ effect mentioned by Osborne. Via a crackling, distortive fuzz redolent within miraculous sheens of colour, Wand’s purely abstract and Rothko-esque field of painterly variegation unmistakably bears the mark of televiseal opticality. As cogently explained by Hal Foster: “The semblance that concerns Richter is of a “second nature”… a culture-become-nature bathed in the glow of the media, a semblance permeated with photographic, televiseal, and now digital visualities” (Hal Foster, ‘Semblance According to Gerhard Richter’, in, Benjamin D. Buchloh, Ed., op. cit., p. 126). Having sought new ways to paint that rally against “redundant” figuration and the “inflated subjectivism, idealism, and existential weightlessness” of Modernist abstraction, Richter’s Abstrakte Bilder picture an assertion of abstract painting, not only in the face of photography which lies at the root of painting’s crisis, but immersed in its digital glow (Peter Osborne, ‘Painting Negation: Gerhard Richter’s Negatives’, op. cit., p. 104). Furnished by the mechanistic dissemination and destructive scrape of the squeegee, Wand possesses the irreprehensible beauty of a Rothko that has been processed through Richter’s desublimatory lens and transfigured into a glorious postconceptual affirmation of painting for the televiseal age.

Fig. 1

art Das Kunstmagazin, December 1999 Courtesy art Das Kunstmagazin Photo: Carlo Fei
Fig. 2

Fig. 3
Mark Rothko, Red on Maroon, 1959 Tate Collection, London © Tate, London 2014 © 1998 Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko ARS, NY and DACS, London

Fig. 4

Fig. 5

Fig. 6
Gerhard Richter in his studio in 1994 Photo: Benjamin Katz © Gerhard Richter, Cologne 2014, courtesy Gerhard Richter Archiv Dresden

Fig. 7
Gerhard Richter, Abstraktes Bild, Rhombus, 1998 The Museum of Fine Arts (MFAH), Houston, USA © Gerhard Richter, 2014
Fig. 8


Fig. 9

Gerhard Richter in his studio in 1994 Photo: Benjamin Katz © Gerhard Richter, Cologne 2014, courtesy Gerhard Richter Archiv Dresden