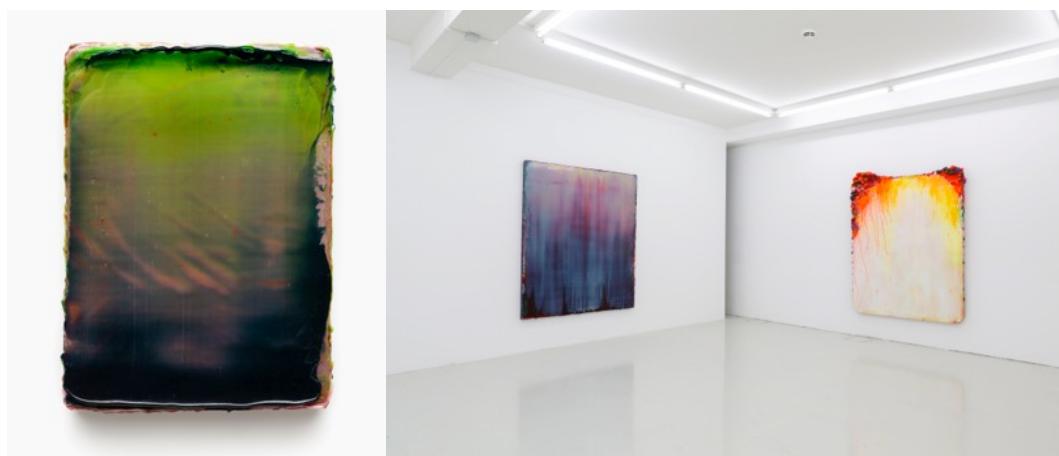


LEV KHESIN / BERLIN  
REVIEWS

# AN OPEN-ENDED EXPERIMENTAL SYSTEM

EKATERINA TEWES

How does something new come about? How does one get a new idea, and how does one create something that has never existed before? Does an idea take on a material gestalt? Or is it the matter itself—its silent presence and its magic stubbornness, its resistance and changeability—that directs our thoughts and actions? And furthermore: how much intention and how much chance are the basis of the new?



These questions keep coming up and are part of every kind of creative activity, be that artistic work, engineering, or scientific research.

Lev Khesin's engagement with these questions is reified in the artistic process that he developed, and points to an immanent potential for innovation in painting. Khesin paints with silicone, or more precisely, he models from the silicone mass dyed with pigments ambivalent pictures that cannot be determined as either paintings or objects.

A certain hybridity also characterizes silicone itself. The elastic, robust all-rounder of industrial consumer society, used in construction as well as in electronics and prosthetics, is in terms of its chemical structure at the intersection of organic and inorganic compounds. It is worth noting in passing that the

invention of silicone in 1940 was partially owed to chance. Richard Müller was working at the time, without much success, at the development of means of creating fog as an antiaircraft defense, until his research took a different direction and he discovered the synthesis method for the industrial production of silicones.

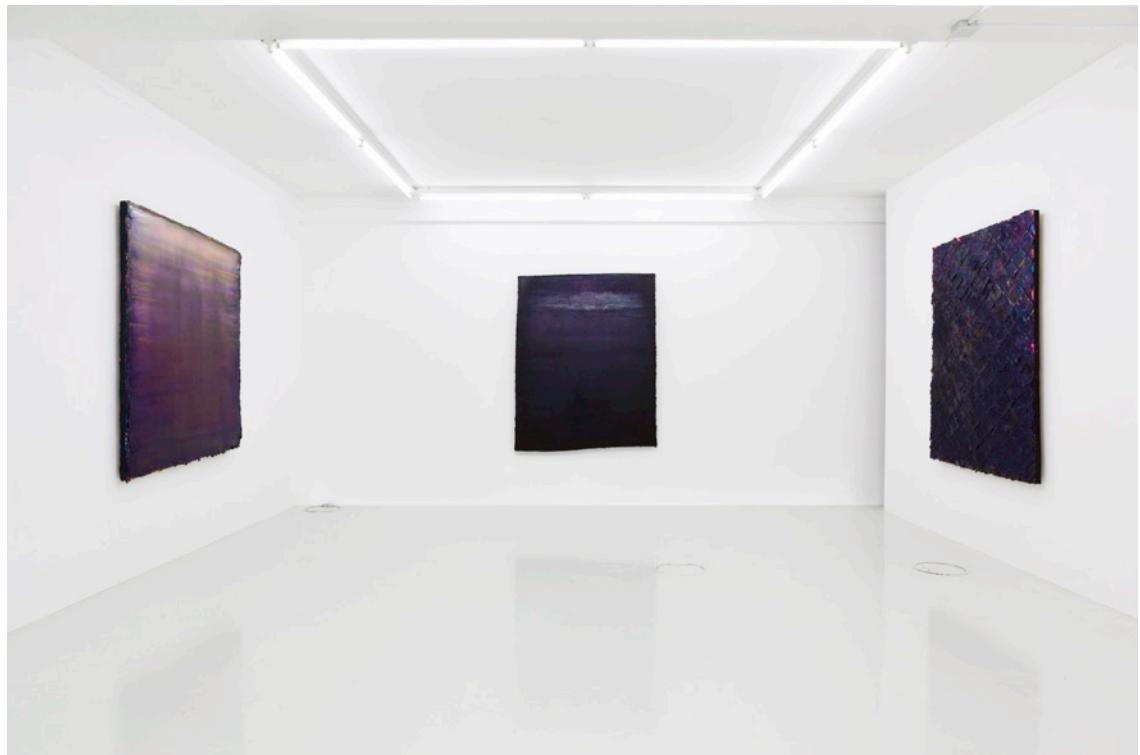


The chances and ambiguities, which are always part of experimentation and discovery, are part of Lev Khesin's artistic method. His basic method consists of the application of connected layers of silicone to a support —

usually a wooden or metal panel. Every silicone layer covers the surface of the panel like a film. The number of layers in a painting varies from a dozen to a hundred. The artist mixes the transparent silicone with different pigments. Every layer can therefore differ from the next in terms of color and degree of transparency. As a result, the superimposed layers produce light effects such as shining, reflecting, shimmering, and opalescence.

The translucent pictorial fields of Khesin's painting-objects are brought to the fore by light. Depending on the perspective from which they are viewed, they light up or go out. Sometimes this light-play leads us intentionally astray. The eye, already used to the changeability of the painting, is challenged to distinguish between the unlit translucent and actually opaque fields of the pictures.

The sensuality of these light-filled, often minimalist painting-objects allows us to experience how strongly our perception is influenced by the conditions of light and the movement of the beholder. This, as well as Khesin's recourse to industrial materials, reminds us of the strategies of the Californian Light and Space Movement — think of Peter Alexander's shimmering cube objects made of polyester resin, Craig Kauffman's wall relief sculptures of transparent plastic panels sprayed with acrylic paint, or Helen Pashgian's opalascent ball sculptures made of epoxy resins.



In addition to its transparency, the almost unlimited sculptability of silicone is decisive for Khesin's artistic process. The artist produces from the silicone mass both plane layers as well as sculptural forms that rise in the manner of a relief from their background. The reliefs sometimes imitate anthropogenic line and point grids, but more frequently Khesin's silicone formations follow the model of nature. Especially in the works from the years 2011 - 2015, we can frequently make out organic as well as inorganic structures, among them crystal and needle patterns, honeycomb-like structures, or cone-shaped coral-like outgrowths.

However, the artist also takes advantage of silicone's viscosity and its ability to develop an independent dynamics. He lets the viscous material move freely, but gives it direction. In this way, through the material's movement diverse forms emerge that in turn inform the structure of these object-paintings. The silicone buckles, hardens into tube-like effusions, disperses at the margins, or hardens into stalactites. These formations coexist with the shapes actively designed and created by the artist. The border between object and subject is blurred here: neither the artist-subject nor the object of his activity are exclusively active or passive.

This is the key element of Khesin's artistic process. Because the dynamic subject-object constellation opens up space for an interplay of intention and accident. In this sense, Khesin's process is similar to an experimental system where the recurring experimental set-up (silicone and pigments on a panel) keeps producing new results, precisely because it allows for chance.

In the moment when Khesin's artistic process gives its answers to the question of when and how something new emerges, it also reveals itself as an engagement with the classic dilemma between action and contemplation. Every single painting thus becomes a new attempt to find a balance between taking action and allowing things to happen.

# A KIND OF MYTHICAL PRIMARY MATTER

HEINZ STAHLHUT



HS: When did you start working with silicone?

LK: In 2005, thirteen years ago.

HS: What was the reason? What lack did you feel when you were painting with oils?

LK: Indeed, up to that point, I had worked for about ten years with oils and also with other classic media of painting. In 1999, I came to Germany from Russia, where I had studied figurative art for a while. I wanted to make a fresh start — also in terms of my art. With classical paint one can work according to classic rules, or one can break those rules. But I was more interested in developing my own rules, my own canon. I experimented with acrylic pastes, resins, and other materials, until I finally discovered silicone for myself.

HS: Since the end of the epoch of classical modernism, there has been a trend in modern art to make use of new materials: plexiglass for example in the 1920s, or aluminum in the 1960s, which up to that point had hardly been used in an art context, because they originate from a “low,” artisanal or industrial context. Did this desire to use everyday materials, in order to get closer to the everyday world of the beholder, influence your decision to use silicone?

LK: Quite the opposite! I don’t see silicone as an everyday material. For me, it is a kind of mythical primary substance, or perhaps the organic-inorganic primordial soup. When I mix large amounts of it on a palette with color pigments and other additional stuff, and then apply it to a panel, I can’t associate this material in any way with the narrow, accurate, colorless caulking that we all know from our bathrooms. Sure, somehow it’s still the same material, but the amount you use makes all the difference: the quality that’s important to me comes from the quantity.

HS: Is the relationship between color and bonding agent different than with oils? Silicone is usually opaque; does that influence the way you paint?

LK: I always determine the proportion of pigments and silicone myself, and it differs almost every time. The translucent quality of silicone is for me what is concrete. Applied in thin layers, it’s almost as clear as glass, and thus a light conductor that no longer refers to itself, but to the immaterial. I remember an interesting and quite accurate hypothesis from your essay on my work, What to Do with Paint. There, you describe how seeing was traditionally regarded as a distancing, “pure” form of perception, and touch as a “contaminating” contact perception. Then you come to the conclusion that this opposition is dissolved in my paintings.

HS: Do you have natural or artificial light when you paint? Is a successful painting one that works under both conditions?

LK: A light conductor, of which we just spoke, naturally depends on light. The light, its intensity, its character, whether it’s diffuse or focused, always plays an important role.

In the twilight, the fluorescent paints  
shine especially brightly, direct sunlight  
brings the metal pigments under the superimposed  
layers of paint extremely to the fore and  
reveals the entire depth of the painting.  
However, I don't adapt a painting  
to a certain light condition: rather, it should  
change as often as possible over the course  
of a day, or depend on one's perspective.

HS: How do you proceed when you plan  
a painting? Is the first continuous layer of  
color a foundation, or you set several centers  
in different colors?

LK: It's not always the same, but usually  
for me the firm panel is the supporting  
"skeleton." The first layers are applied  
extensively, and after several layers  
the color concentrates itself in certain  
places more than in others. Sometimes  
that is planned, but sometimes it's left to  
chance. Taken together, these layers are  
the "meat" of a work. I analyze this sum  
of intentional and chance vectors, and  
then I add the "skin." As a rule, these are  
the many thinner glazes that don't always  
cover the entire painting.

HS: Your paintings often consist of numerous  
layers. How do you decide which color  
to use next? Is that based on your experience,  
did you maybe develop a system so you  
know which colors can be applied on  
top of each other and will "play" together,  
or is the starting point always different, and  
you decide more viscerally?

LK: Initially I tried to use classic glazing  
techniques familiar from oil and tempera  
painting. But soon I was challenged to use  
stronger contrasts. So I added, for example,  
dayglow paints and metal pigments to my  
palette, and found certain sequences of application  
that consist of these and "classic"  
paints. But sometimes I break all the rules  
and do a "bad painting", where I intentionally  
do every step differently than it was  
planned in the system that I devised myself.  
That's liberating and gives me new ideas.

HS: Do you have to paint faster with silicone  
than you would with oils? Can you  
revise decisions you made and change the  
composition when you work with this technique,  
or would you then have to remove  
the entire layer?

LK: That is an interesting aspect: when something doesn't go according to the plan, then that's also part of my plan. Therefore I never remove any layers. In extreme cases, these failures accumulate for years — eight years for one work is my record so far. I can add new layers pretty much endlessly, until the sum of failures and disappointments turns into success. These works that have challenged me the longest, where in the end I almost always had a eureka moment, are often for me personally the most precious ones.

In the context of abstract art, one speaks of content, but almost never of the subject. But for me as an artist, this process is actually the subject, and an adventure as well. And something else: before, I spoke of my paintings' skeleton, meat, and skin. And I can't help feeling that over the course of struggling with me, they also develop a will, a spirit.

HS: Are you aware (perhaps that's also part of your concept) that there is also something a bit disgusting about silicone? I've always found this contrast between the great beauty of your paintings and this actually not terribly attractive material interesting, but I don't know whether you see it the same way.

LK: Absolutely. Beauty and ugliness are possibly the most interesting opposites I deal with in my work. I remember how my professor, Frank Badur, when I was about to graduate, looked at one of my earlier silicone paintings that looked simultaneously like a gigantic flower and a heap of internal organs, and said that he found this "completely perverse."

"In a positive sense," he added after a second. Even if not every work seems like an oxymoron at first sight, it's important to me that there is a certain antagonism.

HS: Will you continue working like this in the future, or are you looking for new painting materials? In your studio, you showed me your sculptural experiments with screens and semi-transparent foil. Will your path in the future lead you there, to sculptural and visual-kinetic works, experiments that could also be discovered in your earlier work?

LK: As long as I'm interested in the interplay of opposites, like for example attractive and repellent elements, or will and chance, as mentioned before, my technique offers me suitable means to explore that. I don't think it has been exhausted yet. But of course I'm also open to other techniques and genres. The video works you mentioned are based on the physical principle of light polarization and address how light and concrete matter are related.

And the drawing machine modeled a situation that consisted in equal parts of order and chaos, control and loss of control. So these are the same questions I address in my paintings, just with different means. I wouldn't rule out that such experiments might play a larger role in my work at some point in the future.

# A META TAGS

VLADIMIR LEVASHOV

Despite numerous declarations about the revival of painting, it is still in crisis. And the reason for this crisis is the same as for the phenomenon of conceptualization of the new art practice as a whole. It is believed that the reason for it is in the lack of direct contact between the contemporary man and reality, in the mediation of his relationship with the world by a whole set of technological gadgets, materials and procedures. They kill any life, so why discussing just painting? Yet, there is a need for it, moreover, there are real precedents of its presence in art practice.

Lev Khesin's creative work is such a precedent. One can say that his painting is abstract, that its samples do not depict anything, do not "denote" any external phenomena. It is impossible to say for sure if his works are paintings or objects though. They have a base and a layer of paint like other paintings. But the size of this layer of paint exceeds every norm of painting, and it incorporates additional substances, besides that, which is usually characteristic of a sculpture or an object. Moreover, Khesin's work lacks strict geometrical borderlines of the traditional canvas decorated with a frame. There are no borders to decorate here for his paintings are simultaneously objects, and objects (just as other things) do not need to either depict and name anything outside their own self, or be demonstratively extracted out of their environment.



Khesin's works resemble lumps of colored substance. Physically it is semitransparent silicone combined with certain of pigments. But visually it is something quite different. This fusion produces a substance where color acquires sophisticated depth resembling that of a precious stone. And this association has nothing to do with jewelry, for it is natural, or alchemical, if you like, as purely artistic manipulations eliminate the distinction between the physical mode and the mode of aesthetic imagery. Transmutation makes routinely technological substances overvalued, they begin to function as natural artifacts, some ancient relics for which many great painters of the past had a real fancy. The names of individual "relics" (and unique precious stones always had their own names) are borrowed by the author from old English, a half-forgotten language, so that nothing but their acoustics were readable hiding (but not destroying) their concrete messages. The name for the project as a whole is selected in the same contrasting way: "meta tags" is a term used in contemporary web design, also designating some hidden information.

There is a saying: "stupid like a painter" which is a fragment of the myth about the fools of geniuses, great painters of the past. But today a great artist cannot afford the luxury of being a fool. And Khesin's practice of generating artifacts that convince senses is a cunning intellectual project based on the conjunction of quite different things which are equally distant from each other, such as old and new, natural and artificial, conceptual calculation and sensuous material, avoidance of nomination and accurate designation. And it elegantly skips the boring for the viewer routine craftsmanship, this eternal compensation for the real aesthetical result, for the effect of wonder.