

January 2024

Gerhard Richter: Engadine

At my suggestion, Gerhard Richter visited Sils Maria to spend a holiday for the first time in the winter of 1989. He was so taken with the landscape that he returned there regularly in summer or winter up until 2016. Numerous works connected in some way to the Engadine were created during this period. That's why I found it important to involve three venues in the Engadine – the Segantini Museum in St. Moritz, the Nietzsche-Haus in Sils Maria and Hauser & Wirth in St. Moritz – in the exhibition of these works.



The piece the venues have in common is a polished stainless steel ball, which Richter produced as an edition of eleven in 1992, each copy engraved with the name of a mountain in the Engadine. This sphere is now presented in different contexts – in the Segantini Museum at the centre of the domed hall with the Segantini triptych, while in the gallery it can be seen amidst Richter's overpainted photographs, and in the Nietzsche-Haus on the floor of the bedroom. The gleaming matt ball is a perfect mirror, reflecting everything that happens around it; it is fascinating and yet aloof, comparable to the world of the mountains which it comes to symbolize here.



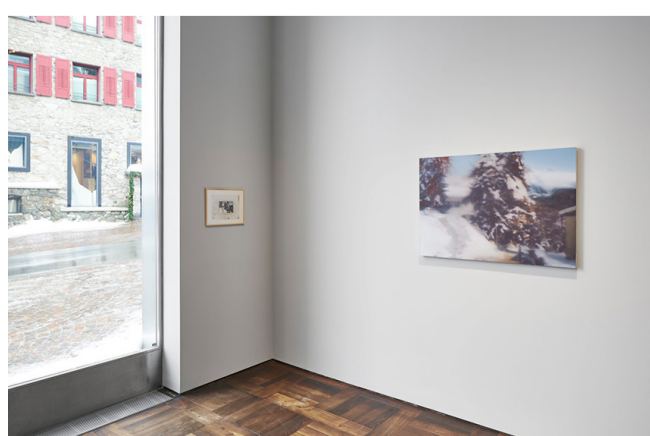
From the numerous photos that he took during his visits to the Engadine, Richter selected just a few as the basis for subsequent paintings. The motifs are houses in St. Moritz, a waterfall in Fextal, snow-covered landscapes in the vicinity of Lake Sils and the forest surrounding Hotel Waldhaus. Richter's painting technique, involving blurring the final coat of oil paint before it dries, has resulted in a smooth finish without any brush marks on the surface or sense of space. The aesthetic appearance is interposed between the motif and the viewer. Not just the melancholy winter landscape, but also the valley in bloom thus become symbols of loss. The overpainted photographs, the first examples of which were inspired by the Engadine, serve as cheerful counterparts to the paintings. In these, paint as real matter comes into contact with the illusionistic photographic image. Daubs and splashes of paint blend in deceptively or cover over the image until it is almost unrecognizable.



In three display cabinets in the Nietzsche-Haus, the 41 photos which Richter contributed in 2010 to the book "Dezember" conceived by Alexander Kluge are exhibited for the first time. The photos showing sections of the snow-covered forest above Sils might appear random and unsystematic in themselves. However, all of a sudden, a sense of order emerges from the sequence of photos, there is uniformity but also differentiation, such as is also characteristic of the surfaces of Richter's abstract paintings.



In this exhibition Richter finds himself in the company of two historical figures – Giovanni Segantini and Friedrich Nietzsche. This was unintended, and indeed purely coincidental. And yet one is inclined to ponder on this juxtaposition. With his Divisionist painting technique Segantini aimed to translate the experience of luminosity and colour, which reaches a maximum in the Engadine mountains, directly into his paintings. This immediacy no longer applies to Richter's practice; on the contrary, his painting depends on photography as an intermediary: the colour palette of his snow-covered landscapes is tinged with red like the off-white of the photo prints. As far as Nietzsche is concerned, Richter would never have presumed to offer a philosophical commentary. His own texts are always concerned with painting, but they do include statements which could in fact be interpreted in this context. Thus, he commented on his landscapes to the effect that they are not only beautiful but misleading, and justified this stance with their transfiguration of Nature, which "knows neither sense, nor grace, nor empathy", being quite the opposite of ourselves. Richter's landscapes no longer stand for the sublime all-encompassing Nature that Segantini depicted, but for a world without teleology, lacking any object or purpose, an experience for which Nietzsche coined the phrase "dehumanisation of Nature". Aesthetic experience remains the only comfort, and Richter's work remains true to this hope.



The exhibition runs until April 13, 2024. It is accompanied by a catalogue with an essay of mine.

Dieter Schwarz