

CHRISTIE'S

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GERHARD RICHTER'S *SCHÄDEL (SKULL)*, 1983 UNVEILED AT CHRISTIE'S HONG KONG FOR THE FIRST TIME IN 30 YEARS AHEAD OF FRIEZE WEEK



Gerhard Richter, *Schädel (Skull)* (1983, estimate on request)

London – Gerhard Richter's *Schädel (Skull)* (1983, estimate on request) will be unveiled at Christie's Hong Kong for the first time in 30 years, in advance of Christie's Post-War and Contemporary Art Evening Auction, and is one of the highlight works of Christie's Frieze Week auction series. Last exhibited in January 1988 at the Galerie Fred Jahn, Munich, *Schädel (Skull)* is a masterpiece that stems from the height of his photo-painting practice. Executed in 1983, it is the first of the iconic series of only eight skull paintings created that year, of which four are now displayed in museum collections. The work will be on view from 4-7 September, Christie's Hong Kong; 15-18 September, Christie's Rockefeller Center, New York; and from 28 September 2018 at Christie's King Street, London. The Post-War and Contemporary Art Evening Auction will take place on 4 October 2018.

Francis Outred, Chairman and Head of Post-War and Contemporary Art EMERI: "*Richter's Schädel (Skull)* stands among his most poignant, intimate and technically refined works. Its subject matter places it in conversation with the memento mori tradition that was cultivated by the Old Masters and extrapolated during the twentieth century by artists such as Picasso and Cézanne. The dialogue between painterly abstraction and photorealist

representation had been simmering across separate strands of Richter's practice for nearly two decades. Here, through a motif laden with historic, symbolic and metaphysical charge, the two poles are brought into resonant alignment. The painted surface, though no longer a portal to nature, takes on another kind of truth: it becomes a physical reality in its own right. In this haunting, timeless image of death, the purpose of painting is thus reborn. It is no longer simply a metaphor for the fleetingness of life, but for the evanescence of images, and the death of painting's innocence. Last shown in 1988 at Galerie Fred Jahn, the reappearance of a major Richter work after 30 years is a significant moment, one that I am pleased we can coincide with Frieze Week this October."

"I was fascinated by these motifs, and that [fascination] is also nicely distanced. I felt protected because the motifs are so art-historically charged, and I no longer needed to say that I painted them for myself. The motifs were covered by this styled composition, out-of-focus quality, and perfection. So beautifully painted, they take away the fear." (Gerhard Richter)

Based on a photograph taken by Richter, *Schädel (Skull)* demonstrates the mastery of pigment that, along with his celebrated series of *Kerzen (Candles)*, propelled him to new artistic heights in 1983. Its seamless blending of contours and shadow mimics the distortive, blurring effects of the camera: a culmination of the disarming painterly *trompe l'oeil* effect first explored in Richter's photo-paintings of the 1960s. Much of Richter's early *œuvre*, created in the wake of the Second World War, may be understood as a protracted mourning for humanity's loss of faith in pictorial representation. By meticulously reproducing mechanical images in painstaking manual detail, he sought to shed light on pigment's potential for deception and misguidance. If figurative painting had once been construed as a window onto the world, it was now revealed to be no more than an illusory game, as distant from reality as an abstraction. In the subtle, tactile surface of *Schädel (Skull)*, which lives and breathes under the flicker of the eye, the genre of *memento mori* is transcended as it is memorialised.

Richter's skull paintings operate in conversation with a rich art-historical ancestry. The genre of *memento mori*, derived from medieval Latin Christian theory, gained popularity in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In paintings by artists such as Caravaggio, Hans Holbein the Younger, Georges de la Tour, Frans Hals, Francisco de Zurbarán and Pieter Claesz, the skull served as a reminder of life's evanescence, frequently featuring alongside other temporal symbols including candles, hourglasses, flowers and fruits. Translating literally as 'remember you must die', *memento mori* was closely related to the *vanitas* tradition, which considered the futility of earthly pursuits. These distinctive still-life compositions would subsequently provide inspiration for artists such as Paul Cézanne and Pablo Picasso, who strove to shed new light on the mechanics of perception at the dawn of the twentieth century. Picasso's skull paintings became symbolic of what he was witnessing whilst living in Paris during the Nazi occupation; it was at this time that he began to play with the motif. Richter's engagement with Picasso's skull paintings is evident in a group of his early ink drawings dating from 1956, which Robert Storr sees as direct precursors to the 1983 photorealist suite. As the twentieth century unfolded, witnessing global conflict and waves of social and political upheaval, the iconography of the skull continued to develop. Artists such as Sigmar Polke and Martin Kippenberger riffed on its antiquated connotations, whilst for Jean-Michel Basquiat and Robert Mapplethorpe the symbol can be seen as a tragic premonition of their own untimely deaths.

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Public Exhibition:

Hong Kong: 4-7 September
New York: 15-18 September
London: From 28 September

Auction:

Post War and Contemporary Art Evening Auction
4 October 2018
7pm

About Christie's

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Alongside regular sales online, Christie's has a global presence in 46 countries, with 10 salerooms around the world including in London, New York, Paris, Geneva, Milan, Amsterdam, Dubai, Zürich, Hong Kong, and Shanghai.

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