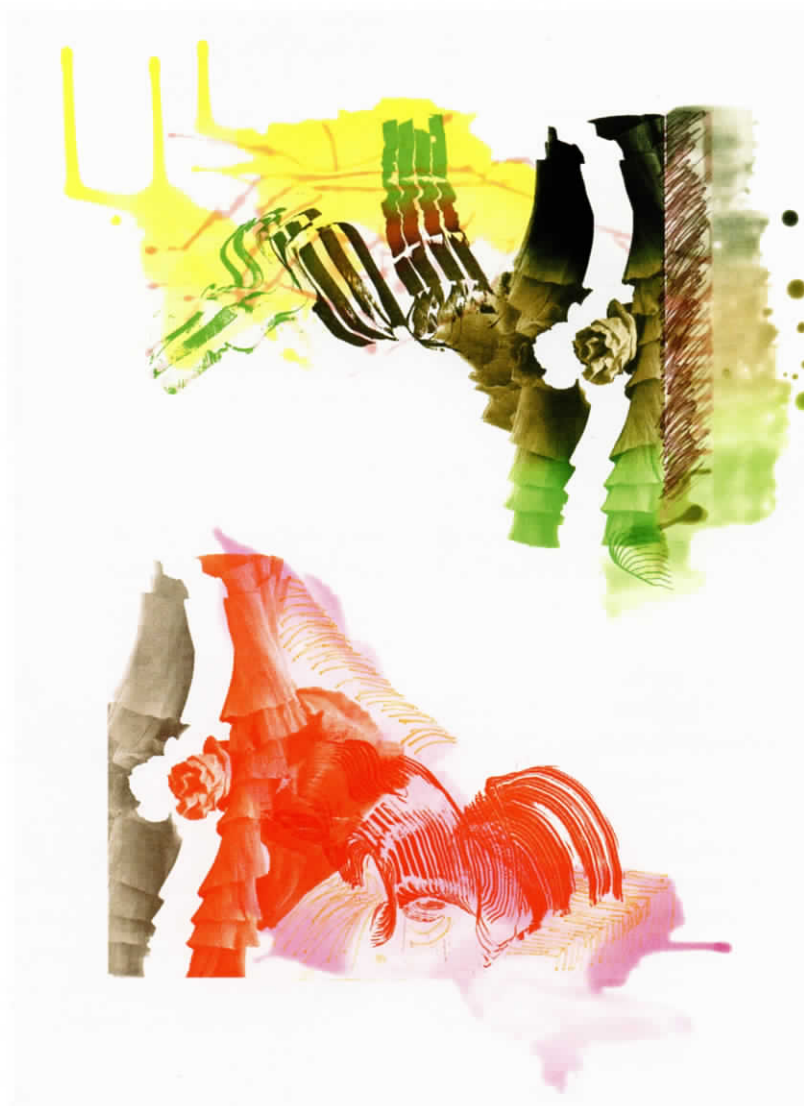


# Overview



*Sulk*, 2007. Color soap ground and spit bite aquatints with photogravure, soft ground etching, and roulette, 34 1/2 x 25 1/2". Edition 25. Printed by Emily York.

## PIA FRIES: Heterogeneous

by Valerie Wade

Two recent articles, "Abstract Painting is Back," in the April issue of *Artnews* magazine and "Abstraction Problem," in the March issue of the *New Yorker*, debate the validity of the new abstraction versus the old. In addition, a number of exhibitions mounted in the last year confirm that abstract painting is in the midst of a revival.

What a relief! If abstract painting is enjoying a comeback, it must mean painting is safe, at least for a year or two, from its supposed displacement as a viable medium. Pia Fries will be happy to learn of this, given that she has spent more than twenty years painting without regard to the medium's viability. Pia Fries is part of a generation

of postmodern painters who have steadfastly engaged in a personal dialogue with the modernist painting tradition.

I first encountered Pia Fries's paintings last June at the Basel Art Fair in Switzerland. It was my turn for a break from the intense activity at Crown Point's booth, so I decided to act on an invitation from Bernard Jacobson, Pia Fries's London dealer, who had invited me to see some of her work at his booth. Standing in front of one of her large paintings I took a moment to let it draw me in. The journey was very satisfying. My eye followed a course the artist had constructed using great swaths of paint that had been rolled,



*Fale*, 2007. Color soap ground and spit bite aquatints with photogravure and roulette, 34 1/2 x 25 1/2". Edition 25. Printed by Emily York.

poured, dripped, squeezed, or troweled onto the painting in thick and thin layers. Paint gathered in the corners, across the top, at the bottom, and along the sides, and the marks left large portions of a bright white background in their wake. The white areas of Pia Fries's paintings play an important role. Not only do they have dynamic shapes of their own, but they provide resting places for the eye and foundations or braces for the density of color, shapes, and marks. The color palette is idiosyncratic. Purples, browns, and pinks are streaked and blended together with baby blue, lemon yellow, and maroon, combinations that sometimes turn into other colors altogether. Swooping curves and graceful smears of brush strokes, drawing marks, and oil stains offer a counterpoint to the rectangle of the painting.

I stood there in Jacobson's booth, trying to figure out how the marks were made, and this became an intriguing puzzle. In Pia Fries's hand, paint doesn't function in expected ways. It was so thick in sections that it had the presence of sculpture, and in other places it was flat, actually printed. Along with thick swaths of paint, Pia Fries incorporates organic shapes and photographic images of painted marks that she silkscreens directly onto the painting. The heterogeneous surface she creates is in a visual language all her own. In the words of Dave Hickey, "To be honest, I never could have imagined anything like that, and this I suppose, is the whole idea."

Standing in front of Pia Fries's works I could feel the joy of

experimentation in every painting. When Kathan Brown and I discussed the various artists we had viewed during our week at the fair, we agreed to extend an invitation to Pia Fries.

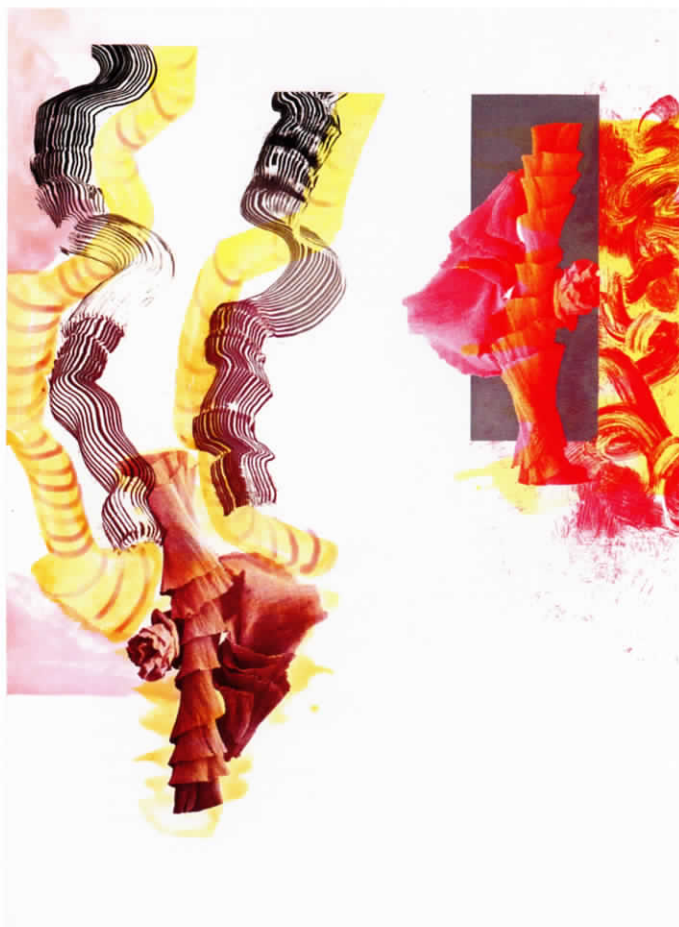
Born in Beromunster, Switzerland, Pia Fries originally studied sculpture at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Lucerne. Later, from 1980 through 1986, she studied painting under Gerhard Richter at the Kunstacademie in Dusseldorf, the city where she currently lives and works.

Gerhard Richter is a considerable force in the international art world and I was curious about his influence on Pia Fries's work. During her residency at Crown Point, we taped a short interview with her (it can be seen on our website, [www.magical-secrets.com](http://www.magical-secrets.com)), and I asked her about Richter. She had this to say: "I started with Gerhard Richter so there surely was an influence, but not directly through his work—more through his seriousness, how he trained himself to be a painter. I think he really believes that painting is still alive. And he gave me this assuredness. This made sense to me. And that is what I really learned from him, which was very important for me, not what his art is about, but that he believes that painting is something you can do today."

Pia Fries was the first Crown Point artist project scheduled in 2007 and we were all looking forward to her visit. She had sent ahead some negatives of photographic images she wanted to use,



*Rake*, 2007. Color soap ground and spit bite aquatints with photogravure and roulette, 34 1/2 x 25 1/2". Edition 25. Printed by Emily York.



*Pliss*, 2007. Color soap ground and spit bite aquatints with photogravure and aquatint, 34 1/2 x 25 1/2". Edition 25. Printed by Emily York.

fragments of sculptures she had made from lumps of oil paint. Master printer Emily York, who was leading the project, took her negatives and developed a photogravure plate of each of them in our darkroom, then printed the images in black and white. After Pia Fries arrived and looked at prints by artists who have previously worked at Crown Point, she saw that the medium has endless possibilities. She had never made an etching before. "So, did you approach the etching like you would your paintings or did you approach it in a different way?" I asked her in the video interview. She paused and replied, "I had in mind to do something similar to what I do in my paintings, of course. But I doubted that this was possible. Then after experimenting with the medium, I suddenly learned how to get colors on the plate. My doubts went by the riverside!"

Working with the blank white paper and the printed photo-elements, Pia Fries began to add color, shapes, and marks. Emily York taught her how to use traditional grounds and etching tools; soon she was comfortable with those and wanted to expand on them. Pia Fries was trained as a sculptor before shifting to painting, so to her tools are especially important. When asked if she discovered new marks, new ways of thinking visually, she responded, "Of course I had to approach etching in a different way. If I would be with my own paintings it's different, so I had to learn somehow to do a brushstroke that looks like a brushstroke in terms of etching. And

I went out to shops and bought different tools; it is similar to what I do at home, because I'm always looking for tools to manage the paint. And here I had to manage different fluids." These different fluids are specific to etching: the materials of soap ground, spit bite, and sugar lift. Pia Fries was excited by the new language; she worked rapidly making lots of color changes and rearranging forms on the plates. The etching process is particularly pleasing to painters because they can layer one plate on top of another to complete the image. The artist can add or subtract a mark or a color in a more efficient way than when making changes to a drawing or a painting. Pia Fries and her printer worked out a method for blending the colors on the plate subtly. In the print titled *Sulk*, the photogravure image is printed in a bright spring green which gradually becomes dark green and then melts into black. The artist enthusiastically tried every combination of mark, color and form and the printers kept pace, mixing together all the colors in the rainbow and proofing plate after plate to produce new proofs for her to examine each morning.

At Crown Point during a project, lunchtime is a chance for the printers, the artist, and me to relax and enjoy some casual time together. At such a moment I asked Pia Fries if she had ever painted figuratively. She replied that she did paint birds in the late 1980s but soon felt that she didn't want a specific image to carry the color and form. Her discovery of an abstract language was liberating to her. "The viewer can roam through the picture responding viscerally and intellectually to the colors and forms, creating a chain reaction of associations," she said. Later, she wrote this statement about her work at Crown Point: "In my paintings, I build forms from lumps of oil paint and they do not directly relate to or mimic forms found in nature. The forms in the prints are the result of treating material (copper, rosin, paper, etc.) and following the flow of materiality with its infinite possible formations and deformations. Forms and colors are liberated. They are not at the service of formal painting issues, or representation, reference, or reproduction."

While working on her plates, the desire to create openness and the unexpected led Pia Fries to carry forms outside the plate margins. Each of the four prints has three plates larger than the finished paper size, and two smaller plates that carry photogravure images and show plate marks. This approach gave her a new space to interplay the opposites of light and heavy forms, and hot and cool colors.

Pia Fries completed four related color etchings in her two-week project at Crown Point Press. Each print balances movement and countermovement through the use of photo elements, marks, forms and color. Standing in front of the new prints, Pia Fries described her reaction to them: "There is one form here and another form there. But they should somehow come together and they also should not fall down. Keeping themselves up with the color and the movement so that the viewer has the impression they are somehow strong enough to stay in the air, for instance. But the color and the gesture will give at the end an embodiment of energy."

*Sulk*, *Falc*, *Rake*, and *Pliss* are the titles Pia Fries gave her new prints. She was hesitant to name them, not wanting the associations

that come with titles, and she said that the titles are not meant to illustrate the images or vice versa. The words are made up. She chose them more for the way they sound than for their direct translation. Valeria Liebermann, in a catalog essay titled "So You Can Talk About Them," 1999, explains, "Pia Fries's paintings refuse to be pinned down—not even with the help of her titles. With each picture, she starts with the material and its physical presence and relying upon her experiences with this building material, she develops her own, extremely heterogeneous pictorial language, which leads to analogous speech and demands its own language – visually as well as acoustically."

Abstraction is a language that is full of endless possibilities. I believe this is one explanation for its persistence decade after decade. As Pia Fries exclaimed in her website interview, "I was open-minded all the time and I looked around, but then I had to choose my own way to create. I mean, it's a process, an ongoing process, to find my own visual language. And I'm still in the process right now at Crown Point Press!"

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