

# Hartmut Austen: Not there, not here

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# Hartmut Austen



McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College

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McMULLEN  
MUSEUM OF ART  
BOSTON COLLEGE

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***Hartmut Austen: Not There, Not Here***  
Jordan Kantor talks with Hartmut Austen

**JK:** To start, I would like to ask you about the painting that lends the show its title, *Not There, Not Here*. This is a compelling formulation that seems to describe a situation of possible in-betweenness (if it's not there, and it's not here, where is it?) potentially related to what is happening in the painting itself, which has two distinct visual registers: the atmospheric, brushy gray "background," and the title phrase, rendered in block letters in the foreground. To me this speaks to the inability of either system—abstract painting on the one hand, and written language on the other—to completely describe an experience, or to function autonomously. Each points to its own limits, somehow, and these systems ask us to consider how they work together to add up to a whole that might be somewhere. Can you talk about this painting, and how, by deriving the title for your show from it, it sets up some of the lenses through which to view your current work? Do you consider this an exercise in thinking through the possibilities and limits of painting to describe? And if description isn't what the paintings are after, precisely, what do you hope they can communicate? It also seems compelling that this painting is installed in a stairwell—a liminal passageway between two stable destinations (one floor and another). Can you also comment on your installation strategies for the show?

**HA:** The painting that you mentioned is called *Title Painting*, with the words "not here, not there" painted on it, and is the newest work in the exhibition, made after I received the invitation for the show.

I had originally wanted to integrate *Title Painting* into the set of the fourteen

works of the same format that are installed one floor higher but decided that because it is more of an “intentional” painting (different to many of my other paintings that emerge from a process with a rather uncertain outcome), it should be solitary, and toward the beginning of the presentation. I juxtaposed it with *Stage*, a slightly larger painting. Both I think present a kind of conundrum that is at the heart of my practice—HOW to make paintings that speak of (and are relevant to) happenings in the present, at the same time to my personal/biographical developments and influences, and how a painting’s original meaning changes with time and context. It is also a rather provisional painting and reveals how many of my paintings start.

The atmospheric gray background is rendered with leftover paint on the palette from another painting or turpentine sludge (sediment on the bottom of the brush cleaning jar that so many of us painters love). The letter forms are more like a scaffold or grid that provides a starting point; one can find this configuration in many of my paintings since the nineties. The phrase “not here, not there” is, I think, well-known both in the US and in Germany (“nicht hier, nicht dort”). Exchanging the second and fourth words gives the phrase a slight unfamiliarity that registers subliminally at first, but also emphasizes more of a geographical attitude.

I have used words in some of my paintings before, but in this particular piece I used it more as a graphic structure with a pictorial purpose rather than meaning, providing the viewer with insight into my process. Only later, words, color, and ideas may coalesce into something with a more refined color and surface quality. Appearance—or let’s say a sense of design with refined color and form and surface—is what really entered my work under the influence of American “soulful” minimalists such as Brice Marden and James Bishop and can be traced back roughly to my physical arrival in the US. So it’s a clash of that (neo-)expressionist idiom that I grew up with in Germany in the eighties and that is still so strong in me, with that more American concern for sleekness, style, and appearance that developed gradually and that I love just as much.

In *Stage*, the painting next to it, the red lines carry a similar function as the letter forms described above for *Title Painting*, but read as screens, or windows. With the title, the setting seems clear, some kind of deserted stage.

It's based loosely on a news photo of the stage design of the 2012 Republican National Convention with large, variously sized digital screens, which struck me as oddly modernist and reminiscent of the Russian avant-garde.

So with these two paintings I feel I set the stage for viewers as they climb the stairs in this light-filled, transparent new addition to the McMullen Museum. I agreed to this show for various reasons, but a big one was the interesting shifting light, the way the window frames create patterns on floors and walls and how the paintings will appear differently with changing daylight. It heightens awareness of the present. Also, the views from the windows really struck me: a park-like setting with shifting vantage points as one climbs the stairs. On the third floor is a terrace that provides far-ranging views of the area to the east, including the Boston skyline.

**JK:** It is very interesting to hear about your imagery and working processes. I wanted to ask you more about *Stage*. You mention the source material: a found photograph of the Republican National Convention. This information is not immediately apparent or available in the title nor the image, and certainly lends different interpretative possibilities into the painting when you introduce that highly charged information. Can you talk about your relationship to the source imagery you choose for your paintings? (I can imagine *Two Prisons* and *Aleppo* also refer to intense historical events happening outside the frame.) Is this also part of the "neither here, nor there" idea in your work—that some of the meaning is within the painting, and some outside it? (I think the work of the contemporary Belgian artist Luc Tuymans is relevant in this regard.) That is, to what extent is information not necessarily contained within the picture itself, or its title, important to your understanding of the meaning of the picture?

**HA:** In *Stage* it was that odd kaleidoscopic arrangement of screens that I found visually compelling and that I wanted to paint. When I paint, I don't have an agenda in any political or other sense other than figuring out how to make a painting. But some of the paintings "come back to me," urging me to look at them again and to think about why and how I made them, as well as the context of their creation. And this painting gives me a strong feeling of something gone awry, emptiness, and of that moment, where elaborate constructions (and ambitions) suddenly appear fragile. For me, it is a paint-

ing commenting on our current state of public discourse and politics.

With *Aleppo*, which I started in my Minneapolis studio but couldn't resolve until six months later in Boston, I had a strong reaction to Tammam Azzam's [\*Freedom Graffiti\*](#), a photograph of a bomb-shelled building onto which he digitally superimposed Klimt's *The Kiss*. That intermixed ornament of both the war-torn landscape and figurative image really gave me a kick in the gut. With the juxtaposition of violent conflict and love, mingled bodies barely distinguished from buildings and streets, and underscored by the bright red color, I hoped to express my outrage but also helplessness about the horrific bombings and killings of civilians, many of them children, in this long proxy war.

I work responsively in the studio. I hardly make agendas or plans for "bodies of work" that get executed. I make paintings that don't need a lot of information and are open for interpretation. I try to make work that has a relationship to current events, be it historic, political, or personal—or somehow all of those perspectives at once. The painting process (hand, eye, mind, time, tools, and material) is bridging a gap that helps to connect, to empathize, to imagine.

**JK:** I agree interpretations of paintings are highly informed by context, and I want to pursue this line of thought further. Can you discuss some of the historical or contemporary artistic contexts in which you position your work? For example, I remember one painting of yours ([\*Untitled \[Under the Influence\]\*](#), not the current exhibition) that seemed very self-consciously to recall Belgian painter René Daniëls's "[\*artistic family tree\*](#)" paintings; you even placed Daniëls himself on your own family tree! I also thought of Daniëls's *Beautiful Exhibition* pictures when I first saw *Stage* as well—a group of paintings in which Daniëls himself pictures the act of exhibition, of placing one's own paintings in context. Can you discuss Daniëls, or other artists with whom you find your work in conversation?

**HA:** I align myself within a work-oriented painting tradition that is informed by observation, thinking, and (intuitive) making. Art that, while personal, fixes and obscures the public flux of images and the times in which it is made, without resorting to preconceived agendas, purposes, or mythologies. My

visual research is really “search,” and I enjoy having a great amount of freedom to pick up or to abandon ideas. To connect different strains of thoughts, to contradict myself, to learn through trial and error. This is not an efficient process, but the continuing work in the studio as well as looking at the art of my peers, provides me with a great source of comfort.

My work is very much connected to Daniëls’s, albeit with a lesser punk attitude, which I first encountered at *Der zerbrochene Spiegel*, organized by Kasper König and Hans Ulrich Obrist at Hamburg’s Deichtorhallen in 1993. His trajectory from painting loose, enigmatic, expressionist works to rather quiet, moody, reflective compositions that he did just before he suffered a devastating stroke really excited me because I felt it somehow echoed my own interests growing up in the eighties and becoming increasingly interested in a more reflective approach to my own developing practice. So, yes, I included his name on a small drawing and a painting with roads and little box-like houses that are occupied by artists who influenced me.

Another seminal show that informed my thinking was Jan Hoet’s *Documenta 9* (1992), which although a bit heavy on painting by mostly male artists, was also rich in attitude and emotion. It featured a number of artists who were more or less new to me, yet to whose work I instantly connected: Jim Lutes, Kurt Kocherscheidt, Raoul de Keyser, Olav Christopher Jenssen, and especially Guillermo Kuitca. Despite being younger than those artists, I saw and still see myself operating in conversation with their work and have recently created paintings that I almost consider to be homages to their visions; several are included in this exhibition. *Untitled* (2016), for example, refers to Kurt Schwitters’s *Merzbau*, another, *Wall* (2014), to a photo of Norbert Schwontkowski’s studio wall. I see them as my own conversation with these artists that I never met in person but nevertheless to whom I feel connected.

**JK:** Finally, perhaps, could you comment on the centerpiece of the show: the fourteen-canvas work titled *Not There, Not Here*. Since it spans the nine years from 2009 to 2018, I wonder if it has a retrospective function to it. Does it trace changes in your thinking about your painting practice over the last decade, and, if so, can you describe these? Perhaps, alternatively, it could be viewed as a kind of field of possibilities for future investigations, holding as it does varied approaches to imagery, paint handling, narrative, etc. How

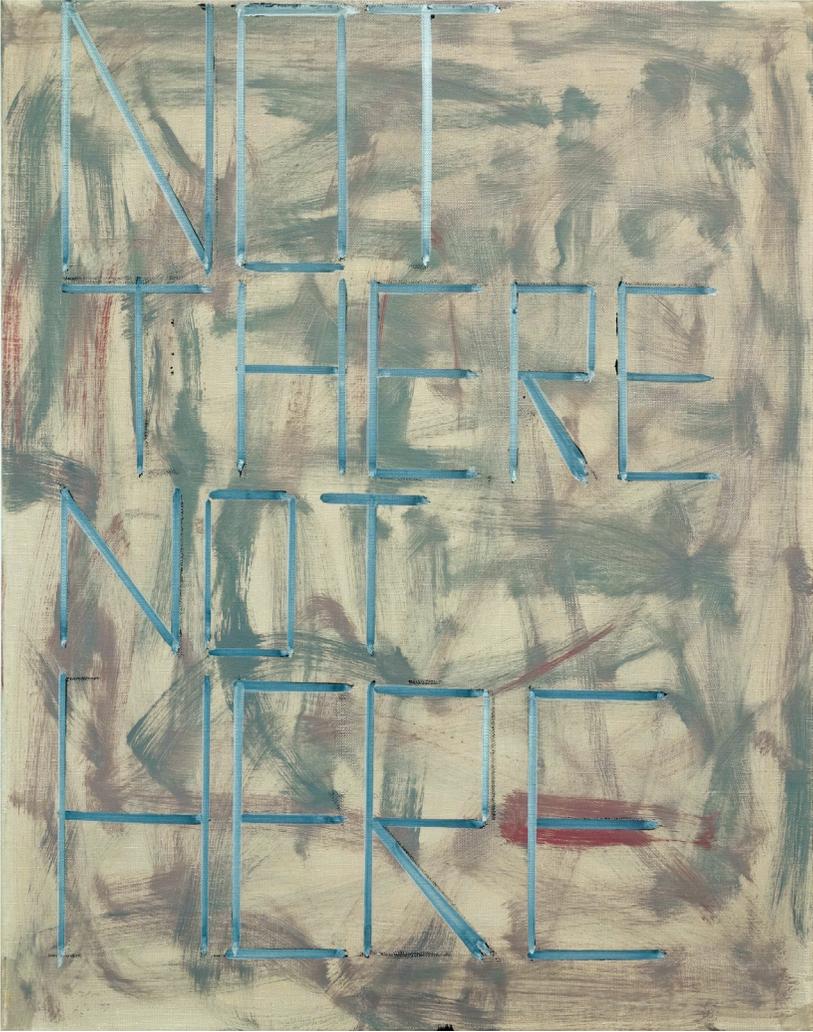
do you see this work functioning?

**HA:** Yes, I see this show as a mini-survey of my work on canvas from roughly the past ten years. Having recently moved to Boston after accepting my appointment to Boston College, I felt it was apt to present this small survey at the museum within the university that has expressed trust in my work as an artist and educator.

The fourteen works of the installation are individual paintings that are not intended to present a homogeneous approach to my practice of painting but rather a testing of ideas, spontaneous mark-making, and reframing of seemingly established conventions of motive, selection, and presentation. Some were completed in thirty minutes, others needed three months. They present an excerpt, if you will, and more works could be added or mixed up in a different setting, lending more fluidity to the arrangement of pieces already intended to be (volatile) and dynamic.

Motives range from shadow and “real” figures, to architectural fragments and things referring to looking, to the practice of painting. Some could be seen as commenting on some of the larger works in the show. *Stage* or *Wall* for example, two paintings that we discussed before, seem to contain frames within frames, or windows that are more or less empty. But once you come to the second floor with these fourteen works, you encounter another setting with frames that are now filled. There is a relationship in my mind. Excerpts of things seen or imagined that interest me.

The works in the show, thus, have some correlative sense in and out of time—they are all related, whether visually to each other, or sensibly, by the process through which I generated them.



*Title Painting, 2018*  
oil on linen  
20 x 16 in.



*Stage*, 2012  
oil on canvas  
20 x 30 in.



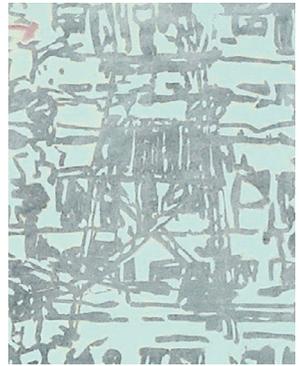
*Aleppo, 2016*  
oil on canvas  
75 x 60 in.

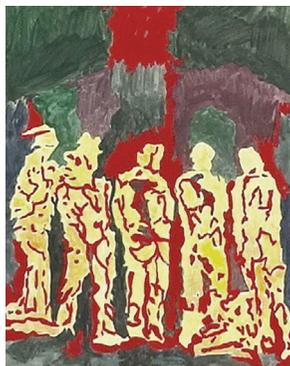


*Two Prisons, 2018*  
oil on canvas  
40 x 54 in.



*Wall*, 2014  
oil on canvas  
20 x 24 in.





*Not There, Not Here*, 2009–18  
mixed media on canvas or linen  
20 x 16 in. (each)



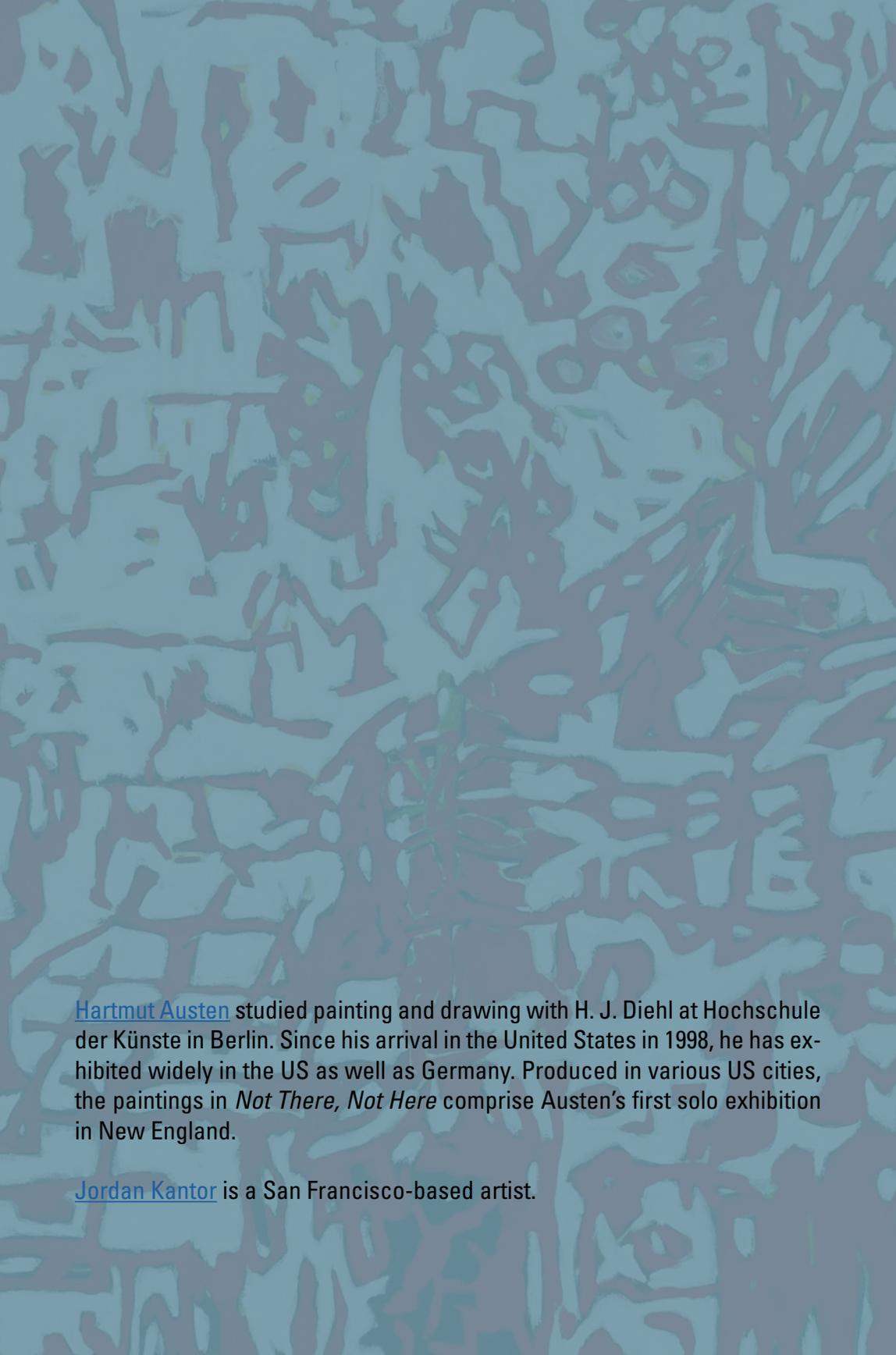
*Untitled, 2016*  
acrylic on canvas  
60 x 48 in.



*Seminar, 2015*  
oil on canvas  
75 x 54 in.



*Harbor, 2011*  
oil and graphite on canvas  
60 x 75 in.



[Hartmut Austen](#) studied painting and drawing with H. J. Diehl at Hochschule der Künste in Berlin. Since his arrival in the United States in 1998, he has exhibited widely in the US as well as Germany. Produced in various US cities, the paintings in *Not There, Not Here* comprise Austen's first solo exhibition in New England.

[Jordan Kantor](#) is a San Francisco-based artist.

