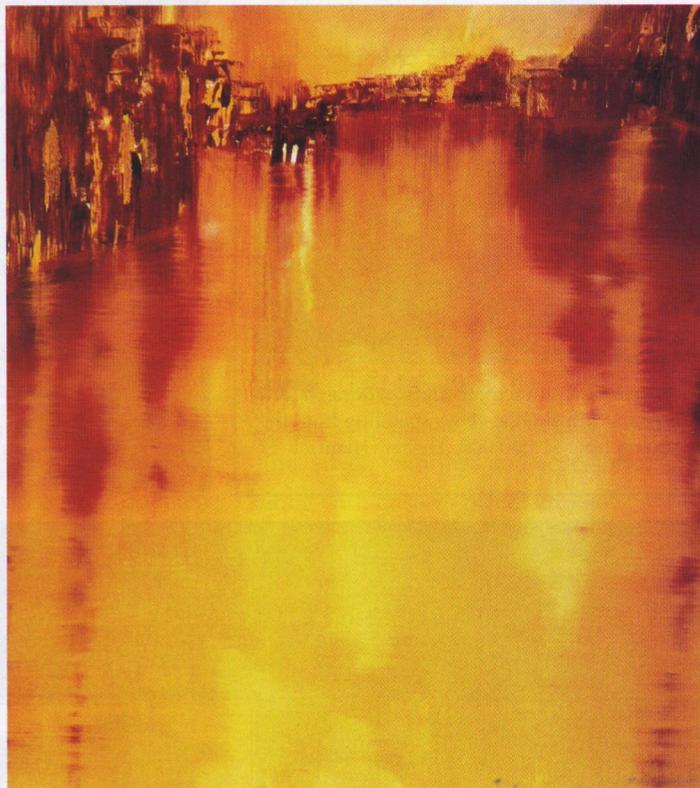


Seeing Red

Gerlinde Kosina paints city streets of burning love.



Gerlinde Kosina,
"Seabound,"

2000, oil on canvas,
37.4" x 39.4".

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114 for representation.

Hemingway wrote in ecstasy about Spanish bullfights and the "emotional and spiritual intensity ... produced by a man, an animal, and a piece of scarlet serge." The matador's scarlet cape infuriates the poor animal, but not because the bull sees red. Bulls, in fact, are color-blind. The cape is dyed red to excite aficionados like Hemingway.

Science has shown that red is the most stimulating color, vaunting a visible wavelength twice as long as blue. When Picasso claimed, "When I haven't any blue I use red," he must have been putting us on. Red is too strong to be taken so lightly. Not only is it the first tint recognizable by newborns, red also is the oldest color word in every language, or so I'm told. We would expect nothing less from the color of blood

and fire. The practical Romans put two and two together, re-naming the planet previously known as "The Red One" in honor of Mars, the god of war. It was in this vein that van Gogh painted the night café in Arles, afterwards explaining to Theo, "I tried to express the terrible passions of humanity by contrasts of red and green." Van Gogh, unlike Picasso, never played it cool.

There are sunrises that bathe the sea in a reddish glow, often in advance of a tempest ("Red sky in the morning, sailors take warning."). A similar apprehension came to mind as I approached "Seabound," one in a series of breathtaking new paintings by the Viennese artist Gerlinde Kosina, who won a medal at the 2001 Florence Biennale. Somewhere an aqueous city

burns red-hot without the slightest hint of smoke. We survey the scene from the air, perilously suspended above a grand canal of flowing fire. The photograph only suggests the effect of the painting viewed in its full dimensions. How some brushstrokes make architecture and others water, though everything is really only fire, is a technical marvel. Another one is how Kosina beguiles a compliant yellow into pretending to be a luminous shade of red. The two tones float and diffuse like a Rothko abstraction in yellow and red—only hotter. I gazed at "Seabound" with the hushed awe of a spectator in front of a conflagration.

Gerlinde Kosina helpfully responded to my questions and set me straight, as it turned out. Instead of the "terrible passions" I assumed were there, the painter wrote to me that red is a color that gives her solace. It came to her as an intuition a few years ago during her mother's final illness. "This fire was lit in myself: I felt like this red represented a 'yes' to life, even though I had to face such a hard time. The red color strengthened and energized me." And then, as if her e-mail were a telegram, she resorted to capitals: RED IS LOVE.

That love is a fire that purifies as it burns is an idea with noble precedents. Michelangelo was consumed by the concept to which he dedicated hours of poetry, including these lines:

Only with fire can the smith shape iron
To his intentions for a beloved and beautiful work;
Nor can any artist, without fire,
refine gold to its highest state;
Nor will the incomparable phoenix live again
unless it first burns.

John T. Spike, ART & ANTIQUES' Florence, Italy, correspondent, is an international art critic and curator.

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