

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Albert Oehlen's Recent Paintings at Gagosian Beverly Hills

Anise Stevens



ALBERT OEHLER *Untitled*, 2012 Oil, paper on canvas, 70 7/8 x 90 9/16 inches (180 x 230 cm) OEHLER 2012.0035

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© Albert Oehlen. All photographs courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery.

Last week, Gagosian Beverly Hills held its opening reception for a major exhibition, featuring new and recent paintings by Albert Oehlen, one of the most influential and controversial contemporary painters of our time.

Born in Germany, Oehlen first gained recognition for his contribution to Neo-expressionism, a movement that evolved in the 1970s in reaction to an absence of emotion characteristic of two of the era's popular genres, Conceptualism and Minimalism. Influenced by the Abstract Expressionists of a generation past, namely William De Kooning, Oehlen sought to incorporate recognizable objects into his work in an abstract manner through the deliberate and sometimes aggressive application of paint.

Oehlen's journey as an artist didn't stop there. In the 1980s, he coined the term "Post-non-representational Painting" to describe what had become his unconventional and conceptual approach to painting: a process in which he consciously challenged the conventional tropes of abstraction by intermingling figurative elements into his work.

Interestingly, as loose and expressive as Oehlen's work often appears, he has always worked within a set of limitations that he establishes for himself before embarking upon a new work

and/or series. The guidelines that he initiates always differ. Sometimes they are simple, sometimes they are complex, but never are they restricting. Instead, they are implemented for the sole purpose of forcing Oehlen to continually work toward overcoming convention and embarking upon new and novel solutions that he would not have explored otherwise.

As offered in *Art Daily*, Oehlen remains an artist of distinction due to his relentless drive to blur “the neat dividing lines between traditional and progressive art, between good and bad, and between reactionary and critical.” The works on exhibition in both Gagosian’s south gallery and upstairs are exemplary of such. Oehlen’s use of torn signs and found advertisements are utilized as conceptual and formal constructs amongst streams of spray paint, geometric forms and various painterly gestures. As explained in the gallery’s press release, “in any one work, the paint, the collaged pictures and texts, and patches of white canvas each occupy their own space, like a worktable clutter without a center, [which attests] to Oehlen’s ability to elevate common genres and materials through rigorous experimentation.”

One recurring motif deep-rooted in much of Oehlen’s work is the tree. With exception to a few of his paintings such as *Untitled* (1989), allusions to such have never been as pronounced as they are in his most recent series mounted in Gagosian’s north gallery. Set against bright red and white bold backgrounds, black silhouettes emblematic of spindly trunks with extending branches and knotted roots are the focus of each of the five massive large-scale paintings that comprise this truly striking series.

Oehlen chose Dibond as his canvas for these particular works. A slick and impermeable surface, Dibond is not forgiving, and Oehlen’s decision to use it again is suggestive of just how instrumental limit-setting is to his maturation as an artist. The series also is unique due to Oehlen’s reliance upon the three-colored palette of red, white and black, each of which has been applied with a definitive hand, unlike and almost in contrast to the muddled markings that constitute his *Finger Paintings*, for example.

Not much has been written about Oehlen despite his considerable contribution to contemporary art. One reason for this may be due to his complex manipulation of genre. As described by Achim Hochdorfer, “it is as if Oehlen were continually out-tricking painting. The intrinsic enemies of painting—avant-garde and new technologies—are brought into the picture, and clichés like beauty or virtuosity are smuggled in cunningly.” What also comes across as perplexing is Oehlen’s tendency to imbue a sense of wit and irony into his work that, as observed by Poju and Anita Zabłudowicz, “require[s] the bodily presence of the viewer and a careful kind of looking in order for the work to make sense.” Whatever the cause, it is far from indicative of Oehlen’s lack for innovative talent deserving of merited acclaim.

Oehlen was born in 1954 in Krefeld, Germany, and he graduated from the Hochschule für Bildende Künste Hamburg in 1978. His work has been featured in galleries and museums since the early 1980s and is included in more than 15 collections worldwide. Between 2000 and 2009, he taught as a professor of painting at Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. In addition to appearing in last year’s Venice Biennale (2013), Oehlen’s paintings have been the subject of several solo exhibitions including *Albert Oehlen: Malerei* (2013) at Museum Moderner Kunst in Vienna, *Albert Oehlen* (2012) at Kunstmuseum Bonn, *Réalité abstraite* (2009) at Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, *I Will Always Champion Good Painting* (2006) at Whitechapel Art Gallery in London, and *I Know Whom You Showed Last Summer* (2005) at the Museum of Contemporary Art in North Miami, among others. Oehlen works in Switzerland where he currently resides.

Albert Oehlen: *New Paintings* will remain on display through Friday, July 18, 2014, at Gagosian Beverly Hills, located at 456 North Camden Drive. The gallery is open Tuesdays through Saturdays, from 10 am to 6 pm. For further information, please call (310) 271-9400 or visit Gagosian Beverly Hills online at www.gagosian.com.