

*A Show of Gratitude*

Hannes Grosse

1932- Present

## 1932-1948 Before Art – Time outside

Nature shaped Hannes's childhood, and he always loved to draw. He explored the mountains around the Bavarian town where he lived with his mother and brother. During and after the war, when there wasn't enough to eat, he hunted mushrooms, berries and other wild field plants. After the war, from ages 17 to 20, Hannes lived at a boarding school on the small island of Spiekeroog, off the north coast of Germany. Thanks to light supervision, he spent much of his time exploring the sand dunes and hunting for amber. At night, he sneaked out to village dances. That's how he met his wife of 60 years, Brigitte.

## **Four Periods of Work**

### First Period 1950 -1965: The floodgates open

No modern art or literature reached Hannes until well after the Second World War. German Expressionism had thrived in Berlin before the First World War. It gave rise to Abstract Expressionism before the Second World War. The Nazis considered these styles "degenerate" and suppressed them in favor of the "heroic realism" of farmers and soldiers of classical beauty.

After the war, when Hannes was 16, the floodgates opened and bombarded him with Cubism, the Bauhaus artists and the many new forms of Expressionism. Before this exposure, Hannes hadn't considered becoming an artist but at the age of 20 he entered art school in Munich to explore the new ideas. He first experimented with the expressionist art of Emil Nolde who, ironically, had sympathized with the regime that rejected his fervent flower abstractions.

Hannes found his fellow students to be urbane, from wealthy backgrounds and with different ideas of dealing with the problems of art. After a few months, he wanted to return to a more natural setting, especially the ocean. So he left art school and joined the merchant marine.

The experience shocked him. When his ship docked at Arkangelsk (Archangels) in Russia, the hills around the bay had been stripped bare of trees. These had been laid in immense piles along the shore for export. This was the work of men exiled by Stalin from Russia and Ukraine, forced into labor in Siberia.

Hannes' ship traveled back through the Baltic past Finland and Poland and into East Germany to the heavily bombed city of Weismark. There, nearly everyone was hungry. Longshoremen worked all day for a loaf of bread while the ship's crew ate rich duty-free food on board –sausages, cheeses, fresh bread. The crew – themselves from poor, simple families – threw old food overboard rather than share it with the hungry longshoremen and their families.

These experiences, added on to the Second World War and its aftermath, gave Hannes the need to respond to the terrible realities of the world. He didn't want to negate the negative through a direct expression of the horror, as Pablo Picasso did in the great anti-war painting *Guernica*. Hannes wanted to balance the terrible realities by showing a different side of the world, the beautiful complexity that also exists and can influence the mind.

*You want to show the positive as well. – Hannes Grosse*

This idea brought him back to art school after six months at sea. From 1954-56, Hannes' art reflected his travel experiences as well as the ideas of Expressionism. He rendered the painting which confirmed his decision to be an artist and opened the door to life-long themes. Wandering the dunes of Spiekeroog, he had noticed how incoming waves imprint a structure on the sand, which in turn gives structure to the dunes. These structures seemed alive and metaphorical, an ephemeral name written by the wind on the water. In Camus' words, these structures are *fugitive and forever*. They gave Hannes a sense of the eternal in the momentary, and a desire to pass this experience to others through his art.

*An unexpected discovery*

In 1953, during Hannes' Baccalaureate exam on art, a teacher asked, "What is abstract art?" Hannes answered, "Abstract art is when you are shot to a place that is so completely different that nothing has a name, so everything is open." This idea inspired a watercolor series influenced by the style of Paul Klee and the writings of Claude Levi Strauss.

Hannes admired the work of Paul Klee (1879-1940), who painted in Germany and taught at the Bauhaus between the world wars. His pictures contained wit and musicality that also reflected darker themes in human nature – Klee fled Germany during the war after being singled out the by Nazis as a Jewish artist.

In *Tristes Tropiques*, Claude Levi Strauss wrote about cultures based on land rather than on the abstract ideas of religion. He noted how the missionaries, with their parent-like concept of God and hierarchical power structures, presented an idea of "civilization" which destroyed whole landscapes, raped nature, adorned false gods,

killed its own members, and was famous for its historic massacres. This civilization – our civilization - had eliminated almost all the others and “conquered” the world.

Strauss’ work brought home for Hannes the two poles of human nature – a unique ability to appreciate and a unique ability to destroy. The sad truth that occurred to him was that with each new discovery of an until-then unknown culture, the anthropologist takes the first step toward destroying what he really wants to have protected. This idea gave rise to Hannes’ “unexpected discovery.”

*So, in 1958, I discovered an unknown island in the immense vastness of the South Pacific. Isolated for endless time, it had developed unfamiliar evolutionary possibilities, different forms, a strange flora and a highly sophisticated culture. I started to make notes and sketches which are now the only proof of its existence.*

*Discovered, but then never rediscovered, this culture will continue to exist because it was never brought into the open and so it can not be eliminated by the ignorance, arrogance and greed of our civilization.*

Hannes’ watercolor series of 1956-58 is the only record of this island’s existence. The viewer must bring their own experiences to a place of unnamed things and undecipherable events. Because the island can never be found, it escapes the fate described by Alfred Russell Wallace in a letter to Charles Darwin:

*. . . should civilized man ever reach these distant lands, and bring moral, intellectual, and physical light into the recesses of these virgin forests, we may be sure that he will so disturb the nicely-balanced relations of organic and inorganic nature as to cause the disappearance, and finally the extinction, of these very beings whose wonderful structure and beauty he alone is fitted to appreciate and enjoy.*

Left alone by “civilization”, the culture depicted by Hannes, deeply rooted in and dependent on nature, escapes destruction.

## Second Period 1965-1975: The Waves

When the art world’s center of gravity shifted to New York from Europe after World War Two, Hannes went there to spend several months each year among the most influential practitioners of Modern Art, such as Kenneth Noland, Frank Stella, Ellsworth Kelly, Robert Motherwell and Ad Reinhardt. He visited their studios, attended their social events and explained to them the recent German developments in art. During his first visit, he lived and painted small canvases in the Chelsea Hotel. Other years, he rented lofts in the Bowery and East Broadway where he painted large canvases.

The experience filled Hannes' mind with the vast new possibilities posed by Modern Art. Robert Irwin, whose thought later exerted a strong influence on Hannes' Fourth Period, describes the historical context for these new ideas as follows:

*We organize our minds in terms of this hierarchical value structure, based on certain ideas about meaning and purpose and function. Perhaps more than anything else, modernist art as a movement has arisen as a critique of that hierarchical structure. When art begins the process of taking all the pictorial out of the pictorial, taking all the symbolic meaning out of the mark and the line, what it's really doing, essentially, is flattening that value structure. The process of flattening has been under way for about five hundred years now, although it's really only become critical in the last one hundred, when the figure-ground dichotomy itself came into question. At first the flattening took place at the level of subject matter, that is, what was allowed to be portrayed as the figure in 'high' works. At first there were only religious subjects, Christ, the King; and then it became acceptable to portray this particular king; and then, this wealthy merchant; and then, this handmaiden; and then, her red shawl; and, eventually, just the color red. But with the cubists the flattening of the value structure moved beyond mere subject matter into the question of how that subject was itself presented.... What you're saying in cubism is that the figure, this thing of value, is no longer isolated or dissociated from ground by meaning, but that's interlocked and interwrapped with this ground, that they're interdependent.... – Robert Irwin*

In New York's blossoming of Modern Art, huge canvases were treated as flat objects rather than as windows into another world. Drastic color separations reverberated, creating an energy field within and even beyond the edges of a canvas. "Hard edge" geometric abstractions created a sense of objective clarity and autonomous self-sufficiency. The gestural aspect of painting - how the marks were made – became relevant to its meaning.

Most importantly to Hannes, Modern Art prioritized the idea of unmediated presence. By minimizing imagery, its terms of engagement maximized the physicality of the canvas, creating a primary experience rather than a re-presentation. A canvas could bring the viewer to a perceptual experience of deep interest for which there are no words.

The organic form of the Black Paintings and the Aquatinte Etching Series helped surface the organic forms that Hannes explored more fully in the Wave Paintings. This new style, like the Island of the Uninspected Discovery, provided a means to balance the disturbing events of his time with the more hopeful idealism of the 1960s. He wanted to force awareness of harmonious beauty on the viewer.

Hannes' Wave Paintings are more intuitive and less literary than the Island series. They pertain more to relationships than to landscapes, providing a metaphor of proximity and separateness and implying flow beyond the canvas edge.

In the Wave Paintings, Hannes retained the formality of Ellsworth Kelly's Color Field painting but, rather than pit reverberating colors against each other, he chose color fields that reflect the earthy tones of nature, the flow of brown into red and the many forms of blue. These shapes formed dense connections, often clearly separated by a black line and yet still presenting as one entity.

The Wave Paintings gave Hannes critical success in New York, Germany and Mexico. His silk screen editions showed in galleries across Germany and in Mexico City. He received a commission for a mural in the largest auditorium of Universitat Regensburg and another for the Camino Real, a premier hotel in Mexico City. He joined the Deutscher Kunstlerbund (an honorary Association of German Artists).

His contemporary German art critic Bernd Schultz described this phase of Hannes' work as follows:

*More than forty years ago, after the war, the painter Hannes Grosse was considered one of the protagonists of the young avant-garde in Germany. While critically acclaimed for his painting, it was his silk screen prints that were especially sought after by a large group of enthusiastic collectors. And intriguing contradiction informed this work on paper. For while the precise construction of the painterly medium was entirely in the tradition of "Concrete Art" (Theo van Doesburg, Mondrian, De Stijl – and later Joseph Albers and Max Bill), the artist invented a strategy to circumvent it. By overlaying a structural grid with a series of abstract wavelike webs in blues, greens and earth tones, Grosse began in the to suggest more visionary landscapes or organic fields. The work seemed to exist simultaneously within the confines of its rectangular format and also at the same time to emanate colour outside of it. Even at that early stage of his work, Grosse understood that by using just a few colour tones, one next another, he could create a frame of mind which – without denying the artificial character of the medium of painting – would create a feeling of naturalness. Thus the work led away from the rigid concept of Concrete Art with its emphasis on painting as an entity only unto itself, as something concrete, i.e. no referring to subject matter outside itself. – Bernd Schulz, translated by Barrie Mottishaw*

Hannes remained skeptical of the heavy intellectualism of that time. Art journals published bombastic, powerful statements. In his view, if a painting doesn't work in itself, it doesn't get better with a big explanation. When asked for an article, he searched the dictionary for complex words to string together in a nonsensical manner. That essay was published without question, and he never heard any commentary about his prank.

The increasing commodification of art affected Hannes' outlook as well. Paintings were becoming investments. At one art opening for wealthy patrons, paintings were turned toward the wall part way through the evening to not distract from the party. Art critics and gallery owners held meetings on how to increase the

commercial possibilities of art and work together to give artists reputations that would make them big money. For the artists, this required a lifestyle of relentless self-promotion. Hannes felt increasingly offended by auctions in which millions were spent on a canvas while people starved.

Throughout this decade of critical success, Hannes retreated for months at a time to the countryside to paint in his studio. This proximity to nature helped him distinguish his personal culture from that of the art world, a culture which accepted and acknowledged the centrality of nature.

After ten years of Wave Paintings, in 1975, Hannes decided that he had out-painted the theme. Any more would be repetitive.

### Third Period – 1974-1983

*The artist as well as a spectator must submit patiently and passively to the artistic process. He must lie in wait for the image to produce itself. The artist produces false notes as soon as he tries to force anything. That in short he must let the truth of his art happen to him. – William Barrett, The Irrational Man*

Hannes moved full time to the Bavarian countryside. In 1977, he and Brigitte bought a farm where they raised sheep, goats and chickens. They tended a large garden as well as potato and grain fields. He worked for eleven hours a day, immersed again in nature. The influence of the color field Wave paintings receded. In the evenings, he returned to the naturalistic pencil sketches of his childhood, enjoying the tactile possibilities in drawing what he found around him. These drawings were like scales – a way to keep limber as he sought a new continuation of his desired expression.

This interlude of small drawings lasted almost ten years. The pencil sketches evoke the relational aspect of the wave paintings as well as geological stratigraphy. The rock drawings connect the river rocks of Bavarian to the beach stones of Hannes' new home on the West Coast of British Columbia.

In 1980, Hannes and Brigitte moved to the Loon Ranch, an historical farm on Cortes Island. Hannes had to face the strength and beauty of the island environment and find an answer to it in his work. Building houses with his family, gardening and tending the livestock took time. Usually, Hannes could complete a sketch or water color in the morning. Then he worked outside all day. Eventually, he started the large canvases that form the main body of his work.

### Fourth Period 1984-present: Abstract Realism

*The artistic product is the final result of our relations to reality, a combination of technical and mental data which are presented in an optical phenomenon. – Hannes Grosse*

The foundation for Hannes' next exploration was inspired by a book given him by a friend, *Seeing is forgetting the name of what one sees*, interviews of artist Robert Irwin by Lawrence Weschler. For Robert Irwin, Cubism's invocation of the fluidity of consciousness made clear that art is subjective, a different experience for each viewer. He took this to the next level by placing the viewer at the center of his work. Irwin's words, "art is what happens to the viewer." Art is in the act of perception.

Hannes' new phase was to create for the viewer a primary experience of nature's perceptual gifts. Life on the waterfront had given him a more diffuse impression than what he expressed in the Wave Period. He replaced the hard edges with tiny waves, each with its own reflection of light. The brief brushstrokes began with thicker paint and ended more lightly, building color fields in which figure and ground, air and landscape, merge. Hannes chose the places that are most expansive, timeless and undisturbed for these reflections. The *Inner Passage* series reflects the waters surrounding southern Cortes Island. The *Painted Desert* series took shape during long car trips to Nevada, Arizona, Oregon and Mexico.

In Hannes' words:

*Even though my paintings deal with landscapes, they do so in an abstract way. They do not represent a certain place at a given time, but rather a condensed experience of nature. By using a technique of thousands of brushstrokes layered on top of each other, up to five times, the surface becomes vibrant, translucent, but still solid, depending on the viewer's position. The paintings create an abstract field which represents the overwhelming strength and stillness of these almost untouched landscapes and give the viewer the feeling of flux as well as the fixedness of natural principles: the fleeting within the constant.*

In the words of German artist and critic Bernd Schulz:

*[In] Grosse's recent work, ... [c]olour banding [of the Waves] has been replaced by a field made up of thousands of short brushstrokes of the same intensity – a minimalist, almost pointillist technique. They are applied freehand and horizontal on a white or sometimes colour-primed surface. This process often lasts for weeks or even months. By minute changes of the tone of each stroke, a visual field is built up in which only a subtle horizontal or vertical line will give the eye a vague orientation. Depth becomes ambiguous. The viewer shifts between two contradictory perceptions. Looking closely, he or she observes a minimalist painting gesture – an analytical concept wherein the viewer experiences both the ongoing feel of time's flux, as well as the "fixedness" of natural principle. Stepping back, focus dissolves, becoming instead a "frame of mind", like an echo of experienced perceptions, a vibration in which it is impossible for the eye to remain for long anywhere in particular. The paintings do not represent a certain*



*place at a given time but rather a condensed experience of nature. In this sense Grosse's titles: "The Colour of Wind," "Desert Light," "The Colour of Rain," "Silence," etc., are not just vague metaphors for undetermined feelings and impressions. By using these titles the artist points to this paradox – that it is really very difficult to represent this duality – of the fleeting versus the constant. Grosse only references this duality, rather, by creating a similar experience for the viewer in the paintings themselves. By this means, the paintings are at the same time abstract and intensely realistic. -Bernd Schulz, translated by Barrie Mottishaw*

In a Hannes canvas, the color field fluctuates depending on the light in which it is viewed. The eye interprets constant change in the way small marks create a united surface with an implied existence beyond the canvas edge and the tiny dynamism of ripples which cast both shadow and light. In terms of gesture, the brush first touches the canvas rich with paint. A few millimeters on, the color fades, the stroke ends. For the viewer, a small step back and the strokes unite, sometimes vertically, sometimes horizontally. The viewer can feel anchored in movement or ruffled by stillness.

Robert Irwin describes this idea of Presence, when the work of art inundates a viewer with perceptual sensations:

*...[Y]ou find that your eye ends up suspended in midair, midspace, or midstride: time and space seem to blend in the continuum of your presence. You lose your bearings for a moment. You finally end up in a totally meditative state. The thing is you cease reading and you cease articulating and you fall into a state where nothing else is going on but the tactile experiential process.*

Hannes uses Presence to invite the viewer to balance the reality of the world's tragedies with the reality of harmony arising from the natural world. In his words,

*A multitude of realities surround you. You should be aware of them. Out of this reality, you are creating something that responds to that. You don't have to negate the negative. You can show the other side.*

Hannes wants to force people to really look, to have their own experience. The paintings require a concentration of perception, like learning to overcome boredom in daily life by truly noticing what is around you.

*The paintings call for a meaningful reflection on perception, on a method that can help people to perceive their own world in a different way. – Hannes Grosse*

Each canvas or print begins with a color field in Hannes' imagination, vague images based on real events. As an example, an image came to Hannes as he traveled through Surge Narrows by boat. The tidal flows of the channel draw the water into cyclonic whirlpools which are hemmed on either side by towering conifers. Knowing this, one

sees in the canvas the downward pull of green water at the center, and the looming forest edges.

But there's an undecipherable element as well. Hannes disclaims analysis of any kind while painting. Something else happens. The painting takes over. Its optical effects force him to do things he did not expect, like a writer whose invented character has gotten out of hand. When this happens, he can't change just one portion of the painting. Because of the technique, he has to change the entire painting, tiny brush stroke by tiny brush stroke.

Such slow creation aligns with Hannes' distaste for excessive materials and artistic commercialism. In the Waves period, he created hundreds of silk screens each year. He chose a "primitive country life" to avoid art as a material consumer product. When he resumed painting, each canvas took months, sometimes years. After a day of farm work, he painted for two hours in the evening. After completing a canvas, he waited for the next image that needed expression. After forty years, he has about four hundred works. He knows where every painting and graphic resides. Each canvas, whether it was painted earlier or later, still astounds him.

### The Balance of Hannes

For more than forty years, Hannes balanced painting with a very physical farming life: milking goats, selling apples, bringing buckets of seaweed up from the shore to nourish the vegetable garden. Impressions from farm work, shoreline walks, and even from his childhood flow into his paintings.

When Hannes walks the shore, he sees the lines of seaweed left from different tides and how black sand washed into waving lines. He recalls the women who worked the hay fields during the war, scything the fields, spreading the hay with forks, putting it in rows as the afternoon grew humid, moving individually and in unison, like a fugue.

Hannes personal attitude is to create something positive from this incredible richness of shifting patterns, light and colors, paintings that recognize flux within solidity, like a prayer.

*Prayer in our society is trivialized and perverted.*

*We are lost without an explanation, so we construct something about why are we here, where are we going to. Christianity came up with a parent-like explanation. It created an abstract entity to help people deal with obstacles and dangers but it also led to a power structure, a hierarchy, for dealing with the land. We were taught this idea of civilization in school, as a kind of morality, a permission to use nature as a commodity. It moves us into materialist behaviour and a belief system that encourages greed. But there is a difference between civilization and culture. Culture can arise from the land. It can reflect a deep bond with nature.*

*I grew up as a Christian, so I can't directly relate to nature religions. When I pray, I don't pray to anybody. So what is prayer?*

*Instead of the religious questions of why and how, one can realize how incredible this is, what happens around us, the permanent flux of evolution. When this tiny thing began to explode and expand, what was that? How did that get there? What is the space it expanded into?*

*Science can tell us partly about how, but it can't tell us why.*

*And that is the thing one should acknowledge. The prayer would be like the acknowledgement. Not asking for something but acknowledging what is given.*

*I think of the moments in my life when I can say I was completely in harmony with something very gracious. It is like opening up. I am out on the beach and I'm laying in the sun. I hear the waves a little bit and I feel the wind a little bit over my body and in these moments you really feel like a part of something bigger, a very tiny humble part of the whole. These are incredible moments which we forget about and then remember again.*

*Humans are capable of this gift to acknowledge, which is like prayer, when one sees beauty and feels wonder about whatever there is.*

*But there are also the bad sides. Maybe we are unique in how we appreciate. But we also destroy. And people are miserable because they see it, they try to do something, and it doesn't change the world. So they get depressed. There's a high percentage of depressed people in Canada. I've never been depressed in that sense. Germans use a word more similar to melancholy, of being aware and sad about it. Octavio Paz believed that creativity is the only thing that can save us. And also, perhaps, the beautiful sensation of being surrounded by nature or by art.*

*The Australian aboriginals sing creation into being. Eventually you can pray a creation into being. Even to fully perceive can be a form of creating.*

*But the roots of beauty must be examined. I saw in Tofino a glorious sunset created from the brush fire of a clearcut. An interesting cloud may arise from the chimney of a concentration camp. An exquisite rose may have been grown with slave labor. You can't separate politics and art. A painter does not just produce something beautiful. What you think and what you do float into the work.*

*So terrible things must be countered by more than shallow images. They call for a meaningful reflection on perception, on a method that can help people to perceive their own world in a different way.*

*It saddens me to know that our brains are able to acknowledge the beauties and wonders of this world but nevertheless destroy what we love. I heard somebody say you can't change the world, but it is worth trying. It's the only world we have and I will continue to try.*

- Hannes Grosse