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The Raw and the Cooked: The late paintings of Hans Hartung

by **Jonathan Goodman**

Hans Hartung at Cheim & Read

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Hans Hartung, T1909-A4, 1929. Acrylic on canvas, 71 x 56 inches. Courtesy of Cheim & Read.

Hans Hartung's long career as a European abstract artist has not been fully understood by the New York art world. Born in Leipzig in 1904, he grew up in a cultured atmosphere; music was a central theme in his family life. Early on he copied artists, including the Old Masters and moderns such as Lovis Corinth, Oskar Kokoschka, and Emil Nolde. After studying at the art academies of Dresden and Munich, he decided to leave Germany, making his way to Paris in 1926. For a long time he lacked money and recognition. Hartung became a member of the French Foreign Legion in late 1939; while fighting in North Africa in 1944, he lost a leg. A year later, he became a French citizen, and in 1947 he had his first solo exhibition in Paris. He would go on to become more and more famous—in 1960, he won the International Grand Prix for painting at the Venice Biennial—and kept working until his death in 1989 in Antibes, France. The current show focuses on work made during the last year of his life, a period of prodigious creativity that resulted in some 360 paintings.

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This is the first Hartung show in New York since the Metropolitan Museum's large, and poorly received, display of his recent work, curated by Henry Geldzahler, in 1975. The canvases at Cheim & Read emphasize Hartung's trademark lyric gesture: with the help of spray paint, he created works whose lyricism is extreme, bordering on the decorative. For a New York audience, acclimated to Pollock's style for more than fifty years now, Hartung's late work may seem a bit derivative; like other European artists of an Art Informel or Tachiste orientation, Hartung's art doesn't quite have the experimental power the New York School artists are known for. Yet is it unwise to write off Hartung's achievement, which spanned more than a half century and encompassed a broad range of abstract styles. Indeed, in light of a life's accomplishments, the late paintings look like a culmination of fruitful work with abstract imagery. In this show, Hartung looks like a major enthusiast: vaporous backgrounds of yellow and red compete with spirals of black paint in *T1989-L14* (1989), whose mixture of misty and linear effects demonstrate a technical mastery and a sense of poetic expression, which from today's point of view may appear showy but whose embellishments originate from a dedicated hand.



Hans Hartung, T1988-K29, 1988. Acrylic on canvas, 26 x 18 1/4 inches. Courtesy of Cheim & Read.

It would be easy to damn Hartung with faint praise, but for this viewer, his case is more complicated than it would at first seem. The artist's control of painterly effects remains visually remarkable; the paintings carry increasing interest as one explores their composition. For example in *T1989-A4* (1989) a tall acrylic on canvas, loping linear lines in black and gold interact with each other, the black lines forming a galaxy with a central nucleus, while the gold is mostly vertical, with some complications on the bottom right of the painting. In the upper left, there is a haze of blue-black dots, above which a light blue field prevails. Over time, the work begins to take on more weight than that of a cultivated imitation; while the painting is refined, it is also assertive in its vocabulary. Like most of the paintings on view, *T1989-A4* manages both elegance and dumb force in ways that distinguish Hartung and transcend the idea that he is merely copying something. *T1988-K29* (1988) is a marvelous work, in which black dots and lines crisscross the lower half; the background is composed of a dark blue haze of small dots and blotches. Here, as elsewhere in the show, Hartung flirts with decoration but mostly avoids it by means of

an exuberance that is raw and cultured at the same time.



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