



APÉRO

KEEPING IT TOGETHER

by
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After a big year, TOBIAS SPICHTIG is looking ahead, albeit a tad gloomily. BLAU meets the man and his mood—and, despite appearances, learns a joke or two

TOBIAS SPICHTIG photographed in Paris by MICHELLA BRED AHL for BLAU International

One evening late last year, I attended an exhibition opening at a Berlin nightclub. The show, *You Can Only Kill Us Once*, a reflection upon Kurt Cobain and his surroundings, presented neo-grunge installations that the guests drifted about before eventually being summoned with song to the main room. Standing beside a replica of the poppy field from the music video for Cobain's "Heart-Shaped Box," the sullen crowd was suddenly rapt. Here was Tobias Spichtig. On stage in a leather duster, dark hair cascading past the collar, phone in hand, eyes at half-moon, he sang "Dreamer" by Ozzy Osbourne—"I'm just a dreamer / who's searching for the way, today." As the artist's voice warbled, I looked to the audience, finding some laughing at the comedic karaoke, others close to tears over the all-baring ballad. And it was through the crowd that evening that I approached Tobias Spichtig. There was, and is, no other way.

"If I manage that with my paintings once in a while, that's all I want," the artist says when I bring up this moment later at his Berlin-Wedding studio. Under the high ceiling of a

former factory, an industrial radiator droning away, we sit in paint-streaked leather chairs at a studio desk, the surface of which is covered in piles of printouts—sketches, images of people, objects, paintings. Nudes and portraits, Spichtig's most favored formats, are our primary company this evening, taking up much of the surrounding wall space, while a few abstractions, still lifes, and landscapes make the odd appearance—a categorically classical offering in the contemporary moment. "It's kind of strange," Spichtig proposes, "but I actually just want to make beautiful paintings."

Tobias Spichtig was born in 1982, in Lucerne, Switzerland, to an aircraft-mechanic father and social-worker mother. An altar boy at the Catholic church, the young man's first loves were music and theater, and the transgressive sport of snowboarding, then considered a profanity on the Alps. He sang and played the trumpet. On his bedroom walls hung posters of metal musicians, the teen Tobias soon finding his way to perform vocals in a never-named stoner band. But back then he didn't have much occasion, he tells me, to visit art institutions or galleries. That



came later, when, in his early 20s, he worked across Europe as a flight attendant, in his off time attending nightclubs and museums alike. It was an informal education while he checked in and out of different art schools, briefly studying theater in Norway under Robert Wilson before switching to fine art in Switzerland at Zurich University of the Arts.

Since the start, painting has always been there for Spichtig. Living in Zurich in the mid-2000s, the artist, who also works in sculpture and installation, began to make over-painted vinyl prints, a motif that he extended with his signature sunglasses around 2018. Monochrome canvases wearing

gas-station shades, the paintings garnered much attention in 2021 at New York's Swiss Institute. Titled *Good OK Great Fantastic Perfect Grand Thank You*, the show presented *I Can't Believe Its 12 o Clock Again*. (*Sunglasses Blue*) (2021), which portrays dark glasses on dark linen. Looking at the frames, the viewer is brought into a situation—seen and, without their reflection looking back, unseen. A certain aesthetic distance is thus given at the same time as it is closed, leaving one little choice other than to relate in the moment, with no room for outside abstractions.

There was more material in the Swiss Institute show. There was abstract painting, the *Geist* sculptures—empty clothing hardened by resin—

“It’s kind of strange, but I actually just want to make beautiful paintings”

ALPEN, 2023
Oil on canvas, 85 × 50 cm

Right: IIDA AND SSI APPEARING
IN THE STUDIO WOODS, 2024
Oil on linen, 230 × 140 cm

and an installation of empty commercial vitrines that got in the way. Products as subjects, viewers as objects, the entire scene haunted by the vacant spirit of 1990s commerce, Spichtig’s work had, for me, come together in a conceptual crescendo. At his studio, I tell him as much. “Do you know why conceptual artists don’t paint?” he replies. “Why?” I ask. “Because it’s a bad idea.” That’s another thing about Spichtig. From his appearance—his black leather jacket, his heavy brow and downcast stare, his own artist-edition sterling-silver claws—one might expect to find only a cold remove, even a measure of misanthropy. But in life, he’s gracious, and he’s a joker.

It was one year after the Swiss Institute show that he’d painted his first portrait, *Portrait Rick Owens* (2022). Then came an eponymous other one of Agnes Gryczkowska in 2023—the artist is a fan of the fashion designer and a friend to the curator, working from a pinup for one and from life for the other. “I paint a kind of desire,” Spichtig



says. Already in Gryczkowska’s portrait, he had withdrawn much of the detail he’d applied to Owens. Features have lost definition, and eyes have been emptied to the point that they resemble sunglasses. It’s a situation. In the portraits, such basic relationality is ushered along by the paintings’ directness, the angular, brutish lines bringing both figure and viewer to a place nearly outside of history, where perhaps not even language has properly taken hold. I wonder, can these iris-less figures *see*—or more precisely, are they able to hold abstract images of the world in their minds? Or are they restricted to the more materially informed senses? Facing the portraits, it’s almost as if one can hear them warn, gutturally, *It was untethered vision and ideas that annihilated your world. Come and join us.*

The situation carries to Spichtig’s nudes, appearing in his work soon after the first portraits. Peering out of cave or womb, the basic beings in the paintings appear to be at once inviting and intimidating, while behind them, the backgrounds, visceral fields of color, have become more layered, the lines even less constrained. It’s this, the busy blur of freedom, that is for me reminiscent of Die Brücke, the early 20th-century German expressionists, and of the similarly minded Neue Wilde artists of the 1980s. But Spichtig claims, perhaps a little deceitfully, to not be too interested in the history, saying he strives more for a kind of realism. Rising from his chair, he makes his way across the room to get us both a glass of apple juice, turning back to say: “I don’t even know why it’s called

expressionism. Isn’t all art expressive? Like, Warhol was also trying so hard to express everything and something very specific—and he did.” He holds his hands out in front of him, as if to catch his falling words. “There’s just a mood.”

Rather than dragging up inner demons like, as he calls them, “the suffering fucks” of expressionism, those in torment over some interior truth or other, Spichtig gives form to the mood of his surroundings, his situations—“Just being there, really desiring things, working with what’s around.” And what’s around, if you’re Tobias Spichtig, are people. Consider for instance his recent nude *Iida and Ssi Appearing in the Studio Woods* (2024), shown last year at Tao Art in Taiwan, and the fact that the figures—the Berlin artists Iida Jonsson and Ssi Saarinen—were

Spichtig gives form to the mood of his surroundings, his situations—
“Just being there, really desiring things, working with what’s around”

modeled from life. The expectation, the intimidation, the generosity. The bareness of the relationship between painter and figure. “It can be bit embarrassing if you’re serious about things,” Spichtig says. Like his singing that evening at the Berlin nightclub, his painting resonates just here, between embarrassment and seriousness, humor and melancholy, honesty and deception, closeness and distance. He’s chasing beauty through it all, and he’s having a good time.

An abstraction on the wall calls my attention. “These are kind of idea paintings, the ornamental abstractions,” Spichtig says—if there’s a contradiction with the figuration, neither of us cares to register it. The ornament is anyway something he’s simply picked up, as if it were a rose in a garden. Like every one of these works, *When the Spirits Arrive Abstract 2* (2024) is all sweeping spirals, resembling those of forest ferns, some buried well under the painting’s surface. I remark on the ornaments, suggesting that some might find such forms rather decorative.

Tobias Spichtig



Spichtig doesn’t have a single concern. “Rothko in a fucking café, it’s endlessly beautiful. That’s the kind of world we want to live in. But of course it’s decoration. All art is decoration—it’s just really good decoration.”

There is irony here, in picking up the long-scorned ornament—“When I started this work seven years ago, everyone was like, ‘Hey, stop that. You’re so lost.’” And there is idealism. But the abstractions, like the figuration, are attempting much more than a conceptual play on objects. In the paintings, the symbol of the spiral is brought close, falling back to its materiality, to the time when it was drawn in caves, or still today, to where one might find it while on a heroic dose of hallucinogens—and these works, too, sometimes wear dark sunglasses. It’s almost as if the maker of the paintings were not the artist but one of his basic beings. Picking up a stick from the cave floor, they are making marks for the first time, drawing spirals taken from their surroundings in the formation of a language not abstract but real, a language perhaps from which something like, to borrow a term from Donna Haraway, a situated knowledge could emerge—a knowledge never to wander away and make problems. As the seer, Lorna, in Russell Hoban’s 1980 novel *Riddley Walker* says, “you dont want your mouf to walk you where your feet dont want to go.”

The final two categories in Spichtig’s painting are landscape and still life. Both were on show last year at the Kunsthalle Basel in the artist’s most important exhibition to date, *Everything No One Ever Wanted*. Hung alongside portraits and nudes, the still life *Pink Rose* (2023) portrayed a flower that very much resembled the one from Walt Disney’s musical film *Beauty and the Beast*—with only a few petals still to fall, time is nearly up. Perhaps before the metal posters hung



I DO SMELL HORSEPISS. THIS IS GRAND. WHERE WAS I?, 2016
Mixed media, 196 × 32 × 27 cm
Left: I PRAYED TO GOD BUT YOU WERE LISTENING, 2020
Nickel, resin, textile, 40 × 52 × 163 cm



“When I started this work seven years ago, everyone was like, ‘Hey, stop that. You’re so lost’”

on the walls of the artist’s childhood bedroom, there was one of Belle and the Beast. In the landscapes, the flat, triangular shapes recall the mountain ranges of his birthplace, pared back to their most essential. *Alpen* (2023), for instance, is a cluster of four simple triangles that propose a descent much too steep for the average snowboarder. It appears with these that Spichtig’s situations reach beyond the immediate, bringing objects near from as far back as his childhood. This much is certain: things are not getting away on him.

It comes to me at the studio that evening. For Spichtig, the traditional categories of painting have themselves become material. Portrait, nude, abstraction, still life, landscape, not to mention sculpture and installation—he does it all. As I go to ask him about this rather strange part of his work, he excuses himself to text a friend, and soon he and I are on the way to Paris Bar. Walking into the restaurant, we pass by a large poster for an exhibition at Contemporary Fine Arts, soon to be replaced by one for Spichtig’s show with the gallery. He tells me at the table that the new work is people in groups, small crowds. The situations are expanding in their frames, I say, and he tells a joke that gets lost in the noise of the restaurant. “I’m chasing ghosts”—something I’m able to make out. It is enough to pick up the mood.

Tobias Spichtig’s solo exhibition at Contemporary Fine Arts in Berlin closes May 31, 2025.

THE PROBLEM WITH
ABSTRACT PAINTING IS THAT
IT IS SO ABSTRACT, 2021
Oil on canvas, 190 × 120 cm

Right: SELF-PORTRAIT, 2024
Oil on linen, 190 × 130 cm

