

# Imi Knoebel

**From the Kinderstern ‘social sculpture’ to the stained glass windows of Reims Cathedral, Imi Knoebel’s work reflects the major questions that art has asked of itself – and of the world – throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. Drawing early inspiration from Malevich’s challenging geometry, he studied under Kilian Breier and Joseph Beuys, making the creative exploration of material, form and colour a constant demonstration of his extraordinary creativity, giving non-figurative art a new splendour. This German artist, represented in the world’s most prestigious art collections, has prepared a portfolio for *Electra* which is presented here in an essay by Gabriel Barbi.**

*Brasília is constructed on the line of the horizon. Brasília is artificial. As artificial as the world must have been when it was created.*<sup>1</sup>

As the visual editor for *Electra* since issue number four, I have been selecting images for this publication for six years. For the first time, I now feel it necessary to expose the process behind how some of the images presented in these pages are chosen. This reflection is prompted by the generous invitation extended to me by Carmen and Imi Knoebel, who welcomed me into their home, studio and creative haven on *Reichsstrasse*, overlooking the neat gardens of the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, in Düsseldorf. The impetus for publishing in this very magazine a feature on Imi Knoebel’s work emerged with the artist’s latest and luminous new series, titled *Alphabet*, which is in production at the moment and has not yet been exhibited.

I first learned about this series through a text written by Barbara Piwowarska to accompany Imi’s exhibition at Jahn und Jahn Lisbon in 2024. There, several irregularly shaped, hand-cut aluminium sheets from the *Etcetera* series were hung a few centimetres from the wall, with its surfaces covered with gestures that might not be limited to painterly gestures. Does a particular brush stroke suggest the letter E, or perhaps F? Or perhaps even ancient scripts such as cuneiform, Cyrillic, or kanji? Yet what becomes clear is that they are not truly representative of such systems. Rather, they form part of Imi’s visual inventory, which resists limitation and is continually reassembled; an ever-growing body of work spanning nearly sixty years.

This concept of continual grounding and layering (*Grundierung*, in German) runs throughout Knoebel’s practice. It recalls what Hanne Darboven once referred to as *Grosse Arbeit* (*Great Work, Big Work, Background Work, Base Work*). This foundation was laid in 1966, during Knoebel’s first year at Kunstakademie Düsseldorf under the tutelage of Joseph Beuys. It was there that works such as *Linienbilder* (Line Pictures), *Raum 19* (Room 19), and many of the structural references emerged,

1. Clarice Lispector, *A descoberta do mundo*, Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 1999.

setting the tone and actually enabling everything Knoebel has created since. *Haltung*, in German, means an attitude, a posture, a state of mind. These early works represent a multiplying equation, an exponent. *Kernstücke*. Core Pieces (1966-2014); *Projection X* (1970-71); Mies van der Rohe's cross-shaped pillars. The reminiscence of Malevich. Neue Nationalgalerie. Casting shadows. Foreground and background. Emptiness as wholeness. Hardcore. Cern. Medula. The inner part of an animal or plant. *Where the energy comes from*. Foundation. *Love Child*.

ALMOST YELLOW, JAZZED UP RED,  
OUT OF THE BLUE

The titles of Imi Knoebel's works are surprisingly revealing – despite the common impression that little can be 'read' from them. When I described a painting I had seen at Knoebel's comprehensive exhibition which is permanently installed at the *Kunstraum am Limes* near Koblenz, (echoing the magnificent exhibition at Kestnergesellschaft in 2002), Carmen immediately replied: *The Milano paintings!* While the archive lists one large painting titled MILANO, the actual series bears subtly altered titles: AAAMMO, LILILA, MMMMMM, OMMNOM, NNNNIL, MOLANI, IIAAOO, ALIAAA, LILOLA, IOOOOM, MOLAIN, INNINN, LILINA, AAMIII. These are not anagrams as they do not pertain to language but rather act as codified repetitions and variations on a visual theme. These works originated as schematic models, made from hand-painted paper cut-outs. They were later *transfigured* into larger aluminium pieces, also hand-painted by Imi. Sometimes directly on the metal tubes, sometimes over a grounded super flat surface. Tubes are assembled through an intricate system of holes and concealed welds, entirely invisible to the viewer. Their colours are bold, vivid, and numerous, sometimes covered with a second aluminium sheet, slightly smaller than the grid beneath. The result is a striking play of opacity and transparency: the very essence of painting despite their very three-dimensional manifestation. Carmen referred to these titles as a suggestion of DNA sequencing, the genesis of creation. Is this essentialism? Spinoza. Descartes? *Cogito ergo coloribus*. *Cogito ergo figura*. *De coloribus*.

*Ars poetica*. *Ut pictura poesis*. Artificial essence. Essential artifice. Belief systems. Codes and signs. Baroque. Apparition. Repetition and parallelism. *Fantôme*. Light. Love. *Alte Liebe*. *Neue Liebe*. Silence. Knoebel's use of colour resists systemic logic. Unlike the Bauhaus tradition of controlled palettes and colour harmony, his juxtapositions are idiosyncratic. The death of Imi's close friend and fellow artist Blinky Palermo in 1977 plays a crucial role here. Chromatic radicalism. *Farbenlehre*. Seriality and modularity also shape Knoebel's practice. This links back to Minimalism historically, but also to systems-thinking in postwar abstraction (Darboven, LeWitt, or Judd): his works often appear as modular systems, governed by internal logics of repetition and variation. Yet, unlike Minimalism's industrial coolness, Knoebel's grids pulse vibrantly and are made by *him*: hand-cut edges, slight misalignments, brush strokes – evidence of a body within a system. *Imi* is his pseudonym that stands for *Ich Mit Ihm*, which is German for *I with him*. *Selbst im Spiegel*.

His atelier might be likened to the concept of the body-machine, mechanical yet vital, rational yet instinctive, an intricate organism of intellect and labour. It is a building of several floors, each devoted to a distinct stage of a meticulous process. The first three rooms house Imi's palette samples and countless drawers filled with coloured cut-outs cookie-cut by hand, later placed within scaling diagrams to be resized and dispatched to the metal or wood workshops on the corresponding floors. Pinned to the walls are newspaper cuttings depicting an eclectic constellation of images. Stonehenge. Archipelagoes. Bacteria. Ice floes. A potato. Ayers Rock. A reproduction of a Philip Guston painting in which the artist lies awake in bed. Red flags whipping in the wind. Beuys's *Capri-Battery*. Another room is covered with photographs of Carmen Knoebel, their daughters, and granddaughters. Beyond, a space is reserved for painting (all of the photographs published in the following pages originate from this room). Beneath it all lies the basement: the brain of the organism, the foundation where raw materials are stored, where matter enters in an unformed state and, following its alchemical journey through the floors above, is meticulously packed and sent out into the world like a shooting-star.

FROM HYBRIDS (CONSTRUCTIVISM)  
TO ETCETERA (THE WHOLE PICTURE)

Carmen and Imi have lived in the same house since 1984. In the first room hangs an irregularly shaped aluminium painting in many reds, part of the aforementioned *Etcetera* series. A Noguchi *Akari* paper lamp in the form of a horn glows between two windows. Three works are nailed directly onto the opposite wall: two shapes painted in light blue-turquoise and deep dark blue-forest green, both from the *Love Child* series, and 1 of the *1000 Hasen* (a copper water-jet cut-out resembling a rabbit). A vibrantly coloured and shaped table from Knoebel's 2004 exhibition at Bärbel Grässlin leads us into the second room, where another table, produced 43 years earlier in an edition of 25 for the Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven, sets a conversation place, served by Arne Jacobsen's *Series 7* chairs in crisp white. Children's drawings, made by the couple's granddaughters, are pinned to the walls opposite a very large flesh-pink painting from the *Archetyp* series (2021). Alvar Aalto's undulating *Iittala* glass vases are filled with flower arrangements, which include Siberian anemones, daffodils, roses, ranunculus, and tulips in yellows, mauve, cadmium red, light purple, pinks, and melting whites against many shades of green. In the same room, three Josef Hoffmann *Kubus* armchairs and a Daniela Puppa green and pink *Oz* table lamp on the sill of a large window, framing a garden that awakes with Spring. *Garten für Carmen*, 2008/09. I can see a *camellia*, with flowers resembling fried eggs, proudly standing next to a blooming *Magnolia soulangeana* – the saucer magnolia.

This magnolia, a hybrid of *Magnolia denudata* (native to eastern China) and *Magnolia liliiflora* (from Sichuan and Yunnan), was first cultivated in the 1820s by Étienne Soulange-Bodin, a retired Napoleonic general and plantsman. I like to see Imi's work in the same way: a refined set of components, capable of being reproduced, enacted, normalised, unfolded, and hidden and filed away. *250.000 drawings*. Stars. Constellations. *The Bottom Line* of additions, subtractions, equations. Cross pollination. Blooms. From flower to fruit. Knoebel's hybrids. *Prendre parti*. At times opaque, at times transparent, not

simultaneously, but rhythmically. Dynamic, yet without direction. Perhaps a vortex turning inward. It opens and closes like a camera's diaphragm. It can mean something or nothing. Something old and something new. Everything or one singular thing. But never *anything*. Old news... Could this be the arrow in Achilles' heel – not a fatal wound, but a liberation from the constraints of representation? Haecceity. Quiddity. Sum: *Unterm Strich*: the bottom line (1968/2019). Perhaps, even, credits and debits. *Soll und Haben*. A new new. But then, what isn't? It is not transgressive like the avant-garde. Nor does it contradict itself. Discourse is muted – if not entirely erased. This is not a position, nor does it illuminate; is it a negative where light can shine through? It might appear rather as a constellation but aren't some of the shimmering stars we see in the night sky long since dead?

In this hermetic transe (or atomic dance), I recall Wisława Szymborska's *Conversation with a Stone*. As with Clarice Lispector's vision of Brasília – white, hollow, impenetrable –, there is nowhere to enter, and nowhere from which to exit. *Senses be critique of reason*. Pure joy.

Gabriel Barbi

מבוא  
המבוא  
המבוא  
המבוא



IMI 2024-04  
Acrylic / Aluminium  
237 x 297 x 6 cm



IMI 2024-05  
Acrylic / Aluminium  
256 x 217 x 6 cm



Poem 2025-002  
Corten steel  
82 x 191 x 2 cm

3 2 1 0



IMI 2025-01  
Acrylic / Aluminium  
222 x 286 x 6 cm



IMI 2025-04  
Acrylic / Aluminium  
162 x 304 x 6 cm



IMI 2024-01  
Acrylic / Aluminium  
228 x 255 x 8 cm



IMI 2024-06  
Acrylic / Aluminium  
223 x 288 x 6 cm



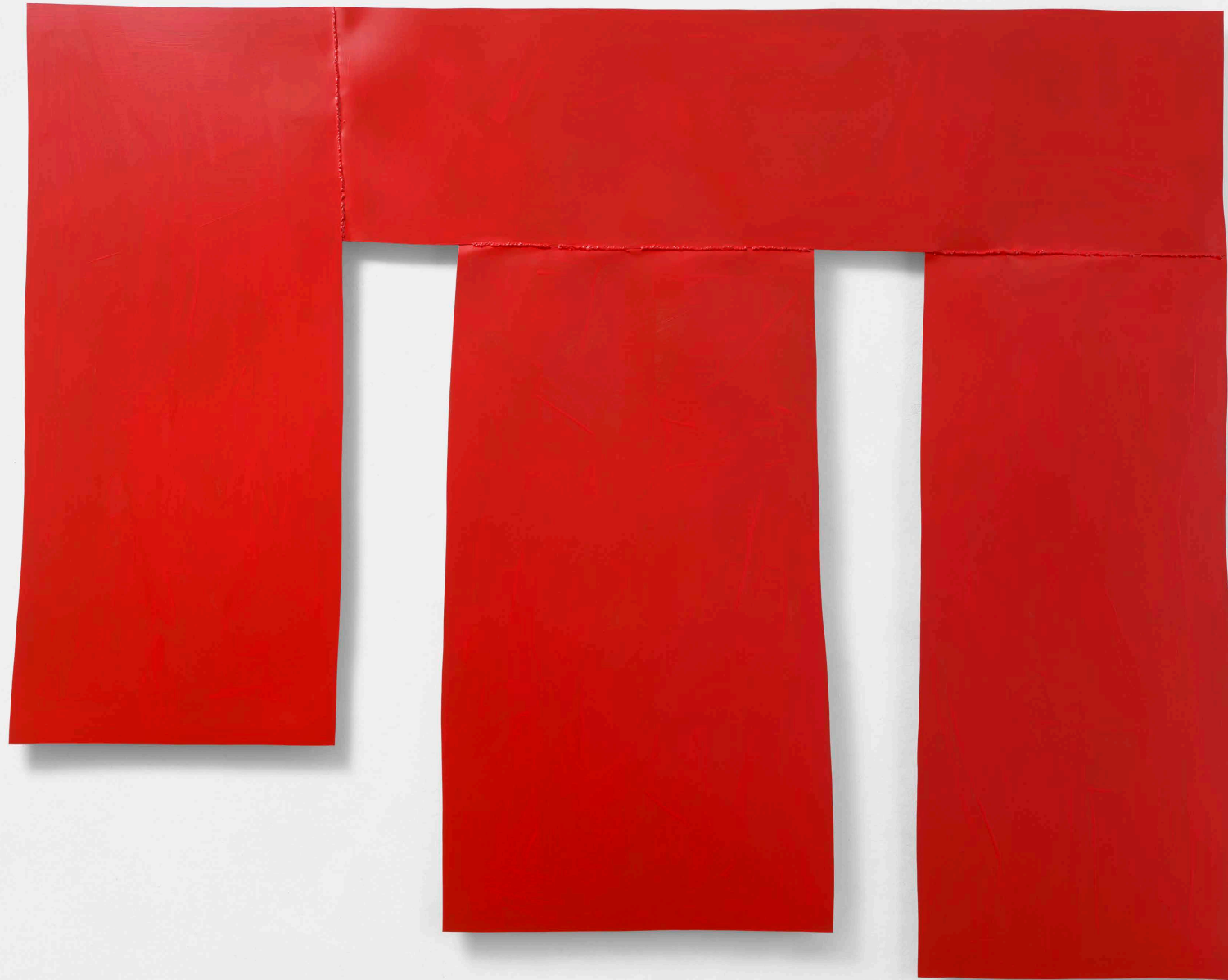
IMI 2025-03  
Acrylic / Aluminium  
226 x 268 x 6 cm

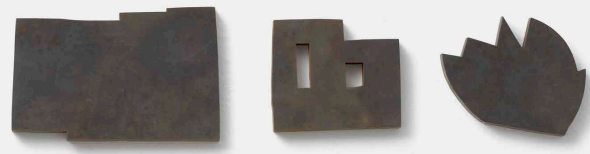






IMI 2025-05  
Acrylic / Aluminium  
259 x 285 x 8 cm





IMI 2025-06  
Acrylic / Aluminium  
231 x 219 x 6 cm