

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Art in America

THE ACCIDENTAL ABSTRACTIONIST

Albert Oehlen:
Untitled,
2014, oil on
wood, 82% by
67 inches.

All images,
unless
otherwise
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Galerie Max
Hetzler, Berlin
and Paris.

Influenced by de Kooning and Kippenberger, German painter Albert Oehlen has experimented ceaselessly for some 30 years with every aspect of his medium—form, material, support and subject matter.

by Raphael Rubinstein

*The most important for us is to realize what is possible
and what is not.*

—Albert Oehlen

CURRENTLY
ON VIEW
“Albert Oehlen:
Home and Garden,”
at the New Museum,
New York, through
Sept. 13.

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Miraculous* (Paper
Monument, 2014)
and *Shirley Jaffe:
Forms of Dislocation*
(Flammarion, 2014).

IF YOU HAD TO cram Albert Oehlen's career into one sentence suitable for a book jacket blurb, you might come up with something along the lines of: The unlikely tale of how an exponent of “bad painting” in 1980s Cologne became a major legatee of gestural Abstract Expressionist painting. Even for a longtime admirer of Oehlen's work like me, the notion that he is among the most compelling inheritors of the legacy of Willem de Kooning and Joan Mitchell comes as something of a shock. This, after all, is an artist who made his name with paintings such as *Morning Light Falls into the Führer's Headquarters* (1983), a big, garish expressionistic depiction of Hitler's HQ, bearing several actual mirrors, into which Oehlen has inserted a giant painted swastika, and *Self-Portrait with Shitty Underpants and Blue Mauritius* (1984), where the artist, clad in the aforementioned soiled shorts, is portrayed examining a rare postage stamp held in a pair of tweezers.

Throughout the 1980s, Oehlen was Martin Kippenberger's main partner-in-art-crime, participating in public provocations and wildly offbeat projects (like covering a Ford Capri with brown

paint and oatmeal) as well as producing an endless torrent of books and exhibitions. The duo were among the loudest members of what Susanne Kippenberger, in her biography of her brother Martin, calls the “Hetzler Boys,” an all-male cohort of artists who showed with Cologne dealer Max Hetzler. As Oehlen later recalled, “With Hetzler we made asses of ourselves and made everyone hate us. We climbed on tables and pulled down our pants—extreme artist behavior.”¹ Imbued with a punk-derived insolence, and maybe influenced by the radical Maoist politics he had absorbed as a teenager in the early 1970s, Oehlen took up subjects and painting styles that were calculated to offend the German art establishment, often with imagery that tested the limits of its tolerance, its liberal ideals. The depth of Oehlen's dissatisfaction with the status quo is revealed when he talks about how he and Werner Büttner met with disapproval for their friendship and solidarity with Kippenberger, whom many in the early 1980s saw as a drunken, attention-seeking clown rather than as an artist of substance. “We lost favor with some people too—art-lovers, gallerists, museum people—when we supported Kippenberger. He was unserious. They said, ‘Do you want to go with the monkey house or with us?’ I said I'd rather stay with the monkey house, thank you—or rather, that that was real art. Not the stuff you think art is.”²



Self-Portrait with Shitty Underpants and Blue Mauritius, 1984, oil on canvas, 94½ by 102¾ inches.



Although they painted together, showed and made books together, traveled and caroused together and, on a few occasions, even lived together, Oehlen and Kippenberger were two very different kinds of artists. Their differences are not always easy to discern, but one place to look for fault lines is in their relationship to painting as a medium. Although the social attitudes expressed in their work and their subject matter often overlapped, Oehlen and Kippenberger diverged when it came to their painting sensibilities. Even at the time when Oehlen was creating scabrous works such as *Self-Portrait with Shitty Underpants* and larding his canvases with swastikas and painfully awkward figuration, his feeling for the physical effects of brush and oil paint was hard to miss.

Some of the differences between Oehlen and Kippenberger may stem from the fact that Oehlen was a slower painter, even in the manic mid-1980s. When they came up with an idea together, which, he says, they often did, "Kippenberger would churn out 60 pieces overnight, straight away, so that at breakfast the next morning I knew I could forget it."³ Of course, Kippenberger was an immensely gifted painter, but I don't think he ever fully shared Oehlen's interest in its *matière* or in expanding its technical possibilities (something which became central to Oehlen's work after 1989). I don't know, for instance, of any 1980s painting by Kippenberger that is as heavily worked, or as luscious, as Oehlen's *Four Travel Bags* (1981). Significantly, Oehlen has always been primarily

a painter and a painter without assistants, while Kippenberger, who died in 1997, was an artist who made a lot of paintings but was perfectly willing to outsource the brush-on-canvas part of his work (even at the beginning of his career) and, as the years went by, was as engaged with sculpture and installation as he was with painting.

Perhaps it was precisely because of Oehlen's attraction to the richness of his chosen medium, his capacity to indulge in sheer painterliness, that he needed Kippenberger—the master of the monkey house inoculated him against the temptations of conventionally "good" painting. As long as Oehlen was so closely linked to Kippenberger, there was no chance of his being sucked into the deadly orbit of Neo-Expressionist hacks, of settling for petty ambitions. Instead, he could stake out a zone for paintings that resisted stylistic pigeonholing, just as they defied assimilation into polite discourse. And what did Kippenberger gain artistically from Oehlen? I suspect that Oehlen's gifts as a painter and his gradually emerging ambition to engage the legacy of 20th-century abstraction may have helped Kippenberger to push for more formal complexity in his own paintings and to find a balance between corrosive satire and painterly verve. There is a world of difference between the stylistic blandness of early Kippenberger paintings such as the 1976-77 series "Uno di voi, un tedesco in Firenze" (One of you, a German in Florence) and the kind of canvases he was producing at the height of his association with Oehlen.



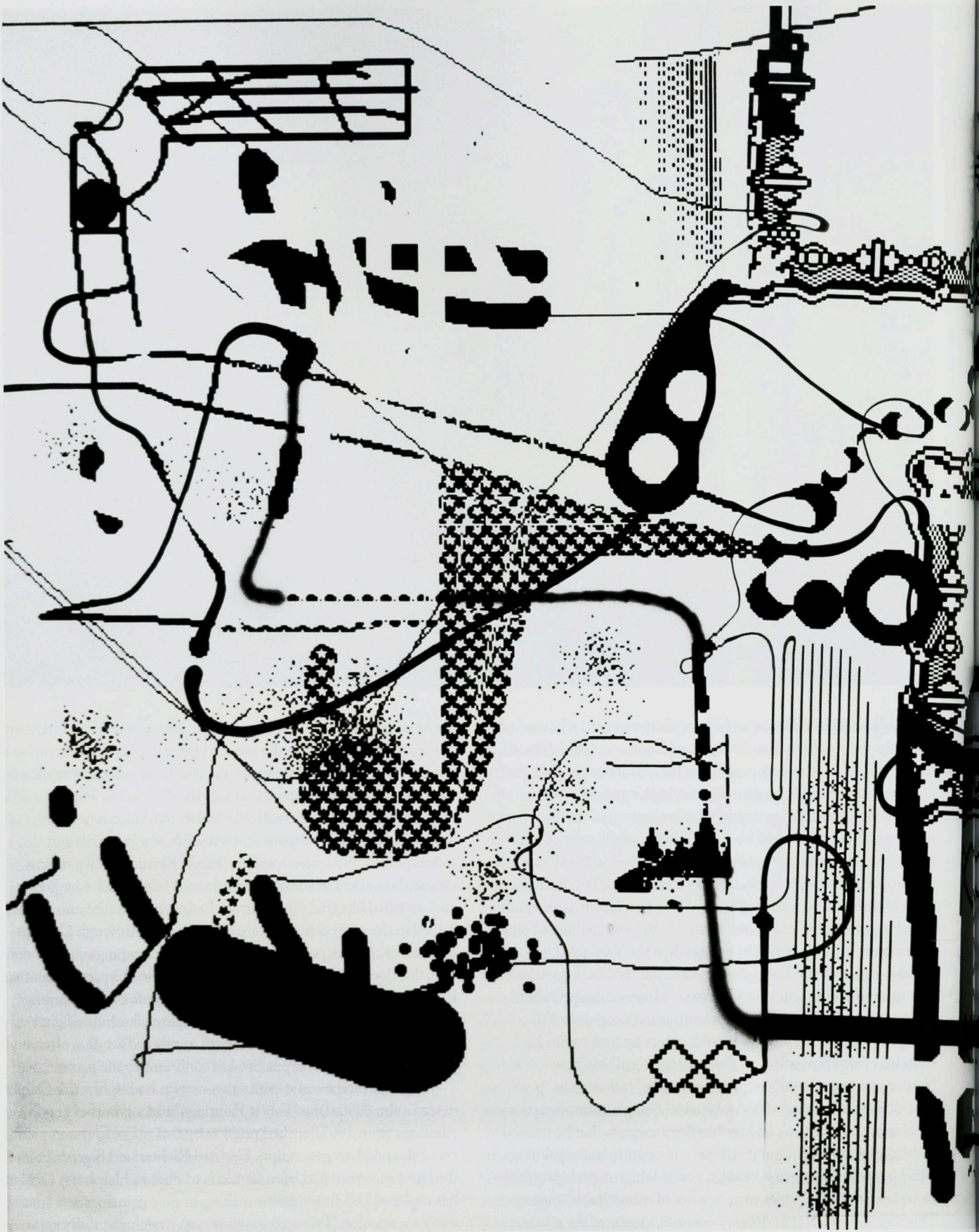
Four Travel Bags,
1981, latex on
canvas, 26¾ by
35½ inches.

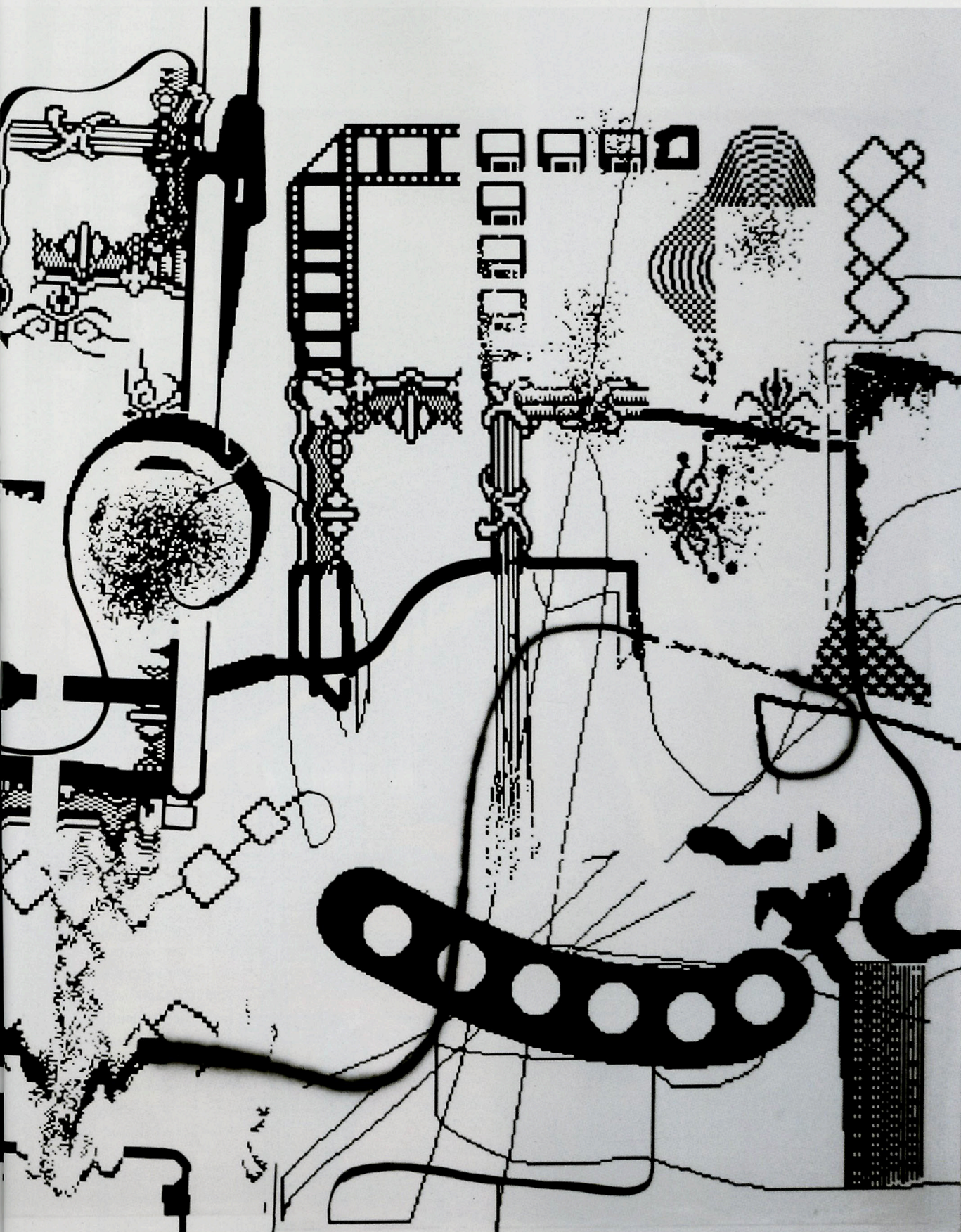
IN EARLY 1988, Oehlen and Kippenberger rented a house/studio in the southern Spanish town of Carmona. Oehlen recalls that “Spain was extremely productive for us, totally extreme; for me it was the start of my abstract paintings, a radical revolution in my painting, the decisive step in my development.”⁴ It also seems to have marked the end of his “wild years” and the start of his long residence in various parts of Spain. If the period 1988–89 marks a transition in Oehlen’s work, one has to ask if the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent collapse of Western Communism influenced his practice. Oehlen has dismissed the idea, telling a French interviewer in 2009, “I was in Spain when the Wall fell. I saw on TV the arrival of the East German cars, the ‘Trabis.’ I can’t say I was upset. I didn’t feel very German.”⁵ Interestingly, Oehlen refers to his 1988–97 abstract paintings as “post-non-objective.” The phrase is odd since you would expect an artist who had switched from figuration to abstraction to call his new work “post-representational” or “post-figurative” rather than “post-non-objective,” the term “non-objective” being a common synonym for abstraction. Oehlen’s odd terminology suggests that he wanted to escape the abstract/figurative binary, in order to make paintings in which one didn’t have to take sides, and in which content wouldn’t be equated with the presence or absence of recognizable imagery. This stance parallels post-1989 geopolitics, insofar as the postwar discourse around abstraction had been intimately bound up with

the ideological debates of the Cold War, especially in West Germany where, as an alternative to the social realist styles imposed throughout the Communist Bloc, abstract art was widely seen as emblematic of the Federal Republic’s integration into the democratic West.⁶

As the 1990s progressed and Oehlen continued to work abstractly, he began to experiment with different materials and techniques. In 1992, he started his “Fabric Paintings,” oil paintings executed on pieces of commercially printed fabric stitched together and stretched like traditional canvas. In the same year he also first turned to the computer as a compositional tool. Although Oehlen’s embrace of the computer might suggest some ramping up of production, this doesn’t seem to have occurred. By 1996, his pace of painting had slowed down to eight or 10 canvases per year, even as his range of techniques multiplied. He began to employ silkscreens, digital printing, collage and spray paint as well as oils and acrylics, often on a single canvas; this hybrid practice has continued to the present.

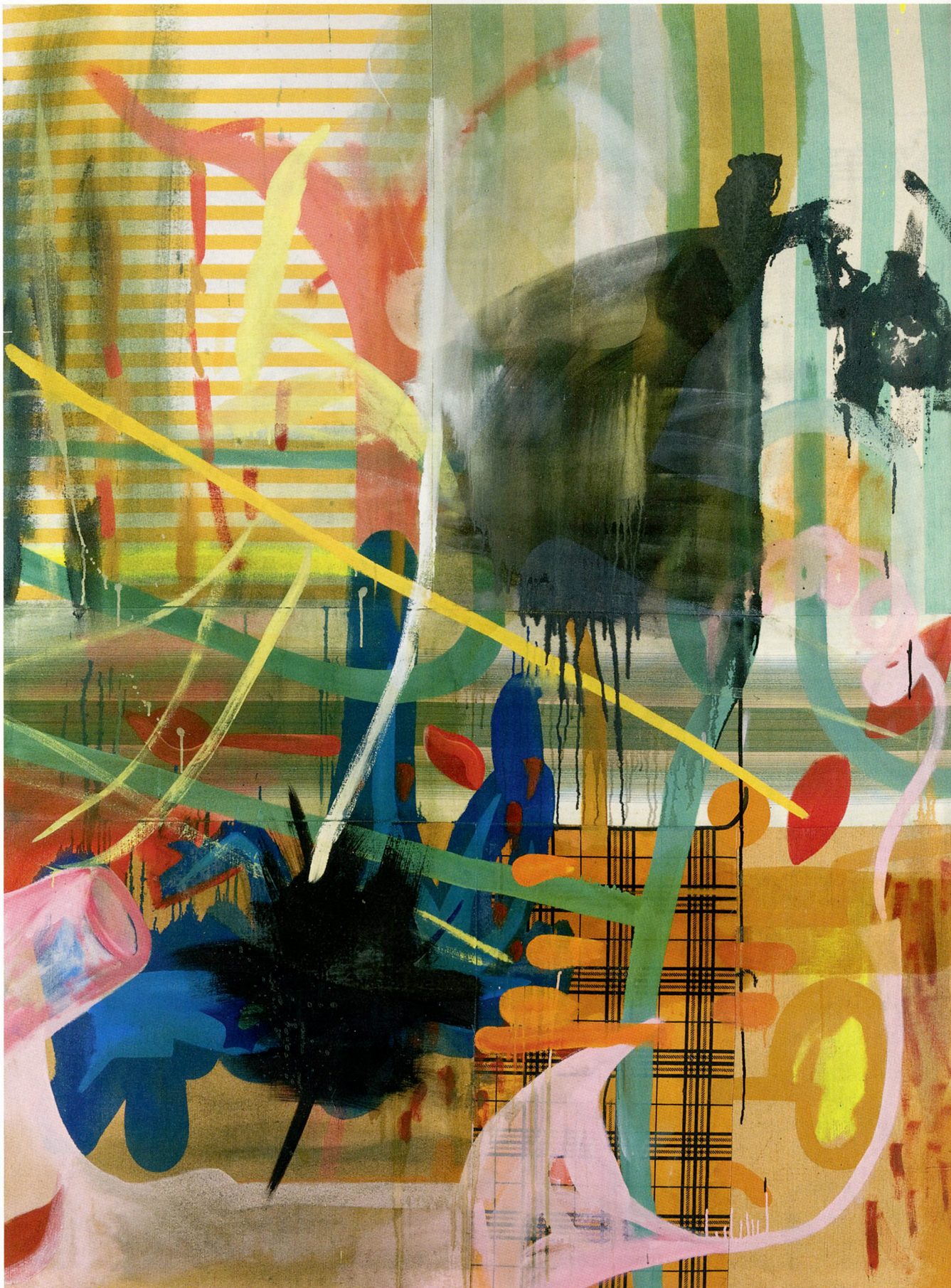
It didn’t escape some critics that certain bodies of work Oehlen made in the 1990s (the “Fabric Paintings” and a group of gray paintings from 1997) evoked projects by two major German painters of the previous generation, Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke, the latter of whom had been Oehlen’s teacher in Hamburg. Oehlen has explained his intermittent making of gray paintings as a spur to using more color: “I wanted to paint even more powerfully colored pictures and prescribed the gray ones for myself as therapy so as





Untitled, 2007,
oil on paper on
canvas, 78¾ by
133¾ inches.
Courtesy Skarstedt,
New York.

Untitled, 1993,
oil on fabric,
76¾ by 56¾
inches. Courtesy
Skarstedt.



to artificially heighten the craving for color.”⁷ I don’t doubt the artist’s explanation, but I also think that the gray paintings, like the “Fabric Paintings,” can be seen as evidence of Oehlen’s compulsion to struggle directly with art history. Rather than deprive himself of printed-fabric supports or all-gray paintings because such elements had been notably explored by other artists, Oehlen decided to utilize them in ways that were recognizably his own and might contribute to the history of the medium.

Like most great painters (and maybe all of them), Oehlen is keenly aware of what has been done before and how difficult it can be to open up new creative space. Refreshingly, he doesn’t simply plunder art history for stylistic options or knowing references, but instead seeks to understand, assimilate and, with luck, transcend past precedents. For the last seven or eight years, the historical antecedent that Oehlen has been contending with most directly has been Abstract Expressionism. The process began, the artist says, when he saw an exhibition titled “Action Painting” at the Beyeler Foundation in Basel, Switzerland.

It was by no means my favorite type of painting; I merely thought I should give it a try, and since my approach is a deliberate, very slow way of painting and a very artificial procedure, it cannot ever be considered spontaneous or aggressive. Everything that played a role in action painting was intentionally left out, totally eliminated. My pictures were constructed. And then to be confronted with the term “action” . . . after my work of the past twenty years . . . that was finally the moment when I was able to get somewhere with action. When I integrated it into my practice, it became a wholly different story than if I had simply charged at the canvas headfirst in 1988.⁸

So deeply immersed has Oehlen become in Abstract Expressionism that de Kooning now looms greater for him than any other artist. In 2009 he told a French interviewer that de Kooning was his “absolute master, a painter who was truly fascinating all through his life,” and when Glenn O’Brien asked who inspired him in the history of abstract painting, Oehlen replied, “It’s mostly de Kooning. I was fascinated by others, but the thing that lasts is de Kooning.”⁹

The “Action Painting” show also inspired Oehlen to start using a painting tool he had never considered. “I said to myself: ‘Which painting could one add to this hanging?’ That influenced my way of painting: I started to use my hands, something I found ridiculous and impossible before.”¹⁰ Although it was a departure in Oehlen’s work, finger painting had a well-known precedent in Gerhard Richter’s allover monochromes of 1972. Maybe that was one of the reasons that Oehlen had found it “impossible” before 2008. Something he saw in the “Action Painting” show must have suggested to him how he could try *Fingermalerei* in a way that wouldn’t be dismissed as Richter-esque.¹¹

FINGER PAINTING IS but one of the many ways that Oehlen has sought throughout his career to interfere with or detour around conventional approaches to painting. Again and again, this studio restlessness has helped him to avoid settling down



Interior, 1998,
oil on canvas,
93¾ inches square.

into any formulaic style. Large oil works are sometimes painted on canvas supports that carry ink-jet printed enlargements of the artist’s digital drawings. On several occasions he has used one of his paintings as a film screen, projecting onto it the 1986 movie *9½ Weeks*, starring Mickey Rourke and Kim Basinger. Nor has he ruled out provocations that hark back to his Kippenberger years: Oehlen’s 2008 finger painting titled *FM 9* features a toilet seat glued to the canvas. In the mid-1990s his writer friend Rainald Goetz challenged Oehlen’s emphasis on “clarity.” (“He told me that believing yourself to have achieved clarity was a stupid state to be in.”¹²) As a result, Oehlen started a new body of emphatically nonabstract work that he calls “computer collage posters.” Similarly, around 2008 he began affixing Spanish advertising posters to his canvases and painting over them with brushes and his fingers. As artistically successful as the poster paintings have been, I didn’t expect Oehlen to stay with them forever, and in fact in 2014 he unveiled a new mode: stark paintings on aluminum panels of black treelike forms against geometric shapes and white grounds. There is no finger painting, no “action” in sight: de Kooning seems to have left the room.

The presence of the posters, with their cheap, emphatic graphics guarantee that the painting won’t be “pure,” that the experience of looking at it will involve some kind of conflict, on the canvas and in the viewer’s mind. What are these works about? Is the presence of the poster just a way for the painter to have something to take off from, as when de Kooning would paint a big arbitrary letter shape so he wouldn’t be stuck with a blank canvas? Or is the artist trying to say something about high and low, about the interweaving of pop culture and fine art, about advertising and contemporary painting?

I, 2009, collage
on canvas, 74¼ by
86¾ inches.



Ultimately, the effect of the paintings, the kind of experiences they offer, is far more subtle and rewarding than such crass binaries. But perhaps it is the very crassness of this initial juxtaposition, its blatancy, that permits Oehlen to venture into such complex painting territory, to do the amazing things with color, gesture, space and light that make the poster paintings feel as visually rich as some Baroque masterpiece. Recently my eye was caught by a striking resemblance—or so it seemed to me—between some of Oehlen's poster paintings and the zigzagging yellow and purple satin garments in Anthony van Dyck's 1632 portrait of the doomed English sovereign Charles I and his family. (Oehlen's colorful schmears can also evoke passages in Cy Twombly's paintings, but his compositions are wisely devoid of any Twomblyesque graffiti.)

In 2010 Oehlen explained his decision to start painting over posters:

It evolved slowly, and finally I would permit myself something that could have been misunderstood before. Back then [in the late 1980s and 1990s] it wouldn't have worked. It would have been overpainting, which was already around. Overpainting always interested me, but there were already stupendous works that couldn't be topped.¹³

Here, I think, is a wonderful glimpse into what has made Oehlen such a significant painter. He knows that the technique of "overpainting" holds great potential for his work, and he also knows that if he doesn't approach it properly, if he doesn't find an

unprecedented relationship of ground image and paint, he will just be repeating what so many other artists have done before him. Patient, rigorous in his conceptualizing, and then, when the moment comes, absolutely free, as if he were the first one in the world to attempt the thing at hand, Oehlen is able to turn the anxiety of influence into the most personal of styles.

When I included Oehlen in my May 2009 *A.i.A.* article "Provisional Painting" it was because of these overpainted poster paintings as well as his earlier black-and-white computer paintings. At the start of the article I described him, Raoul De Keyser, Christopher Wool, Mary Heilmann and Michael Krebber as "artists who have long made works that look casual, dashed-off, tentative, unfinished or self-cancelling. In different ways, they all deliberately turn away from 'strong' painting for something that seems to constantly risk inconsequence or collapse." One aspect of Oehlen's work that made it look "provisional" to me was his use of basic graphic design software, with crude pixelation and obviously off-the-shelf effects. The situation of a gifted and experienced painter deliberately turning to a drawing tool that seemed to exclude all his skills was paradoxical, even perverse. That it resulted in unexpectedly compelling paintings forced me to rethink some fundamental painting issues, as did the exhilarating balance between virtuosity and defacement in the overpainted posters. (Rereading my brief description of these works in "Provisional Painting" I think that I didn't do justice to their painterly lyricism.)

In "Provisional Painting" I connected punk to a particular approach to painting. Oehlen has some interesting things to say



Untitled, 2014,
oil and paper
on canvas, 90½
by 106¼ inches.
Courtesy Gagosian
Gallery.

on the subject. He explicitly links his initial choice to become a painter to the ethos of punk. As he recalls in a 2003 interview:

What sparked my interest was a desire to be involved with the medium that quintessentially represented High Art but which at the time, in the late 1970s, was coming under fierce attack. Added to which, there was a general feeling of massive potential in painting, since so little was happening in that field. It was more or less a black hole. And it coincided with Punk, the feeling that one could use rudimentary means to revitalize the whole thing. There was no question of being intimidated by jibes like: "Go and learn to paint an instrument."¹⁴

Oehlen is then asked how he feels about the punk attitude now. Noting that it can be helpful in giving young people the confidence "they might otherwise have lacked," Oehlen adds that "it soon becomes ridiculous." Like any other originally iconoclastic, avant-garde, disruptive stance, punk inevitably turned into a codified style.

Something similar seems to have been happening among younger painters attracted to the painting mode I identified in my 2009 article. If a new generation of artists (and maybe an occasional contemporary) wishes to learn valuable lessons from Albert Oehlen, they will not find what they are looking for in any of his specific moves (compositional overload, playing high against low, mixing the digital and the handmade, inserting text into abstraction, etc.), although his brilliance as a colorist

should be taken as a challenge by all chromophobic painters. Admirers should focus, rather, on his refusal, for more than three decades, to ever be satisfied with his own art, and on his equally sustained, equally demanding pursuit of a deep dialogue with art history. ○

1. Quoted in Susanne Kippenberger, *Kippenberger: The Artist and His Families*, trans. Damion Searls, Atlanta and New York, J&L Books, 2011, p. 246.
2. Ibid., p. 248-49.
3. Quoted in Jörg Heiser and Jan Verwoert, "Ordinary Madness: An Interview with Albert Oehlen," *Frieze* 78, October, 2003, pp. 110.
4. Quoted in Susanne Kippenberger, p. 344.
5. Quoted in Valérie Duponchelle, "Albert Oehlen: 'Je suis un alien très discipliné!'" *Le Figaro*, Nov. 25, 2009, www.lefigaro.fr. My translation.
6. Ralf Beil has an interesting discussion about the relationship of Oehlen's art to the fall of the Berlin Wall in his essay "Red Light District: On the Eros of Impurity in the Work of Albert Oehlen," *Paintings/Pinturas*, Salamanca, Domus Artium, in association with the Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne, 2002, p. 30.
7. Quoted in Beil, p. 16.
8. "Interview: Alexander Klar and Albert Oehlen," originally published in German in *Albert Oehlen: Fingermalerei*, Cologne, Walther König, 2010; English translation from *Albert Oehlen: New Paintings*, Los Angeles, Gagosian Gallery, 2014, p. 82.
9. Quoted in Duponchelle; Glenn O'Brien, interview with Albert Oehlen, *Interview*, May 2009, p. 108.
10. Quoted in Duponchelle.
11. Possibly Oehlen had in the back of his mind the title of Red Krayola's 1999 LP *Fingerpainting*, a record to which he contributed electronic rhythm tracks. Since the 1980s, Oehlen has pursued musical experiments, releasing recordings under his own name, with his brother Markus as Van Oehlen, and, most extensively, with Red Krayola.
12. Quoted in Heiser and Verwoert, p. 106.
13. "Interview: Alexander Klar and Albert Oehlen," p. 82.
14. Quoted in Heiser and Verwoert, p. 109-10.