

# HEIMO ZOBERNIG

CURRENTLY  
ON VIEW  
Solo shows  
at Mudam  
Luxembourg,  
through Sept. 7;  
Petzel Gallery,  
New York,  
through June 21;  
Nicolas Krupp  
Contemporary  
Art, Basel, through  
June 28.

**Interview by Karin Bellmann**  
**Studio photography by Florian Rainer**

KARIN  
BELLMANN  
is a writer based  
in Vienna.

# IN THE STUDIO







AUSTRIAN ARTIST HEIMO ZOBERNIG is tirelessly productive, although he is lesser known stateside than his sometime collaborators Albert Oehlen, the late Martin Kippenberger and the late Franz West. Zobernig has been involved in some 25 exhibitions or projects in each of the last 20 years. This year will be little different. As of June, he will have shown in nine group exhibitions around the globe. This month alone, his work is featured in three solo exhibitions, at Petzel Gallery in New York, Nicolas Krupp in Basel, and Musée d'art moderne Grand-Duc Jean (Mudam), Luxembourg.

Since the beginning of his career, in the early 1980s, Zobernig has worked across disciplines—from painting and sculpture to video, performance, architectural intervention and design. His exhibitions almost always upend expectations in some way, as he persistently questions the boundaries of art, while incorporating its history by drawing upon and interrogating 20th-century art movements, from modernism to Post-Minimalism.

Born in 1958, Zobernig studied set design at Vienna's Academy of Fine Arts, after being rejected from the painting department. Yet, in the mid-1980s, he made a name for himself with paintings of abstract geometric forms and minimalistic cardboard objects. In the late 1980s, he created tall monoliths, lacquered in black synthetic resin and covered in feathers. Recently, Zobernig has taken up this motif again, with "tarred" and feathered objects made of cardboard sheets folded to resemble portable room dividers or open plinths into which the viewer can peek.

Zobernig moves with seeming ease between graphic, architectural and interior design. He is well known for his sculptural shelves and bar stools that straddle fine art and decor. He has been asked frequently to design museum interiors, including the entrance areas at the Kunstverein München, in 1992, and at the Kunstverein Braunschweig, in 1999. A more recent example is his design (in collaboration with architect Michael Wallraff) of the new cinema at MUMOK, Vienna, commissioned in 2011.

In 1994, he and six other artists living in Vienna were asked to collaborate with a non-Austrian artist of their choice for the exhibition "Jetztzeit" (Now-Time), which appeared at Kunsthalle Wien and de Appel Arts Centre, Amsterdam. Zobernig decided to work with Oehlen. Inspired by the limited palette of Picasso's *Guernica*, Zobernig installed 15 Oehlen paintings bathed in red fluorescent light. The multicolored works then appeared to be monochromatic, as if painted in the light-dark modulations of the red spectrum.

How does Zobernig, known for his rigorous inquiries into exhibition-making and for his thorough engagement with art history, keep up? He seems to take a systematic, pragmatic approach to everything he does. A lot of his works follow sets of self-imposed rules. For instance, he never titles his pieces; he uses "neutral" colors for sculptures; all of his self-made catalogues and graphic-design commissions employ A4 paper and Helvetica font. His restrictions have led to an almost scientific approach to color. Since 1987, he has limited himself to a fixed palette of 15 pigments for a series of stripe paintings.



Heimo Zobernig:  
Untitled, 2006,  
acrylic and tape on  
canvas, 11¼ inches  
square. Courtesy  
Nicolas Krupp  
Contemporary  
Art, Basel.

In these works, vertical monochrome stripes of equal width are arranged according to criteria such as tone or contrast of hues. He creates a written list that predetermines their organization on the canvases.

Since 2000, Zobernig has been occupied with the creation of square "grid paintings." Initially he applied white acrylic to chroma-key fabrics—commonly known for their use as backdrops for TV weather forecasts—producing checkerboard or grid structures with blue, red and green lines. In 2004, after being struck by the work of Australian artist Ian Burn, he abandoned the chroma-key fabrics in favor of strips of masking tape, which remain on the canvas to make patterns. In 2011, after seeing a Picasso show at Kunsthalle Zurich, on view during his own show at Kunsthalle Zurich, Zobernig started a new group of paintings combining grid structures with free lines.

A less familiar aspect of Zobernig's oeuvre is his mannequin sculptures. For these, he uses parts from male and female dummies to construct hermaphrodite figures, presenting them half-dressed or naked. Painted with a white acrylic finish, they often feature superimposed grids of blue masking tape.

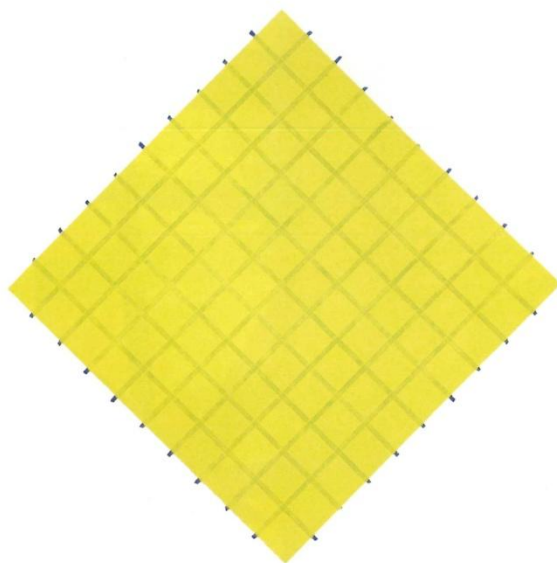
In March, Zobernig and I met at his sculpture studio at the Academy of Fine Arts, where he has been teaching since 2000, in order to examine the objects he has selected for his exhibition at Petzel. We then went to his other studio—a spacious loft, where he makes his paintings—to talk in more detail.

**KARIN BELLMANN** You are premiering three new groups of work in your Petzel exhibition—display dummies, minimalistic sculptures covered in feathers, and paintings. Do you define the mannequins as sculpture, too, even though they are found objects?

**HEIMO ZOBERNIG** Yes, I take them out of shop windows but not without a twist. Through my manipulations,

Untitled, 2014,  
feathers and  
synthetic varnish  
on cardboard,  
approx. 82%  
by 31½ by 23%  
inches. Courtesy  
Petzel Gallery,  
New York.

Untitled, 2005,  
acrylic and tape  
on canvas, 39½  
inches square.  
Courtesy  
Nicolas Krupp.



I introduce elements that turn them into sculptures. As a result, they become fetishlike objects.

**BELLMANN** When did you start using mannequins?

**ZOBERNIG** When I was studying at the Academy in Vienna, I wanted to have showroom dummies in my studio but didn't really know why. I had little money so I asked various department stores if they could spare mannequins that were no longer in use. I got arms, legs, torsos—never a whole figure. I had all these parts in my studio, but I did not know quite what to do with them. Eventually they were lost. When I returned to the Academy as a teacher in 2000, I was invited to participate in an exhibition about sculpture in Austria after 1945 at the Belvedere [museum in Vienna]. I had just taken over the academic post of Joannis Avramidis—a modernist sculptor who divided the human figure into meridians for use as idealized abstract segments. So, I bought a dummy for the show to try taping a grid onto it. I wanted to use my own body this way in a video [*No. 19*, 2001]. After the shoot, the dummy remained in my studio. In the evenings, at dusk, I always had this creepy suspicion that somebody was there with me.

**BELLMANN** Scary! Did this frighten you?

**ZOBERNIG** It was a brief but powerful sensation of alarm. It occurred to me that objects could appear alive. I think of it as an instance in which the unconscious enters consciousness. It really fascinated me, particularly because my approach to art is usually very sober. When I started to teach at the Academy, I asked myself why the tradition of figurative representation had been abandoned. It used to be the only valid approach to sculpture, but the knowledge seems to have been lost altogether. Two students from Milan, who came from more conservative backgrounds, caught my attention. As a daily routine, one of them mod-

eled faces based on plaster casts. I asked him to make a cast of my naked body. A realistic representation was the outcome. This exercise was an attempt to draw the other students' interest back to the figure. As a consequence, I turned to the figure myself. That was when I started working with dummies.

**BELLMANN** Can you tell me about making *No. 19*?

**ZOBERNIG** For the video I covered my body with a grid of blue adhesive tape, which I had tried out on the mannequin. Using the chroma-key process, the grid could be manipulated in postproduction, resulting in the disintegration of my body into abstract fragments in the video. Additionally, I wore a latex wig to increase the effect of abstraction. There was an embarrassing aspect to the video, too, because the camera filmed my body in extreme close-up.

**BELLMANN** What relationship exists between segmenting your body into fragments and the grid paintings? Did you want to experiment with the grid in different mediums?

**ZOBERNIG** Yes, the grid sticks with me. Ultimately, the world can be grasped through grids and geometrization. In today's digitized world, particularly, lines become an increasingly important means of rationalization.

**BELLMANN** Do you trace the dummies to anything in your early work?

**ZOBERNIG** One of the mannequins I'll be showing in New York is wearing a blue T-shirt with the word "Sale" printed on it. Only recently, I discovered this motif in a very early work of mine. In the 1980s, I kept a visual diary. Each day I made paintings or drawings in A4 format. Everything that came to my mind was chronicled this way. Among these images there is a drawing of a young, melancholic man with one arm shorter than the other. He wears nothing more than a shirt. The half-dressed mannequin is a reference to this early image of shameful nakedness.

**BELLMANN** There are two more figures you will be showing in New York. Both are partially covered with grids—one on the face, the other on a leg.

**ZOBERNIG** Yes, the grids are made of the same blue tape I used in *No. 19*. Originally, I did not conceive of the mannequin parts as a whole. In 2003, I showed them at Galerie Christian Nagel, Berlin. At the time I had no idea what to do with them, so I spread them out on the floor of the gallery. Years later, I reused the fragments, assembling them in my studio and arranging them in different postures. One of the mannequins lifts its arms as if embracing an imaginary space—a sort of nothingness, a void.

**BELLMANN** And how have you come to the paintings at Petzel, in which you combine the grid with free forms?

**ZOBERNIG** My painting has undergone a simple development. My engagement with color theory and color ordering systems led to monochromes—paintings that are also empty, naked—and eventually to black monochromes. The grid came out of this.

A painting is not always seen from an ideal viewing position. When passing by an image, the frame is necessarily



perceived as an integral part of it. This change of perspective is apparent in my early grid paintings. I wanted to paint frames slipping into the images. Mondrian's grid originates from a view out of a window. In 1917, he painted a stained-glass window. It was not an invention; he tried to reproduce a perceptual phenomenon.

**BELLMANN** What made you change your approach to the grid paintings? You gave up the chroma-key fabrics and started using masking tape.

**ZOBERNIG** Mondrian used tape to hold the places of his lines, but he never exhibited them that way. Since Barnett Newman, using tape has become ordinary. In 2004, I was in Brisbane, Australia, for an exhibition. There I discovered the work of Ian Burn. In his painting *Yellow Blue Equivalence* [1965-66], which he described as "bringing Mondrian to the modern space," he references Mondrian's diamond paintings. Burn's image is painted bright yellow and blue though. Additionally, he handled the divisions differently from Mondrian. Burn's divisions are odd in number rather than even, which decenters the picture. You can divide Mondrian's grids by two again and again. An odd number is a more complicated geometric task. For me, this was a peculiar irritation that I only came to realize by imitating Burn and by counting the divisions. The encoun-

ter with Burn's works was deeply inspiring. After that there was a lot to do.

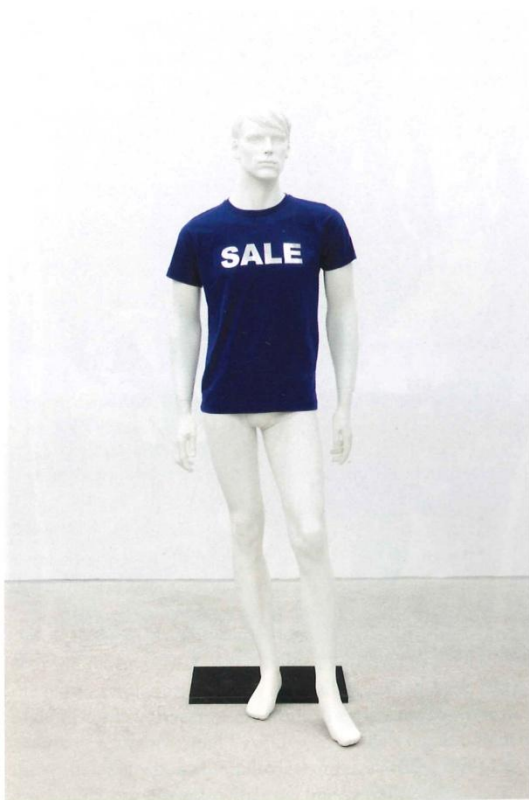
**BELLMANN** Infinite divisions?

**ZOBERNIG** Yes, countless possibilities opened up. You have to decide what the interesting cases are. After discovering these geometric possibilities, bringing the frame into the picture was not important anymore. It was a totally new field.

**BELLMANN** How does the grid fit with the gestural forms in your new paintings?

**ZOBERNIG** The free line adds something like expression to the paintings. Furthermore, the classic topic of figure and ground seems pertinent. In my new paintings, some gridlines appear to be in the foreground. Actually, I had to decide on those first. But the tape for those is the last to be removed from the canvas. This can cause a fantastic confusion. The straight grid lines appear to be a reliable system. The free lines, the curves, provoke obsessive interpretation and open up the whole problem of aesthetics: is it a beautiful, an ugly or an awkward line?

**BELLMANN** After you saw the Picasso exhibition in Zurich, your work took on expressive, subjective gestures, with direct references to Picasso. Are the new paintings at Petzel a continuation of these?



Far left, *Untitled*, 2011, silkscreen, linen, polyester and steel, 73¼ by 26¾ by 19¼ inches. Courtesy Petzel Gallery.

Left, view of Zobernig's installation of painted mannequin parts at Galerie Christian Nagel, Berlin, 2003.





**ZOBERNIG** The new ones grew out of those paintings, but they bear little relation to Picasso. Every now and then, an exemplary artist triggers a new painting. One of the works at Petzel alludes to Gustave Moreau. When I started this cycle of works in 2011, the paintings were made after Picasso and his forms. Simple lines can evoke certain forms. A curved line inevitably suggests a guitar. I try to bring the form into the present. In Zurich, I discovered a relation between geometric and free forms in Picasso's paintings. I started to see regularities in the free forms. They appear to be spontaneous but are actually quite deliberate. In my newest works, I wanted to combine free forms and grids without relying on any existing artistic model. My aim was to realize something similar to the depiction of nature.

The immediate, expressive gesture is a fiction. One isn't surprised and satisfied right away. If I succeed in realizing a certain idea, I always want to know whether I can repeat it.

**BELLMANN** Is this the reason why certain themes surface again and again? Is it why you work in series?

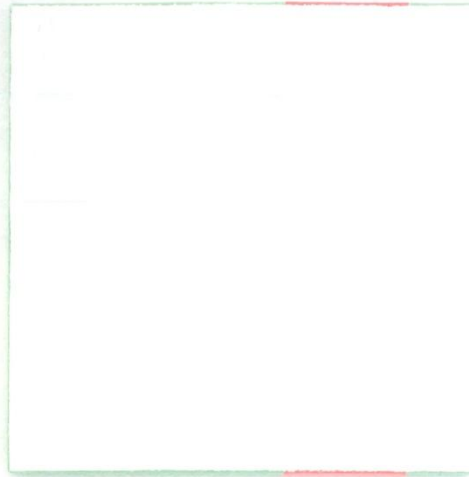
**ZOBERNIG** Series are unintentional. I always work on one painting at a time, rather than working on various paintings simultaneously. Not until one is finished do I start the next. This is the reason I'd rather speak of a cycle, which enables me to branch in different directions.

**BELLMANN** In your studio at the Academy, you showed me your feathered objects. Why have you returned to this idea you experimented with once so many years ago?

**ZOBERNIG** This is a question I ask myself, too. On the one hand, it refers to the problem of the series versus the cycle. The minimalistic sculptures made out of cardboard are all very different, despite their common surface. The feathered sculptures were a move to a different type of finish, if you like. They generated distinctive and humorous feedback. At the time, I thought, that's it, and I did not follow up. Today, certain issues have reemerged. I draw from a rich pool of work I've done over the years. And of course it intrigued me to see how these specific forms would work today. In contrast to pieces from the 1980s, the new feathered sculptures are more complex, architectonic forms.

**BELLMANN** The works you are showing in New York appear disparate, but they have a lot in common. How do you think the individual pieces are perceived as a whole in the exhibition?

**ZOBERNIG** It remains to be seen if the works complement each other. Sometimes, I want to make a single statement in an exhibition. That is why I will show only white monochromes on chroma-key fabrics at Nicolas Krupp in Basel. At Mudam, I am showing sculptures in one room and a selection of monochromes and more recent paintings in another one. The show ends with paintings that can be considered the starting point of the works I will send to Petzel. Over the past several years, curators and gallery owners have asked to do historical surveys of my work. They wanted to show the artistic development, and I acquiesced to their request. When the work is shown in chronological order, a golden thread is discernible, but discontinuities are fine as well.



Untitled, 2012,  
acrylic on Trevira  
Television CS  
fabric, 15¾ inches  
square. Courtesy  
Nicolas Krupp.

**BELLMANN** Why does the square play such a big role in your work?

**ZOBERNIG** For one thing, the square format is neutral. In the 1990s, I limited myself to that format to see how I could set it in motion or stabilize it.

**BELLMANN** Because a square form does not lead to an interpretation right away?

**ZOBERNIG** Yes, in a way. The vertical format is used in portrait painting, the horizontal in landscape painting. I did not want to prescribe a meaning—not even with a title. Within the confines of the square, my aim was to place emphasis on color and form in order to expand it irregularly to the left, to the right, to the top and to the bottom.

**BELLMANN** In the stripe paintings, the grid paintings and the monochromes, you have experimented with the possibilities of painting and challenged art historical predecessors.

**ZOBERNIG** Challenging models is essential. Sometimes it can be great fun to paint "the painting after the last painting."

**BELLMANN** You seem to be working without ever taking a break. How is this possible?

**ZOBERNIG** I am surprised myself, since being lazy has always appealed to me. In my daily routine, progress seems to be very slow. There is beauty in cultivating that slowness. Things that are well done need time. And I always take the time.

**BELLMANN** Your art is very allusive. Is there an artist or person who deeply matters to you—someone that could be called a role model?

**ZOBERNIG** In many respects, I'd say Sol LeWitt—both in his artwork and as a person. At the start, his work followed strict rules but later it became more cheerful and free. ○

Untitled, 2013,  
acrylic on canvas,  
78¾ inches square.  
Courtesy Petzel  
Gallery.