

Richard Schur

“Painting need not be perfect. It’s like a person: often a face is more beautiful if there are some marks.”

RICHARD SCHUR lives and works in Munich, Germany – a city famous for the special quality of its light. As well as teaching at the Academy of Fine Arts there, he is renowned for his complex, seductively coloured abstract paintings. Some works are huge, some tiny; the grid of rectangles at times crammed densely together, at others times lavishly spread out. Combining rigorous visual enquiry and art historical references with an element of knowing playfulness, the works are satisfyingly painterly close up. *INTERVIEW: Vici MacDonald*

“Schur” by name and “sure” by nature?
Oh yeah, I like that, so I’ll take it! Although Schur doesn’t translate to English directly. I once looked for the root of the name – it means something to do with shearing sheep.

How long have you been painting these striking colour grids?
I started about eight years ago. I worked expressively as a student, but then noticed certain spatial phenomena happening with colour, extracted that aspect, and came to hard-edged painting. It was very pure and direct: the interaction of colours was what interested me.

Why did you desert expressionism?
Emotion was always very important, and still is. But I found that I can create greater drama and emotion through what colour evokes than through brushstrokes. Colour works very directly for me, like music.

Can you explain about your method?
It involves a long intuitive process and many layers. A small piece usually takes about three to five days of work – painting one layer over the other. It’s often a long process, but I also create some that are very spontaneous. It’s important for me that the first step of the painting has the same value as the last step, when I finish it.

The works look hard-edged from a distance but looser close up – is there a grid system behind them?
My room is very messy, so in art I need to bring real order to this messiness. Through painting I am always seeking some certainty: everything decided, everything in its place. But there is no planned grid at the beginning. There *is* a painterly system I’m using, but it’s kind of grids in a metaphorical way.

And although you paint over guides of masking tape, you don’t worry about the paint going under the edges?
That’s correct. It took many years to get to

work with what happens when I’m not so strict. Hard-edged painting should not be about making a perfect line. Painting need not be perfect. It’s like a person: often a face is more beautiful if there are some marks.

So is there any system to the colours?
The system is intuition. And so where does intuition come from? From the experience you have of making the work, or of nature, or of urban culture when walking in big cities like Tokyo or New York – the architecture gives you some input and it comes out again later. Perhaps that’s intuition.

Are the colours influenced by your mood, or meant to create a mood?
During the painting process they are influenced by my mood, for sure. But when I consider it, they are also meant to create a mood. People often say to me, “You must have been very happy when you made this painting”. Yet I was in my darkest moments when I created the happiest paintings.

They all look very cheerful. Have you ever done a depressing painting?
I don’t know. That’s an interesting question, because I ask myself can a very dark painting, if it’s good, be depressing. So I hope not – only bad ones are depressing!

Some of your titles, like Supernoverdrive, or Only Palone, are quite jokey. Does this undercut the work’s seriousness?
I try to give titles that are authentic and what I feel. So if some painting evokes for me a feeling of jokiness, then it can still be serious. Comedians are very serious artists; ancient comedians were serious too. And so the work is meant seriously – very seriously.

And some titles, like Billy Idle, pun on English-language pop music – which you’ve said Germans have trouble understanding. Why do you do that?
It sounds a bit different. I think it puts the title on another level, like poetry. It evokes

associations, not naming things directly. To a German, English titles have a kind of mystery.

You’ve said that you work intuitively, but also that decision making is at the core of your process. Isn’t that a contradiction?
I mean the decisions are made intuitively, so it’s not just based on what happens by chance. This is a very complicated question, because I am always interested in walking on this edge. It’s like walking on the ridge of a mountain, between making a decision and doing what the materials tell you, and what happens by chance or what happens by process. This small edge is the point for me.

Do you have an idea in mind before you start a painting?
Not an idea, but I have a clear feeling of what to do. I don’t paint unconsciously, I always paint when I have the feeling there.

How do you choose scale and surface? Some works are big, some small, some on canvas, some on masonite.
The scale is very important for me. And that, too, is intuitive – I may feel, “Ah, today I want to make a small one”... it’s like that. There are no rules. I do what’s necessary for me at a certain moment. Surface is also to do with finding out and experimenting. I like to use canvas because it has a long tradition, but I came to masonite in America – and at the moment I am working on aluminium plates.

Do you intend the eye to move through one of your paintings – take it all in as one – or just get lost?
In the best case scenario, I want you to do all of that. So if you get lost – well, you should always be able to get back in. You should always be moving around.

Finally, if you could live with any work of art ever made, what would it be?
A Titian – I saw a very good one in Vienna last year. I don’t always look at his titles, but I’ve looked long and hard at his work. ☺



1 **Untitled** (1994)
acrylic on canvas, 160 x 195cm
– an example of Schur’s early “expressionist” style

2 **Untitled** (2006)
acrylic on canvas, 200 x 150cm

3 **Billy Idle** (2006)
acrylic on masonite, 23 x 30cm

4 A detail of **Billy Idle**, showing Schur’s “imperfect marks”

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All images courtesy of Richard Schur



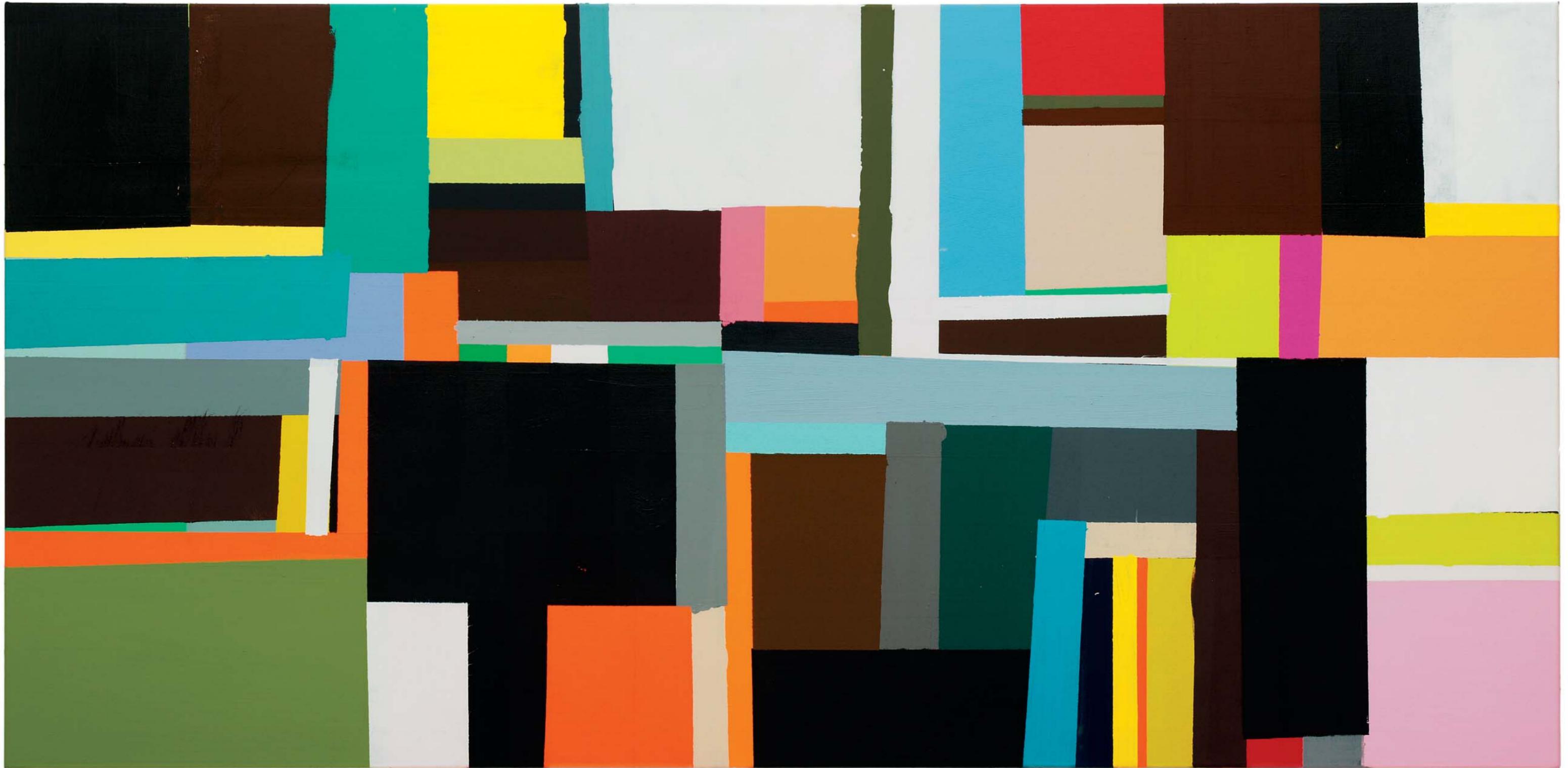
Suburbia's Sunsets (2007), acrylic on canvas, 80 x 70cm



Bitter Love (2007), acrylic on aluminium, 45 x 50cm



Piet's Coffee (2007), acrylic on canvas, 38 x 40cm



Untitled (The Horizon is Queer) (2007), acrylic on canvas, 120 x 240 cm