

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

ARTNEWS

‘Humans will have the last word’: A Talk with Albert Oehlen

Bill Powers



Albert Oehlen photographed on June 8 at the New Museum.
KATHERINE MCMAHON

A retrospective of Albert Oehlen’s work runs through September 13 at the New Museum in New York.

Bill Powers: I understand that in high school you papered your bedroom walls with cheap supermarket advertising.

Albert Oehlen: That’s right. When I was fifteen. It was my kind of protest. I was living with—what I considered—a bourgeois family.

BP: I heard you once made a rule that on half of a canvas you would use only expensive paint and on the other half very cheap paint.

AO: Yeah, I did these kinds of experiments a lot. It has an impact on your work. It makes things slower and you come to impossible results. You might put your paint in alphabetical order and say, “I’m only using A through K today.” It makes no sense, but you wonder what will happen on the canvas.

BP: Is that something you learned from Sigmar Polke? The need to experiment?

AO: This is stuff that just came to mind, but I did find out that other artists had similar ideas, yes. Like when Malcolm Morley makes an oil painting after a watercolor he did—he transfers it with these grids and is able to keep the aesthetic of watercolor, only done in oil. For someone who

knows about painting you can see how that's strange. I love this kind of thinking. Malcolm Morley has done a lot in that direction and has a kind of humor.

BP: Is humor something that you value in painting?

AO: I think it should be there anyway.

BP: People make a big deal about your use of technology in painting. Do you remember the first time you worked with Photoshop?

AO: The thing that was important for me was when, in 1990, I got a Texas Instruments laptop. I liked the pixelation. It was like a filter: take it or leave it. Then I thought the only way for me not to accept what was happening there was to hand-paint over it. This meant that I had the last word instead of the technology. And I liked the fact that I could call what I did "computer paintings." Also, they captured a moment in history. They are time-stamped by the technology.

BP: And you were employing this technology in real time. There was nothing nostalgic about it as in, say, the Mario Brothers videos of Cory Arcangel.

AO: It really depends on what you want. I wasn't trying to profit from the technology—in fact, quite the opposite. I made a fool of myself and of the technology. It was a struggle between us.

BP: In the end will technology overtake us? Like when Garry Kasparov plays the computer in chess, is it just a matter of time before the machines win?

AO: I don't know if I can give the right answer, but I know the answer I want to be true: humans will have the last word.

BP: Has music directly influenced your art? I know John Currin will listen to horror music or bad heavy metal in the studio.

AO: I did a lot of paintings listening to Frankie Laine.

BP: That's not very punk rock of you.

AO: It just put me in the right mood.

BP: Christopher Wool is a good friend of yours. What did you think of his recent show at Luhring Augustine?

AO: I loved it. When I first saw photos of the sculptures I thought he'd gone crazy. Then, when I saw them in person, I realized how smart they are.

BP: You made your fabric paintings in the early '90s while living in Spain?

AO: Martin Kippenberger and I went to live in the Spanish countryside, but then we moved to Madrid because it got too boring.

BP: Can we talk about your relationship with Kippenberger? What did you admire about him?

AO: Technically he was far ahead of all of us. He could sit in front of a painting and work on it for hours. I could never do that. I'd step back, interrupt the process, but I saw myself as a real artist. Kippenberger was very disciplined and I liked his craziness. Also, I liked his feedback very much.

BP: So you guys would trade ideas?

AO: He would see something that I was doing and would respond to it, make something more

extreme. I made funny self-portraits, then he made self-portraits, almost as an answer to me, a parody on it—like the thing with the swastika. Do you know this story? I painted a Rodchenko sculpture and he looked at my painting and said, “For the life of me, I can’t see the swastika in this painting.” He made a joke of it. If you were with Kippenberger, you had to take whatever he dished out. You might tell him about an idea you had for a new painting one night, and the next morning he would have made 20 of them. You couldn’t even be mad at him.