

## Tillman Kaiser's enigmatic geometry on show in Vienna

The artist pushes the boundaries of scale, material and shape in his exhibition at the Secession

Installation view of Tillman Kaiser's exhibition in Vienna © Iris Ranzinger

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At a moment when many artists are making work that is bigger than their practice can bear, it's a pleasant surprise to find a painter who triumphs on a vast canvas. Entitled *Im Dom (In the Cathedral)*, Tillman Kaiser's show at Vienna's Secession is a tour de force thanks to the Austrian artist's gift for knowing how far he can push the boundaries of scale and material.

Kaiser's talent is at its most dramatic in one enormous untitled work that takes up around 7m x 4m of wall space. Made of five separate paintings, it is a galaxy of squiggles, swoops, stains and splotches anchored by a few key images — a humdrum dining chair, some goofy faces, a burst of delicate, Disney-kitsch stars.

Behind this whimsical cosmos is a hybrid toolbox of painting and photography including cyanotype, photogram and images shot on a home-made camera obscura. The results are organic expressions of luminosity, shadow, shape and line, glazed with an unpredictable shimmer due to the light that accidentally “strays” — as Kaiser puts it — into his camera obscura.

Born in Graz in 1972 but based in Vienna, with his work already shown at the city's Belvedere museum as well as other international institutions, Kaiser rises to the challenge of installing his art in the iconic edifice that is the Secession. Built, in 1898, as the main display case for the Vienna Secession, the avant-garde movement founded by Gustav Klimt, the

building, in synergy with the group's championship of glitter and decoration, is crowned with a sumptuous dome of gold-plated laurel leaves.

Yet with its glass roof and white walls, the Hauptraum, as the Secession's main gallery is known, is characterised by an atmosphere of spare radiance. As such it is the ideal vitrine for Kaiser's grand, complex vision.

Kaiser's 'DAS GLEICHE, NUR ANDERS' (2019) © Iris Ranzinger

The artist both teases and honours the building's fame. As befitting the house of worship referenced in his show's title, he installs his sculptures, just five in all, with reverent precision in the centre of the gallery. Yet their blend of fabricated elements and found materials refuses any further hint of traditional classicism save for the subtle repetition of a particular geometric motif.

Essentially a right angle, the motif is often sharply folded to suggest an isosceles triangle. It comes into its own in a sculpture of a missile-like object placed on top of a rusty old metal chair. Brushed with thin, smeary strokes of white household paint and cut into spiky planes — the angle at its most concerted — the work is reminiscent of abstract origami or a three-dimensional translation of the exquisite drawings of drapery, which themselves often verge on the abstract, by old masters such as Leonardo.

The angle also appears in Kaiser's paintings, most explicitly in an untitled 2019 cyanotype where it fans out into a starburst around a linear pattern of circles enclosing an eye. The clean linearity is contaminated by a background of photogrammed leaves floating on the print's signature blue ground, as if the artist is echoing those physicists who tell us that the world we see — fixed, static, unchanging — is at odds with the palpitating, evolving, quantum realm beneath.

The gallery's spare surroundings are the ideal environment for Kaiser's work © Iris Ranzinger

In other mixed-media canvases, Kaiser nods to rational design with a simple, crystalline pattern which he photograms over a background so

crowded with amorphous shapes it's impossible to decipher most of the individual elements — some of which are painted — although the blurred outlines of his sculptures are occasionally perceptible. Suggesting diaphanous spiders' webs or huge, airy snowflakes which have briefly alighted on a mountain of rubble, these works enjoy a captivating riskiness that suggest the artist is heeding the motto on the Secession's façade: "For every time its art. For art its freedom."

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## **Does Kaiser want us to decode his enigmatic lexicon? Or would he prefer his expressions to remain fugitive and unresolved?**

Kaiser's use of photogram and cyanotype, itself a type of photogram, is key to his skill at evoking a ceaseless tension between order and disorder. These cameraless printing techniques, which place the object on to a surface such as photographic paper then expose it to light so the object leaves behind a negative print, suffuse his canvases with a silvery ghostliness that intensifies their mystery. But, with their thin, pale patina, photograms also resemble paint so often, it is difficult to ascertain which medium Kaiser is employing.

Does Kaiser want us to decode his enigmatic lexicon? Or would he prefer his expressions to remain fugitive and unresolved? The time and effort he has put into his intractable palimpsests suggests he's happy to keep us in the dark. But a mural at the back of the room complicates even this observation. Consisting of a small, dark right-angle which repeats across the whole wall to form two diagonal rows that cross over at the window overlooking the park, its spartan presence announces that Kaiser is a minimalist at heart. As such, it's a pleasure to see him quarrel so fruitfully with a space built as a monument to art at its most ornamental. Klimt must be turning in his grave.

To November 10, [secession.at](https://secession.at)

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