



HOLLIE ADAMS

# COLOUR WHEEL

German visual artist Katharina Grosse tells **Jane Cornwell** how her spray gun helps her compress movement and understand paradoxes

**'It will look beautiful at night. In the daytime it has all the light it needs': Katharina Grosse with her Carriageworks installation in Sydney, above; Untitled Trumpet (2015), below**



**B**erlin on this winter's night is dark and mizzling, especially on the streets behind Hauptbahnhof, the city's main train station, where streetlights are mostly absent and signposts seem to have disappeared into the gloom. "Just keep walking straight ahead," says an assistant when I call. But I forget to ask which way; by the time I've doubled back and found the concrete-blockish, Bauhaus-style studio owned by Katharina Grosse, the renowned German visual artist could easily have reloaded her spray gun and finished off a work.

Were this all part of a play, a stage direction might read something like: "She wanders, damp and disoriented." Grosse often uses stage directions as titles for her vast site-specific installations, which see her transforming space by painting on to architecture, interiors and landscapes, incorporating everything from mounds of earth and slabs of concrete to latex balloons, fibreglass boulders and — for her forthcoming project for the Sydney Festival — reams and reams of fabric.

*The Horse Trotted Another Couple of Metres, Then It Stopped* is the third in the Schwartz Carriageworks series of major international visual art projects, and an installation that will see the public area inside the old Carriageworks building, a former railway workshop complex in inner-city Redfern, enveloped by 8250sq m of suspended fabric — all of it variously draped, knotted and hung in ways that hide, highlight and even fold space.

"I like the idea of something being too big for a space, so you have to cram all this surface in," Grosse, 56, says once we've met in the studio's downstairs kitchen, her bright orange hoodie a cheery riposte to the murkiness outside.

"So it gets lots of wrinkles; you have these folded walls you can step into or see from outside. It is only fabric dividing everything but you get this double volume, an over-the-top feeling of thickness."

But what will really give the work its kapow! factor is Grosse's not-so-secret weapon: colour. Kaleidoscopic, psychedelic, almost hallucinatory, her palette of primary hues is key to her vision. Sprayed in huge arcs, swirls, dots and mists, the paint going off-frame as a skier goes off-piste, colour is the raw material with which Grosse immerses, charms and disarms. Her gargantuan installations are environments to be experienced. The sensation of stepping into a painting prompts thought of all sorts of binary goings-on: reality and illusion; order and chaos; the role of the artist and that of the viewer.

"I understand a painting as something that,

as we view it, travels through us and realigns our connections with the world," Grosse has said. It's as if she applies her paint to the world as well.

Just as crucial is what Grosse doesn't spray; the hard-to-get-at areas behind the folds, or health and safety essentials such as fire extinguishers and exit signs. To remind us that her work is not street art ("Graffiti is about making claims and carrying information; my work is about expanding out of an area") or an adjunct to a funfair (despite its giddy effect on small children), she sprays over strategically placed stencils, the resulting white shapes with their blurry edges reinforcing the fact her work is all a construct.

The names she bestows on her rowdy dreamscapes underline their artificiality while drawing us in, turning us into participants. Take for example *Two Younger Women Come In and Pull Out a Table* at De Pont Museum of Contemporary Art in The Netherlands; *Third Man Begins*

*Digging Through Her Pockets*, which colonised three floors of Cleveland's Museum of Contemporary Art; or *Hello Little Butterfly I Love You What's Your Name* (a title that paraphrased song lyrics by New York art rockers Sonic Youth), which transformed the Museum of Modern Art in Copenhagen.

Even *Picture Park*, which took over the Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane in 2009, subverted the notion of, well, pictures and parks. It was Grosse's first major Australian show after turning heads at the 1998 Sydney Biennale with a fledgling spray piece, an untitled green wall painting at Pier 2/3.

Grosse's titles, then, have nothing to do with what we are seeing. Or at least, only abstractly — and this being modern art, abstraction is the name of the game. "I like using stage directions as names because they are not quotes, plots or even proper titles," says Grosse, pulling a retro office chair up to the kitchen table and pouring me a reviving shot of vodka. "They're like a hinge between activities or a negative of a cast. They suggest something could happen but never say what. It is important that feedback for my work includes many different viewpoints."

Above a sink hangs a silk-screen by Swiss conceptual artist Remy Zaugg, the words "*Schau, ich bin blind, schau*" ("Look, I am blind, look") emblazoned in canary yellow against lime green. Aside from Grosse's hoodie and the splatters on her overalls, it is the only bit of colour in the room. It's upstairs, in a cavernous space with high ceilings, that she flies her metaphorical freak flag, donning a white Hazchem-style suit to create movable pieces such as the 20m x 50m work she has just completed for the National Gallery in Prague.

A small team of helpers (including her younger brother, a mechanical engineer) sort the logistics, reloading the paint supply of her spray gun as she blasts her repetitive gestures, the air pressure amplifying her reach, accelerating her movements. They'll be doing the same in Sydney, in situ.

"The team, the machine, the time, the place, the paint, the light: all these things have the same power to define the work," Grosse pauses for a beat. "The glare you have in Australia feels more like radiation," she adds with a grin. "The other thing is your feeling for size. Your landscape is amazing."

She did her first spray work earlier in 1998, at a small gallery in Switzerland. She calls it her eureka moment: "It was just some green in a corner of the space but separate from the architectural set-up. I understood then that painting could behave according to its own rules."