Thousands of Downtown Brooklyn office workers should be thanking Berlin-based artist Katharina Grosse this week. With her new Public Art Fund commission in MetroTech Commons, “Just Two of Us,” she has transformed one of the city’s most generic plazas into a dynamic public space with character and...
colors to spare. The installation consists of two groups of 18 large chunks of plastic reinforced with fiberglass, all coated in a range of acrylic paints in Grosse’s trademark neon colors and saturated tones applied with a spray gun. The irresistible work straddles the categories of painting, sculpture, and installation, inviting passersby to explore its nooks and canyons, discover hidden hues, and puzzle over its inscrutable shapes — all without climbing on it, according to the nearby signs (good luck enforcing that one).

Grosse — who has made a career of moving painting off the canvas and onto surfaces ranging from museum walls, weather balloons, and furniture to dirt, aluminum, and, for Prospect.1, an entire house — marshals not only an incredible range of vivid colors in “Just Two of Us,” but also many strange and evocative forms. The smaller of the installation’s two neighboring clusters pokes out toward MetroTech Commons’ main thoroughfare, arresting joggers, workers, and dog-walkers. Those chunks that most visitors will come across first, with their diagonal lines and red-turquoise palette, collectively evoke something between a collapsed and heavily tagged Greek column and the set of a mid-1980s MTV show. The proportions of the work are enormous and, amplified by its unwieldy shapes and irrepressible shades, it manages to alter the plaza far more profoundly than any public art intervention staged there in recent memory. Where previous exhibitions have been hampered by the clumsy bulk and mediocrity of the surrounding architecture, Grosse turns the setting to her advantage by overpowering it all the while highlighting its few and easily overlooked charms.

Moving around the smaller group of forms, visitors come upon the bulk of “Just Two of Us,” a more varied and practically mountainous pileup of clumps, stumps, beams, troughs, shards, wedges, and points of plastic placed alongside and atop one another. The installation sits amid the plaza’s grove of trees, so that trunks and branches emerge from gaps in the work, their yellow and orange leaves matching Grosse’s palette perfectly. Partly occluded passages allow visitors to explore the installation up close, ducking beneath propped-up pieces or squeezing around others to find hidden details of color and form. From such vantages Grosse’s construction looks less like a collapsed architectural relic and distinctly more geological, like an outcropping of massive minerals, jagged ice floes, a deconstructed canyon, or the jutting peaks of a treacherous mountain range.

The construction’s contours may evoke nature, but its colors scream artifice and find corresponding hues in the surrounding built environment. The royal blue in one of the work’s corners matches that of a nearby construction fence; the fire engine-red that’s especially vibrant in the section of the piece furthest from the main thoroughfare is the same as that of the architectural accents on the neighboring NYU-Poly library; the rusty orange speckled throughout “Just Two of Us” goes perfectly with the bricks of the office building on the Commons’ south side; and that gripping tint of turquoise is a more saturated shade of the paint applied to the lampposts and benches around the plaza. Just as it blows apart its banal setting with explosive visual force, the painting-on-sculpture-cum-installation manages to tie the awkward space together with its many complementary colors and evocative forms. The fluidity and indeterminacy of Grosse’s work, both in shape and color, make it an extremely potent and pliable piece of public art, capable of transmitting any number of different meanings to every person who encounters it — not the least of them the many kids who will immediately look past the "Please do not climb" signs and see a killer jungle gym.

Katharina Grosse’s “Just Two of Us” is on view at MetroTech Commons in Brooklyn through September 14, 2014. To see more photos of the installation, click the slideshow.