

STEPHAN SPICHER

LOOKING FOR A PATH

JEAN COUTEAU

BLOOMING - FADING
WORK ON PAPER
PART 1



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Stephan Spicher
Looking for a Path

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Contents

| | |
|-----------------|-----|
| Credit | 01 |
| Contents | 02 |
| Introduction | 03 |
| Artworks | 07 |
| Artist Profile | 173 |
| Acknowledgement | 175 |

STEPHAN SPICHER

LOOKING FOR A PATH

Born in Basel, Stephan Spicher is an inquisitive artist. His paintings are less 'representation' and more 'exploration' in the form of a discussion - in images - about the path of nature. Where did he build up this experience? Through travel, and through the turns and stops of life, he found himself accustomed to the vast, open, and cold expanses of the Eastern European flatlands, as well as to the lush, 'sky-less' primary forests of equatorial countries. Throughout all, he has come to know nature in its various incarnations. He knows nature when plants survive winter by shedding their leaves to later return in spring in the twigs and branches piercing through a mantle of snow. He knows nature when vegetation asserts its presence, invading every nook and cranny between sky and earth. He knows nature not only when it is tangled and chaotic but also when it stands straight and upright. He understands when it blooms and thus lives, and when it withers and thus survives. He knows the rhythm of nature's breath.

How does he bring such nature to us? It did not come to him straight away. When he was trained at the Beaux-Arts in Basel, Stephan Spicher followed the usual curriculum: he first learned the form of things, a subject the West has long pondered in its quest for knowledge. Then he cast this aside. He also learned colour, but without the figurative aspect, which held no allure for him. Eventually he shifted to what the West best excels at: questioning.

Along a drawn-out, difficult, yet creative path, he has questioned everything, from form and colour to representation, each in all of its aspects. Simultaneously, through reading and during regular visits to Asian countries, he allowed Eastern traditions little by little to pervade his thinking and thus moved away from approaching nature in order to study and then dominate it, after the Greco-Western anthropo-centrist tradition, and towards blending into it as a part of nature itself, after the Indian-hued cosmo-centrist Eastern traditions in particular. He also witnessed how Asian artists, like his Balinese friend the maestro Made Wianta, traveled in the opposite direction, from east to west.

THE PROCESS OF TIME IN NATURE

As a result of these queries, Stephan Spicher's exploration of nature is not the usual one - a search for knowledge. His aim is not to tell us or show us how nature appears visually, or how it might best be understood. His approach is more one of 'feeling', and a special kind of feeling at that - one from which the artist's personal world is purposely absent. It is a kind of feeling made of his memory of 'things', and thus of time in nature. In his works, one senses within him a human eye, in cohort with a brain, hands, and eventually pen or brush, trained and shaped from childhood onward to observe the movement of the things in this world, especially those of our natural environment. Most of us forget about these things, which often remain hidden in a corner of our subconscious memory. We end up forgetting about them. Conversely, however, Stephan Spicher brings to the fore in his work this accumulation of visual memories stored subconsciously. He follows both the growth of sturdy elements like trees when they take up a straight-lined form, as well as the weaker elements like flowers as they bloom and later wilt. In other works his painting brings back to the fore some of the paths followed by nature in its eternal process of 'becoming, blooming, and dying'. The process of time.



Book cover
blooming - fading, 2021
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Ink and Watercolor on Paper

Is this sensitivity of Stephan Spicher to 'becoming, blooming and dying' the result of the artist's exposure to Indian-based spiritualities, which he encountered during his trips to Asia? It might well be. But only to a certain extent. Stephan Spicher is not the type of person to suddenly fall under the spell of this or that 'oriental' guru, suddenly introducing new rites and beliefs into his life. He simply explores phenomena as they enter his experience and melds them together with his many other experiences. His works indeed 'talk' about life, i.e. order and chaos, blooming and death, and time as it unfurls, but it is in a darker mood than that expressed in eastern spirituality, in which it is always the revitalising and joyful side that is put forward, and which 'wins'. In Stephan Spicher's work, the mood is more darkly existentialist, without any particular 'joyful' or truly blooming moment. We are made to feel nature more as death than life. It emerges chaotically, takes form, is on the verge of blooming, and then dries in a mesh of wrinkled stalks.

What Stephan Spicher pinpoints in his works is always overlooked in the western tradition. Western art usually deals with 'scenes' when it is figurative, or otherwise with 'statements', be they aesthetic or conceptual. All of this tends to immobilise time. Stephan Spicher's art, on the other hand, inhabits a longer expanse of time. He shows time as it manifests its consequences on the world of things, on the natural world, on flowers that bloom and dry. His purpose is thus not to depict – he would be figurative if he were depicting. It is not abstract either. It is elsewhere, attempting to define a process – something that changes – but on the 'immobile' surface of the canvas. Stephan Spicher is conveying the notion of time on a small portion of space – the painter's canvas.

This intellectual transformation continued until about twenty years ago when Stephan moved away from questioning towards focusing on 'nature' as a tangible process, but not as a fixed object to study for the purpose of representation. He began to depict what happens when a leaf opens, when stalks turn into straight bamboo, when a flower blooms, or when branches dry and leaves wrinkle and shrink. It was not representation that he came to seek. Rather it was the series of processes found in changing nature, evident successively in the chaos inherent in nature, in nature's curbs, its broken unity, its perfect linear order, and even in its decay.

It must be emphasised that the full gamut of Stephan Spicher's work dealing with the aforementioned dynamics of nature cannot easily be brought together in a single, simple exhibition. Rather, each successive exhibition explores limited aspects of the natural processes he has been uncovering. Indeed, to fully understand the true scope of Stephan Spicher's work, one exhibition is not enough. Several of his past exhibitions were thus based on the idea of 'order': the order of straight natural lines such as one finds in stalks, bamboo or tree trunks. But for the present his artworks focus instead on the notion of chaos and decay, even though, again, certain individual works seem to depict the initial steps of a flower approaching the moment of blooming. In any case, anyone interested in Stephan Spicher's queries about nature would be best advised to interpret his work through the logic of 'cross-exhibition'. Spicher categorises his series sequentially and exhibits them in many galleries. Sometimes he presents his older works alongside his latest series. He does not merely want to showcase his latest works. He also wants us to appreciate his process more holistically.

THE PROCESSES OF NATURE

The process of giving birth to works from one series to the next replicates the witnessing by Stephan Spicher of the phenomenon of change in nature. This is interesting because change does not eliminate the reality of an object; instead, it emphasises again that natural reality is a process. In previous exhibitions dealing with the impression of eternal lines, what was dealt with was the force inherent in the process of life, and this was a visual impression totally at odds with what we see today, for example when Spicher presents us with the phenomenon of drought, wherein it is clear from the way he plays with colour, and from the forms of the lines, that he is conveying a decaying reality. In some series dealing with chaos, he goes further, presenting it as if he is working on natural elements without any purpose. Whether it is moss, dry branches, root tendrils, or dry bushes, everything is depicted as if not yet unraveled. Often, elements with irregular shapes seem to intervene, devour, or interact unintentionally with one another. Comparing this reality to Spicher's previously completed works in the Blooming and Fading series, Spicher wants to draw attention to phenomena that are unclear, that are in the process of becoming but have not actually 'become'.

What about colour? In the forms of irregularity and regularity, Spicher initially seems to want to present colour as a way to provide clear boundaries between natural objects. Dark, light, brown, red, and green colours express birth or new growth, wilting to dryness and death, for example. The colours appear as if not processed but occur because elements either take shape or lose shape, clump into objects or simply appear as shapes that are formed but not filled. At the same time there is innovation in presenting a single colour, so that the chaotic elements do not meet.

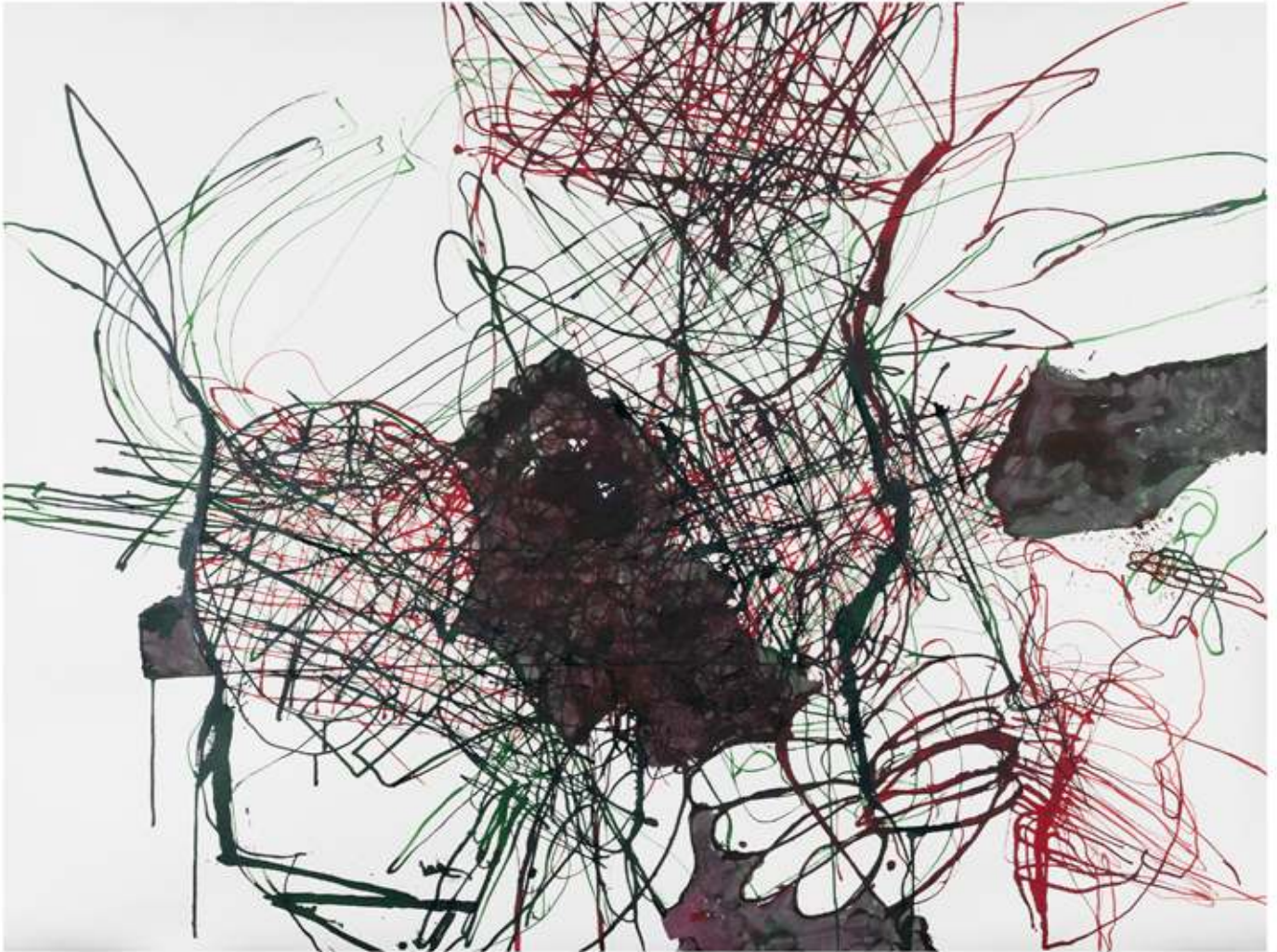
Spicher seems to have succeeded in reintroducing the most important elements of dynamism in nature. No wonder his works are fresh and grounded, because they somehow connect us with the ever-changing experiences of life, from growth to withering, through development, and towards death. There is simplicity, there is complexity, there is order, and there is disorder.

Ultimately, Spicher does not give any answer with regard to the mysteries of nature that his works deal with, but by uncovering his own perception of the processes nature is undergoing, he nevertheless touches the deepest part of life itself. His works are a tribute to questioning.

Jean Couteau



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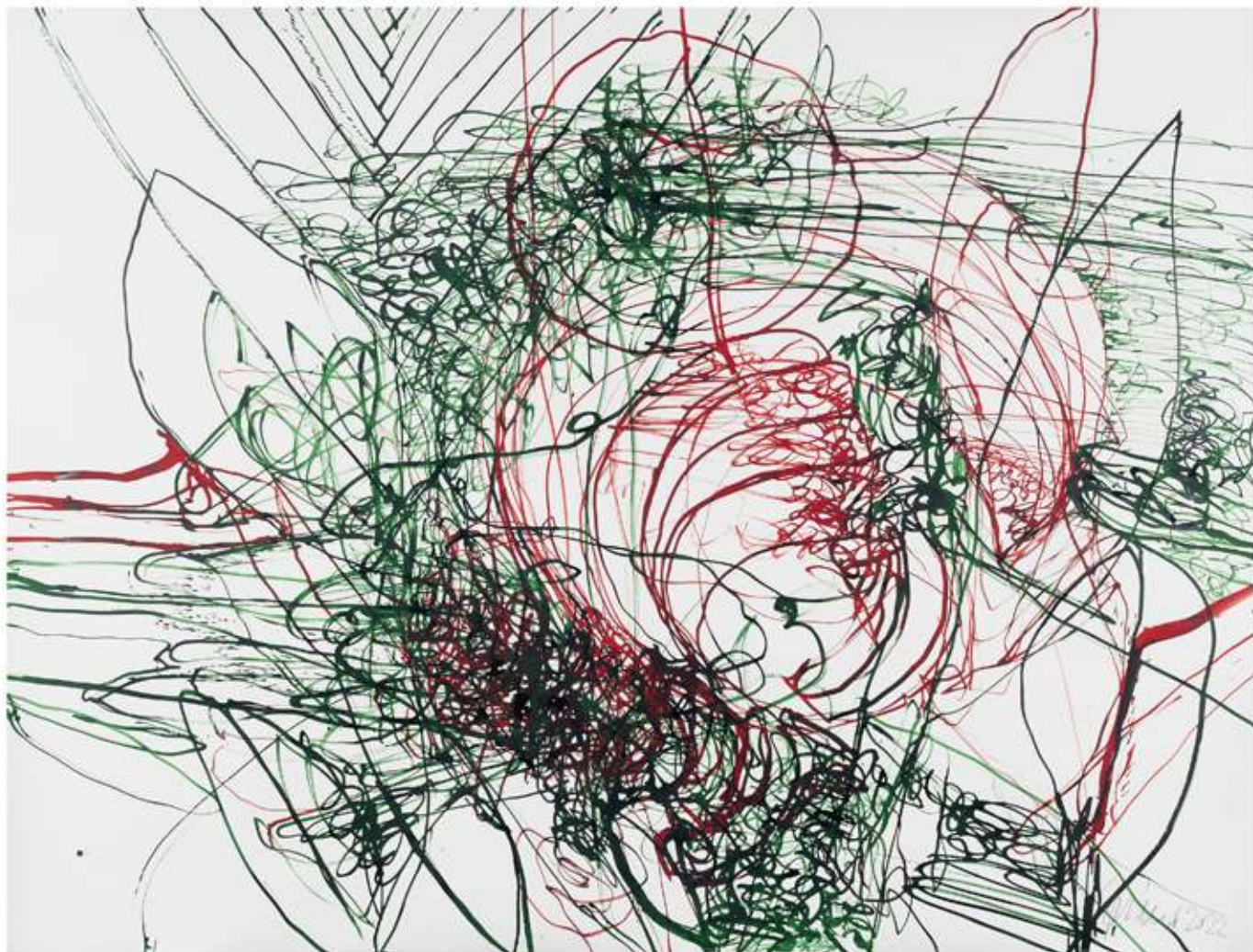
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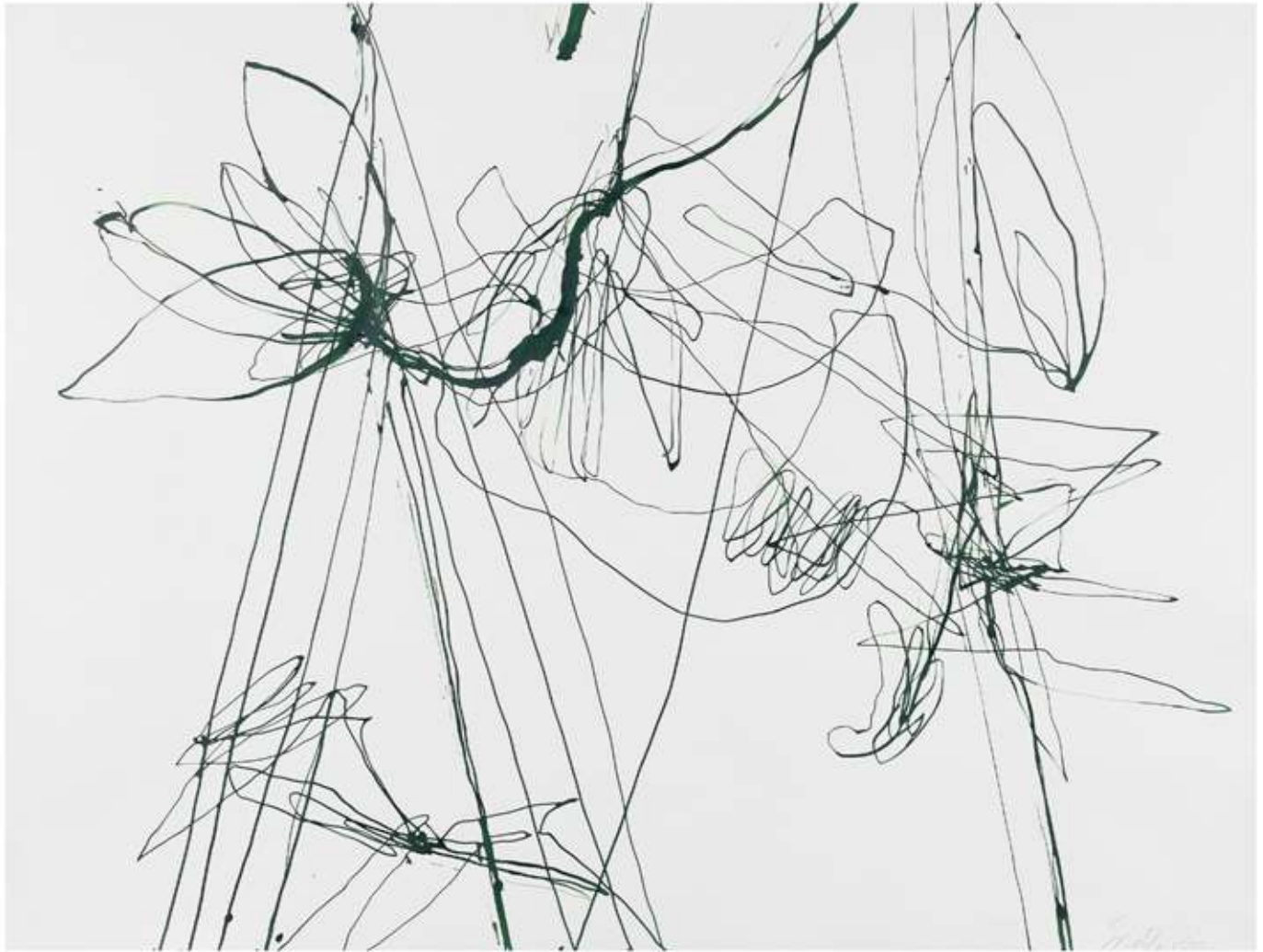
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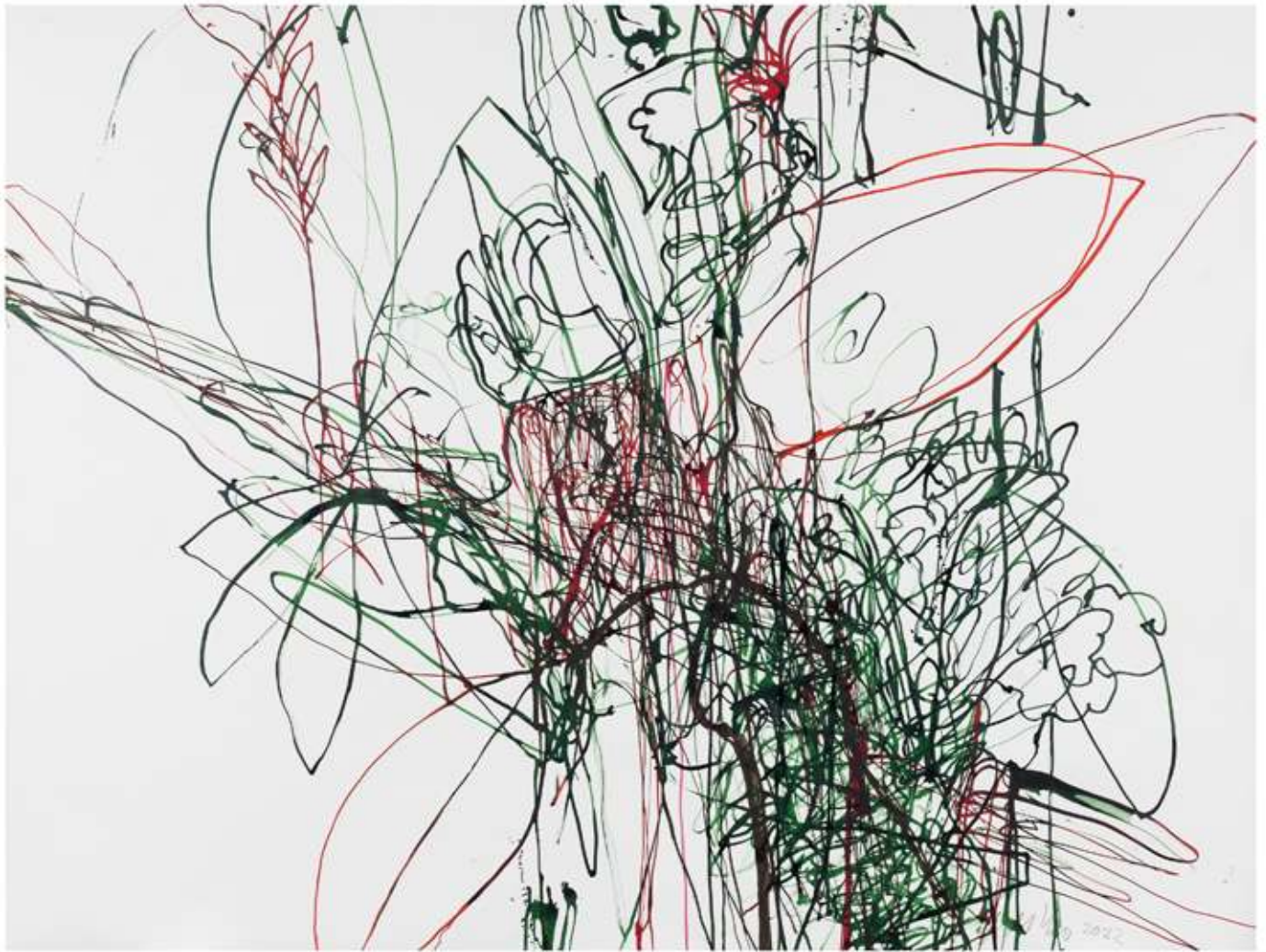
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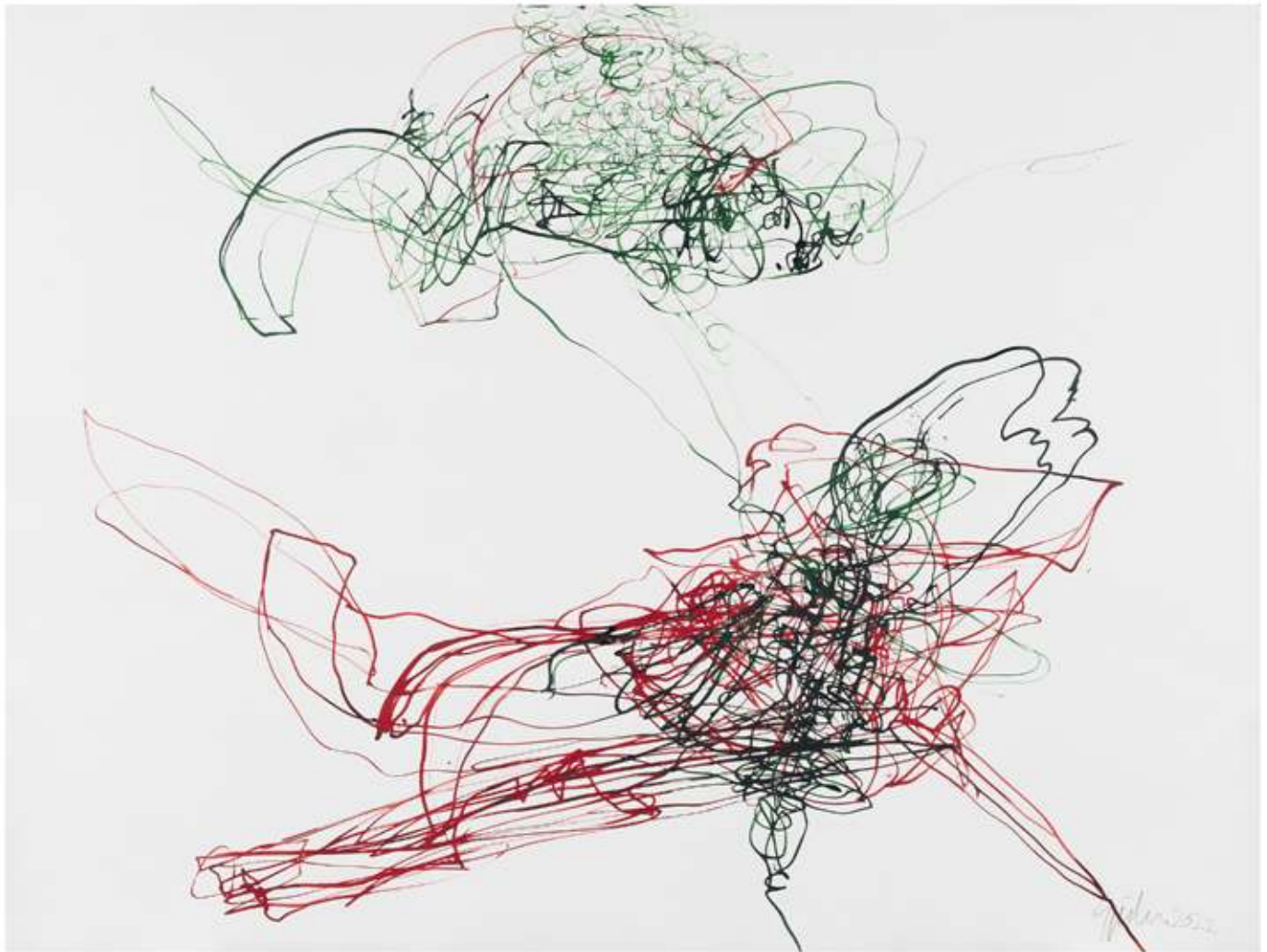
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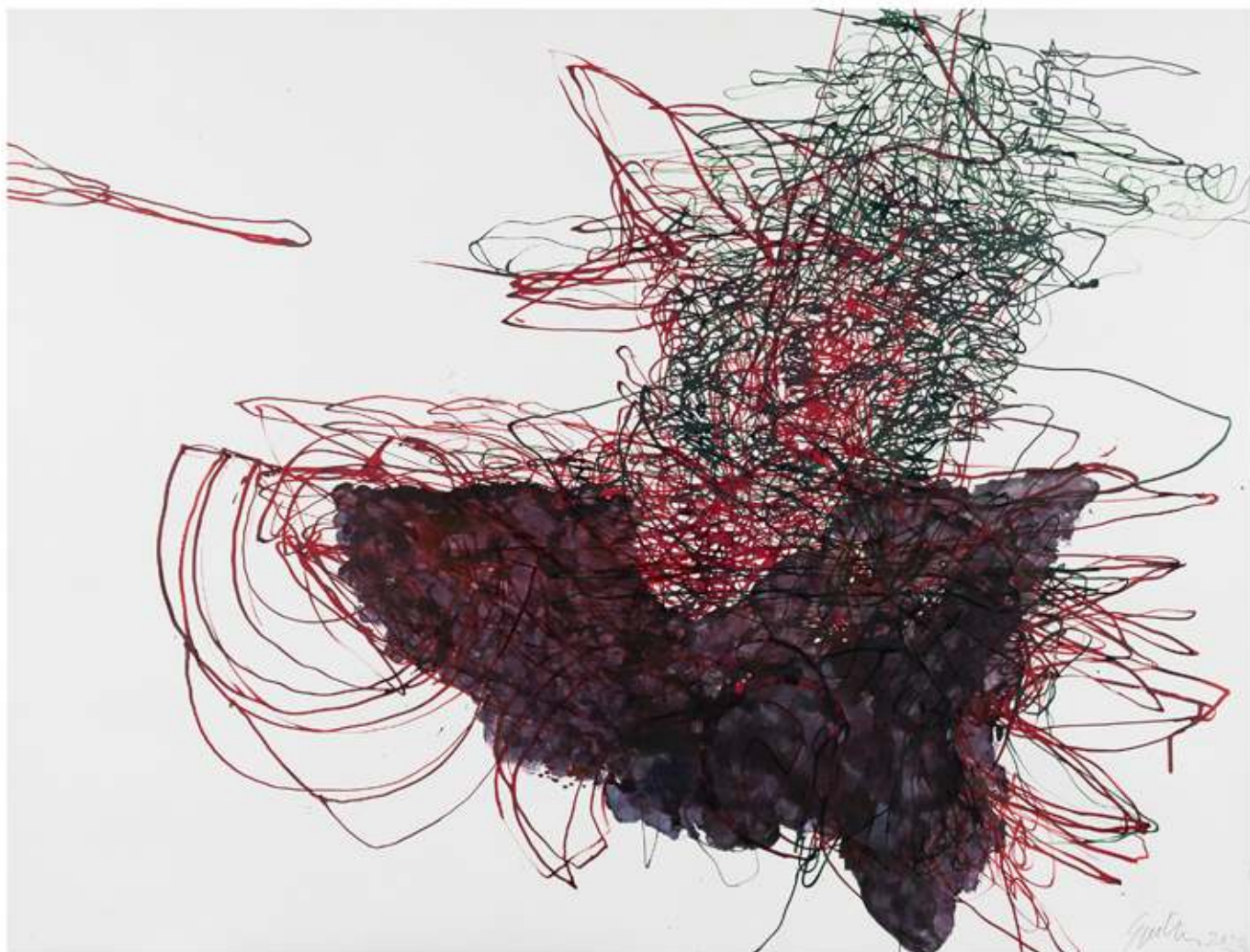
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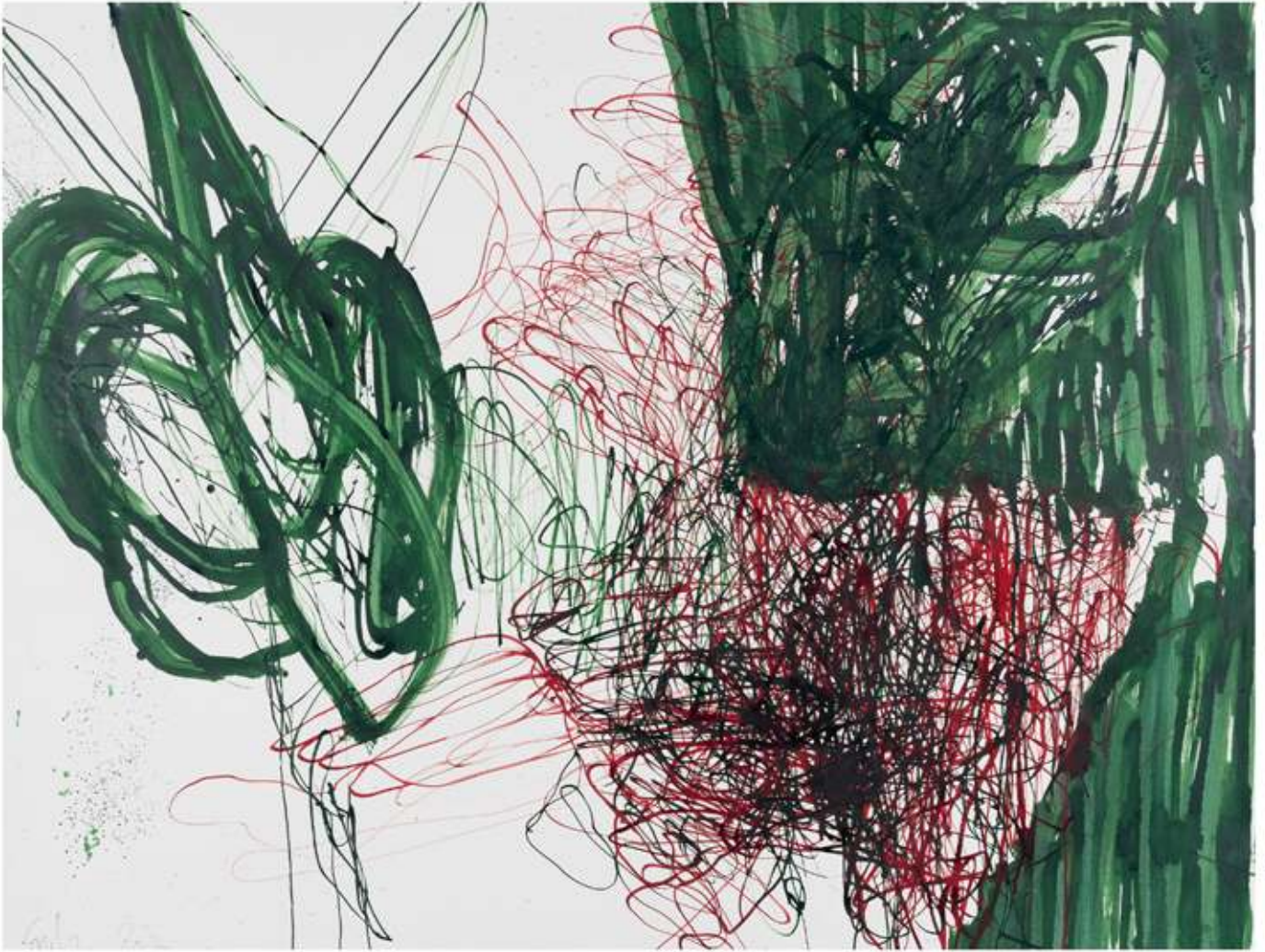
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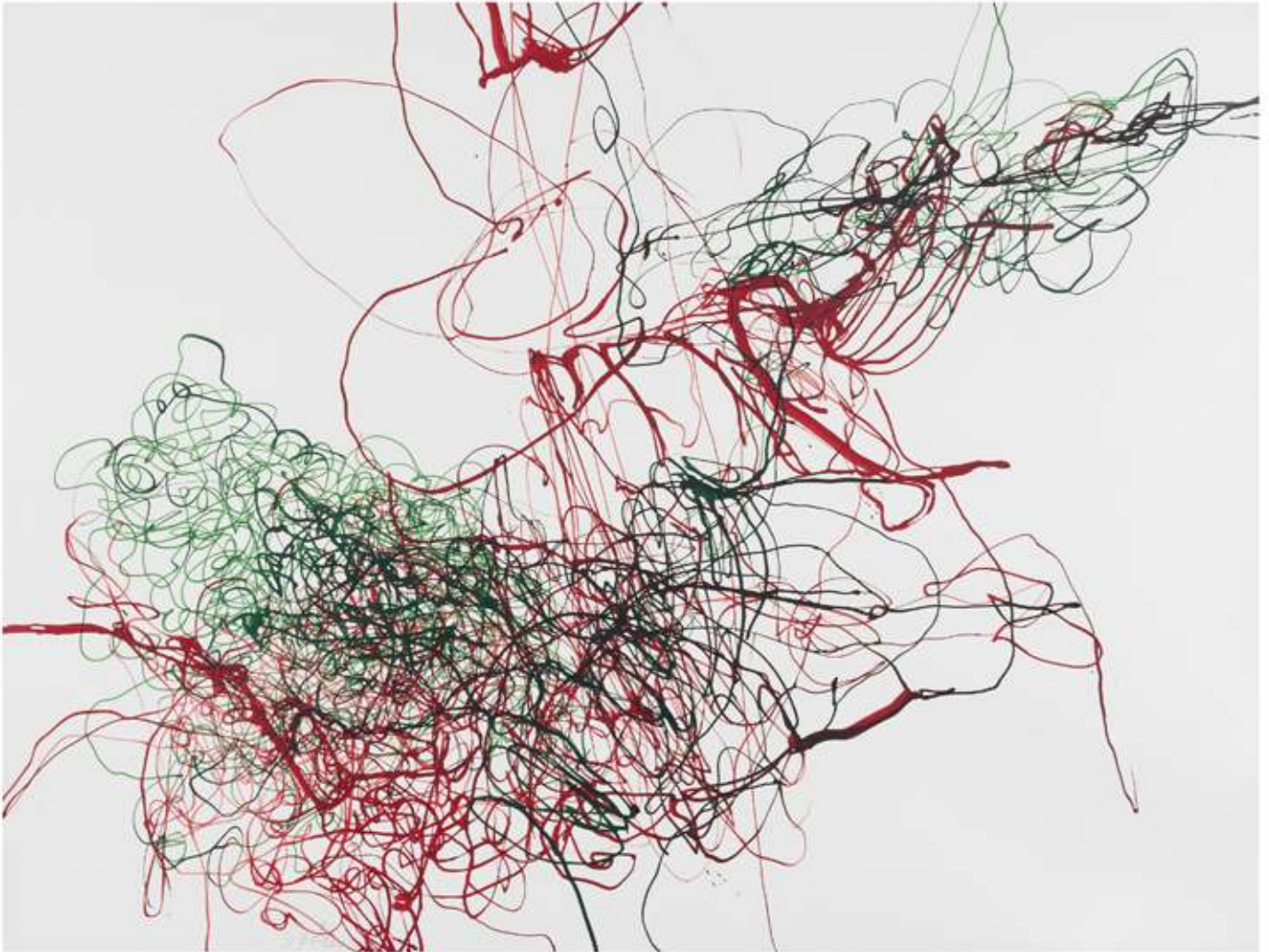
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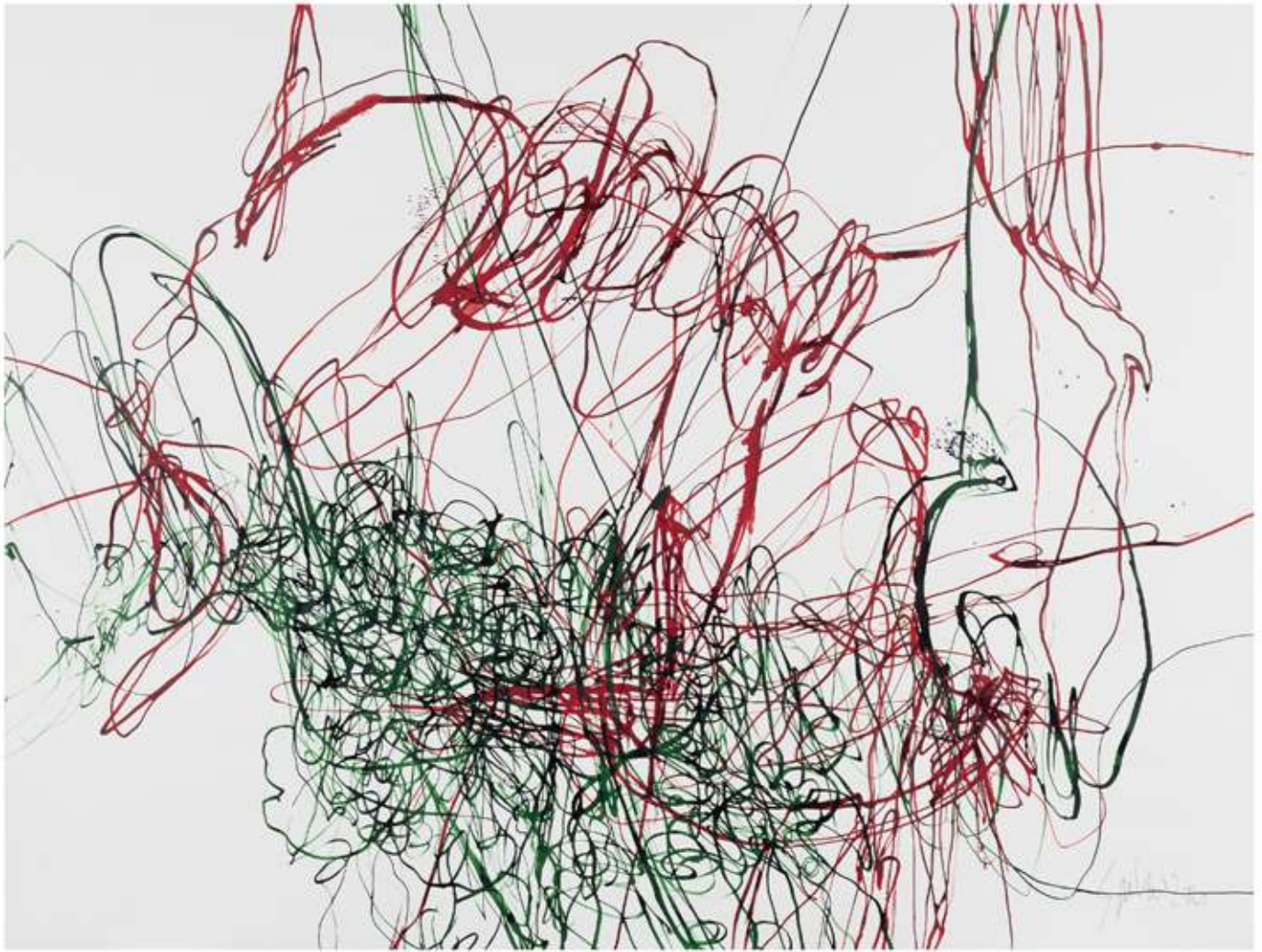
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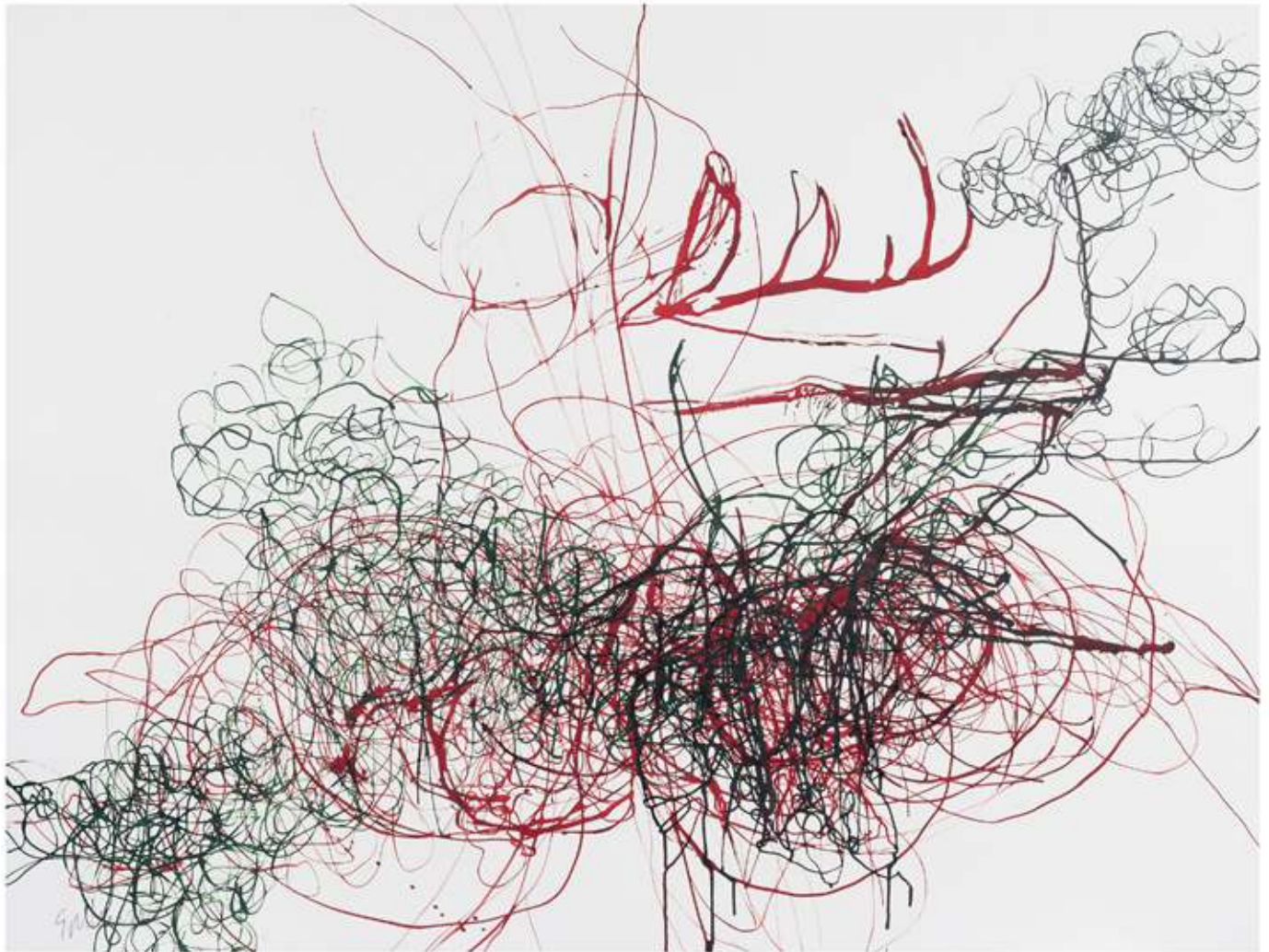
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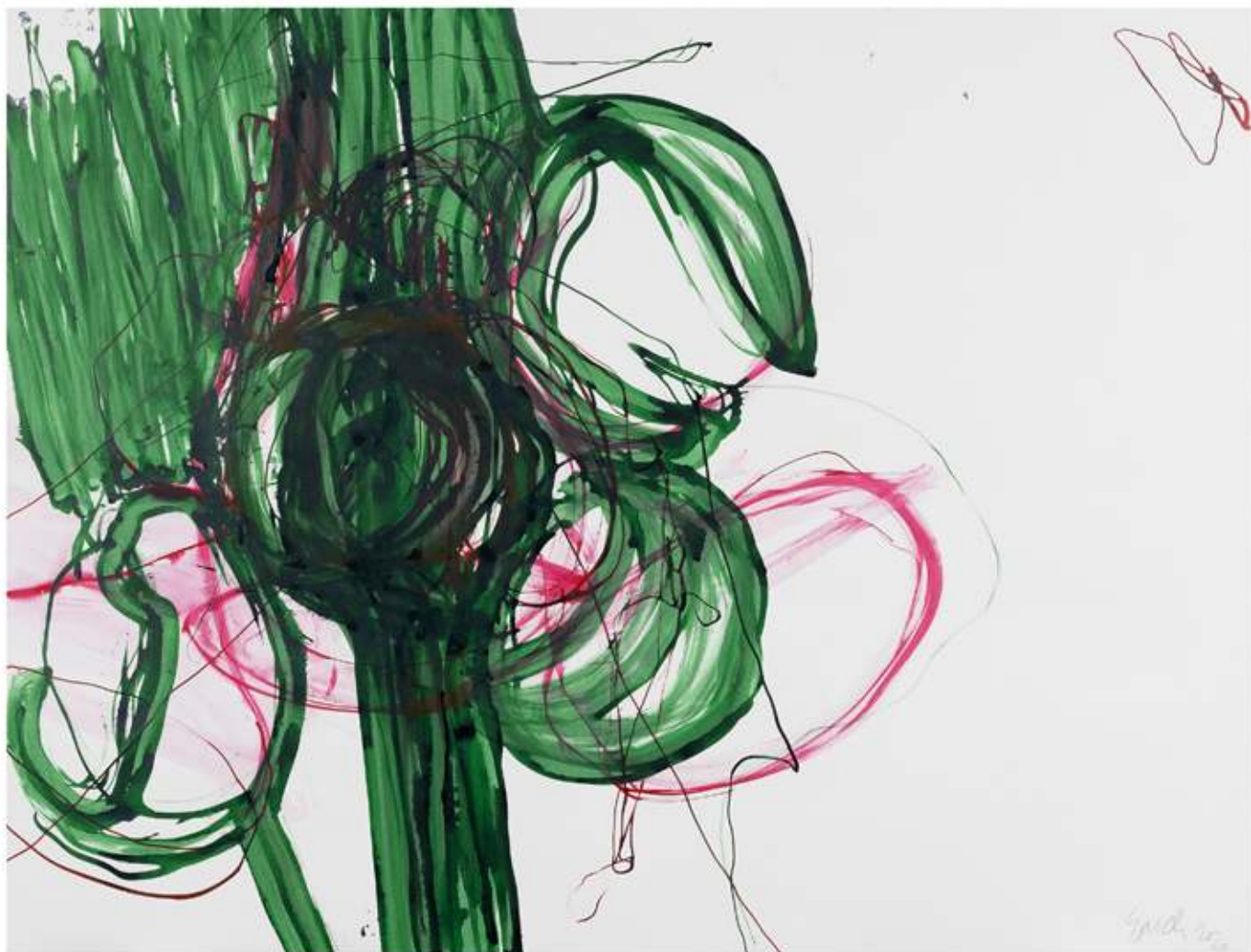
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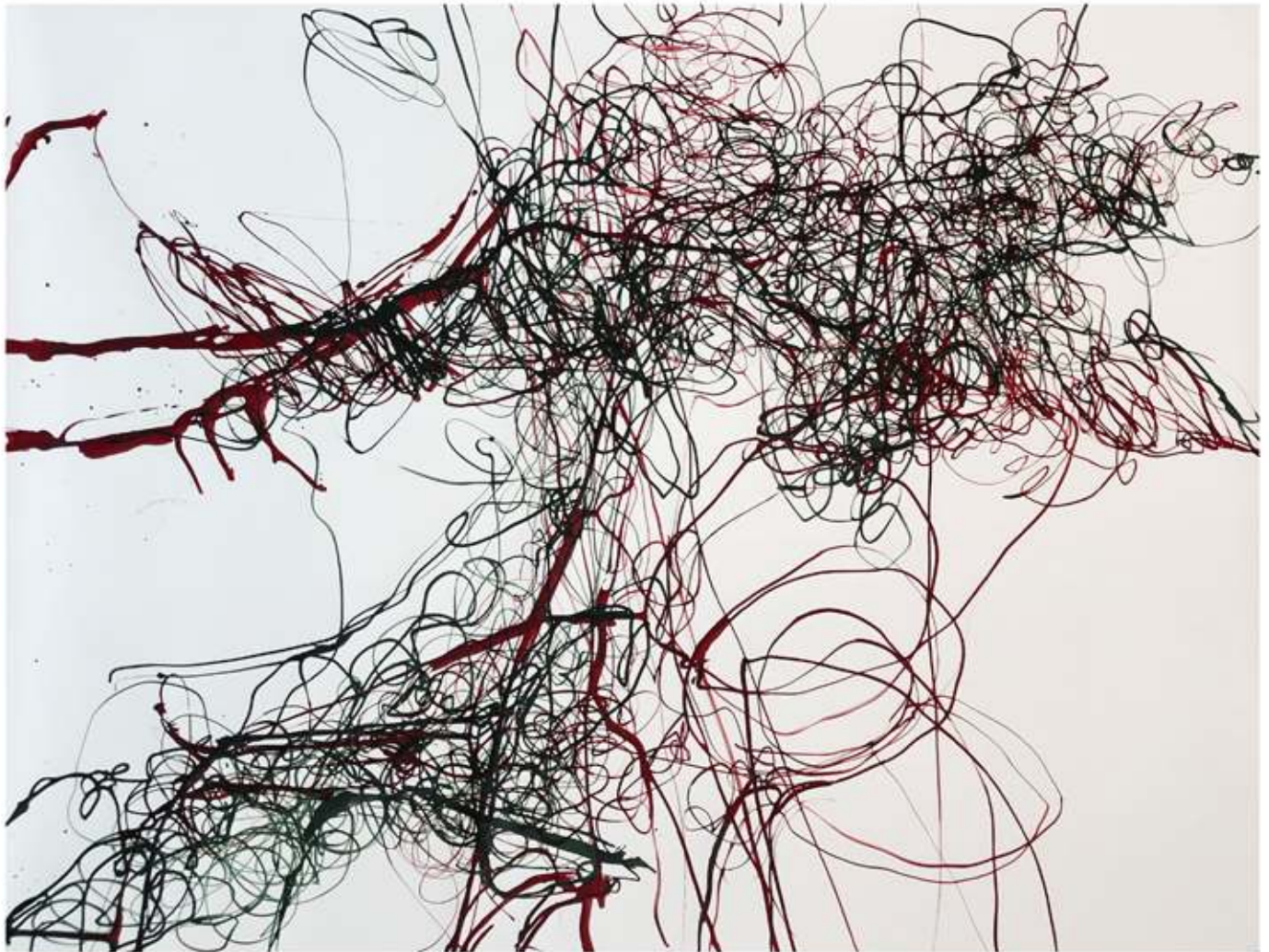
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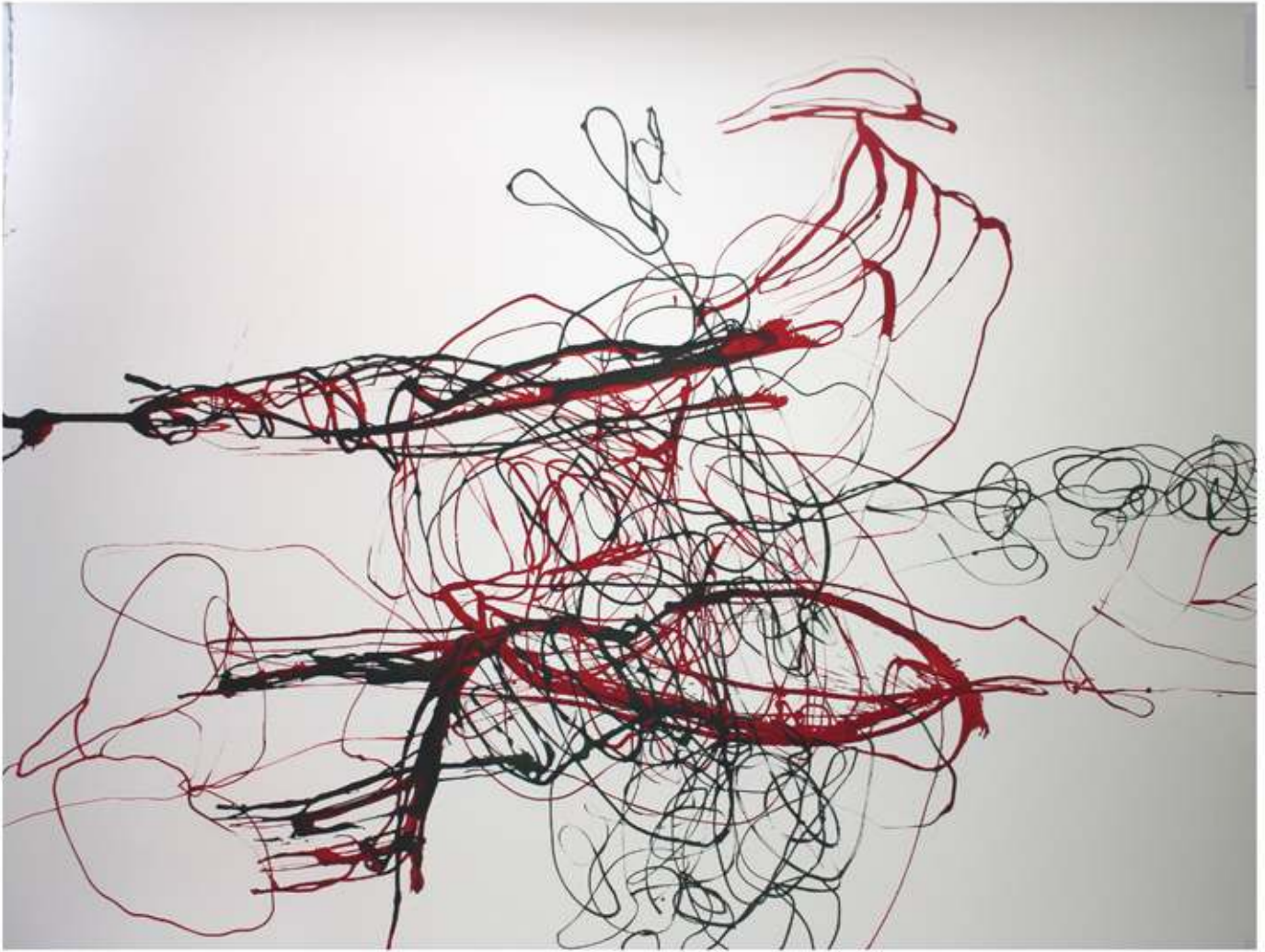
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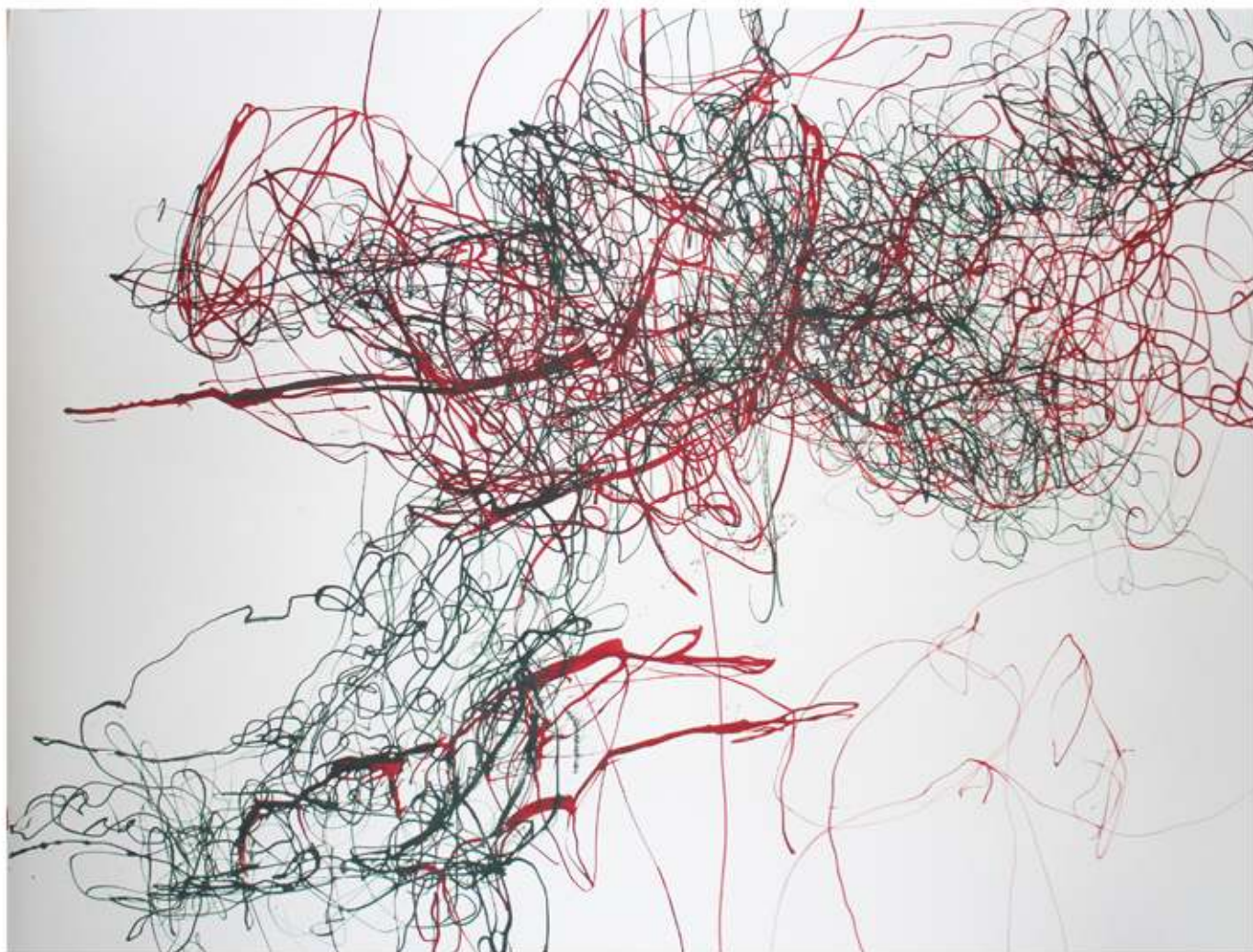
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STEPHAN SPICHER

ARTIST PROFILE

Stephan Spicher was born in Basel on November 27th, 1950 and grew up in a harmonious, middle-class home. The family spent the summer months in the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland and the winter in Basel. His father was a mineralogist and researched the Southern Alps. "For me it was and still is important to be able to identify with two cultures, to live on the north-south axis, so to speak."

After the schools he attended in Basel, at the age of 19, he began to study at the Kunstgewerbeschule in Basel, but then at the age of 22 found his teacher, Beppe Assenza, in whose workshop he studied painting for over four years. Academic studies were the basis, but Assenza, born in Italy, taught pure, free painting and the study of colour. "Assenza taught artistic, processual thinking and at the same time represented Italian aesthetics, my father taught me how to read and observe nature. For me this was an ideal combination".

In 1978 Spicher moved back to the Maggia Valley on the southern edge of the Alps to digest his studies. "To learn something is one thing, to forget it again, respectively to free oneself from the knowledge is another". Spicher decided to abandon the colour he had studied so thoroughly, to concentrate purely on black and white and to deepen the texture with the material ash, only to dissolve it again afterwards. For a painter an informal process that was in keeping with the zeitgeist. The series of ash walls were characteristic for the 1980s. After long spells in Paris, Berlin and the USA, Spicher was very impressed by Japan, which he visited during his exhibition in Tokyo in 1986. "To see the individual as a whole, this aesthetic fascinated me very much and stayed with me until today".

Spicher has visited Japan many times and has exhibited in various Japanese cities. His paintings became more and more condensed into lines. The spaces between these lines became more and more important, space and counter-space, visible and invisible line - themes that were formative for the 1990s. In 1991 Spicher married Tatiana Semenova, a Russian doctor, and in the following years built up his studio in St. Petersburg. His main studio was now in Basel and he was constantly commuting between the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland, Basel and St. Petersburg. Artistically the lines changed into vegetative forms: He named the following large group of works "Blossom".

During this time Spicher was involved in an exchange project with artists from Indonesia by Urs Ramseyer, a leading ethnologist for Southeast Asia and spent many months in studios in Bali. Spicher then consolidated his sensitivity to nature by continuing to explore Bali and Java. He held solo and group exhibitions in Indonesia, and worked on art projects with Made Wianta, his good friend, who lived for a while at his studios in Basel and also in Ticino in the Italian part of Switzerland. Spicher is very particular about creating new spaces in which to bolster his intimate relationship with Bali, which he continues to develop to this day.

*Stephan Spicher in his studio,
Basel Switzerland*

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