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THE PLAIN DEALER

Cleveland Museum of Art's exhibit on painter Albert Oehlen is big, tough, rewarding

Steven Litt



The artist Albert Oehlen with one of his works during the installation of Albert Oehlen: Woods near Oehle, at the Cleveland Museum of Art. November 30, 2016. (Gus Chan / The Plain Dealer)

CLEVELAND, Ohio - The Cleveland Museum of Art's growing commitment to contemporary art is taking an impressive, pugnacious, tough-minded turn in a major show on contemporary German painter Albert Oehlen that opens Sunday, Dec. 4.

A major figure in Europe whose work is less widely known in America, Oehlen is a virtuoso who rejects easy virtuosity.

He's an abstractionist who flirts with figurative imagery so simple that he calls it "stupid" - particularly trees, faces and roads with center stripes.

From these seemingly unimpressive starting points, Oehlen creates high drama. He wields a brush with high-velocity strokes and splashes that convey urgent physical action amid dark, turbulent clouds of pigment ranging from thick to watery.

Or he paints icy shapes with razor-edged precision and a wintry, searing luminosity.

Seeking challenges

Oehlen makes life difficult for himself in the studio as a way to discover the unexpected. His work is an invitation to join a rugged but ultimately rewarding quest.

While helping to install his show on Wednesday, Oehlen, a tall, rangy and approachable 62-year-old in a black T-shirt, charcoal slacks and yellow sneakers, spoke of “the challenge and almost impossible aims I set for myself.”

He described his working process as filled with stressful moments contemplating what to do next, without taking the easy way out.

“You need nerves, yes,” he said. “Most of the time, you’re looking at something very ugly. It needs the confidence that later that day or maybe in two days, you will solve the problem.”

Organized by the museum in collaboration with friends of the artist involved in art, music and writing, the Oehlen show fills the museum’s main special exhibition gallery with colossal etchings, drawings and paintings on canvas and Dibond, a type of smooth aluminum composite panel normally used in outdoor advertising.

Entitled “Albert Oehlen: Woods near Oehle,” a play on the artist’s name that evokes a non-existent place, the exhibition focuses primarily on Oehlen’s fixation on trees as a starting point for explorations in the fresh possibilities of painting.

At a time in which painting has been considered exhausted and less relevant than, say, photography, video or installation, Oehlen is considered a master of those possibilities.

Reinvigorating a medium

As of Wednesday, the show’s installation was still underway, but it was clear that although it covers several decades of Oehlen’s work, it is less a career retrospective than a choreographed meditation on what makes the artist tick, creatively speaking.

The show includes 28 large drawings and paintings by Oehlen, plus a recent series of large-scale etchings, all focusing on twisty, angular tree forms.

But that’s not all. Oehlen’s friends, including the writers Julie Sylvester, Diedrich Diederichsen and American photographer Christopher Williams, suggested other additions that explore affinities to Oehlen’s art.

Those works include a pair of late-career paintings (one from the museum’s own collection, and one from the Whitney Museum of American Art) by Willem de Kooning, the American Abstract Expressionist to whose work Oehlen’s has been compared.

Also on view are inverted photographs of trees by Canadian artist Rodney Graham; large-scale posters of roosters by Williams; videos by the German filmmaker Harun Farocki and poet Jackson Mac Low; and a John Chamberlain sculpture in crumpled metal from the museum’s collection.

Music by the Swiss composer Wertmuller will provide the exhibit’s soundtrack, repeating on a loop.

And, strangest of all, the show examines Oehlen's obsession with a 1940-49 painting by the visionary Ukrainian-American modernist John Graham, who influenced the Abstract Expressionists.

Entitled "Tramonto Spaventoso" - Italian for "Scary Sunset" - the Graham depicts a mustachioed man, the mysterious initial "H," a mermaid and a collection of suns floating in a constellation.

A personal obsession

Oehlen first spotted the painting in a reproduction in a book on the history of Abstract Expressionism, but said he was so perplexed by its enigmatic symbolism that he bought it about 10 years ago and has been painting and drawing his own variations on it ever since.

"I became fascinated by it, so I had to make versions of it, so I could understand it," he said.

Born in 1954 in Krefeld, West Germany, Oehlen is part of a second wave of highly influential German artists to be embraced in the United States, following an earlier postwar generation including Sigmar Polke, under whom Oehlen studied in the late 1970s, and Jorg Immendorff, whom he befriended while still in his teens.

The Cleveland show follows a 1995 exhibition at the Wexner Center in Columbus, and a more recent show in 2015 at the New Museum in New York, which was warmly received by critics.

In the catalog of the Cleveland show, museum director William Griswold described the current project as "the largest and most ambitious exhibition on a living artist's work in the institution's history."

Despite the increasing frequency of mid-sized exhibitions on artists such as Carrie Mae Weems, Jennifer Bartlett and Kara Walker, major solo shows on living artists have been rare occurrences at the museum.

Rare event

The institution, which has had a highly conservative reputation for decades, last used its biggest exhibit gallery for a solo show on a living artist in 2000, when it staged a retrospective on the work of Clevelander Viktor Schreckengost, then 94.

In a twist on the Cleveland museum's usual practice,

Oehlen played a mayor role in laying out his exhibition, in collaboration with Reto Thuring, the museum's curator of contemporary art.

Oehlen's design concept called for removing the customary right-angled walls in the museum's big, lower-level special exhibition gallery and treating it instead as a unified loft space.

In the center of the 13,000-square-foot gallery are two large, curved, freestanding walls, reminiscent of the architectural-scale sculptures of Richard Serra.

Without reaching the ceiling, the walls enclose a roomy, ovoid interior in which two colossal Oehlen drawings in charcoal on paper face off against the colorful, sinewy, sharp-edged shapes in the de Kooning paintings.

One of the walls is pierced with a rectangular window on which the artist will project the shadow of a leafless tree illuminated by a pulsating strobe, a 3-D evocation of his recent paintings.

Initially, Oehlen's art is not easy to look at.

The earliest works in the show, from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, are multilayered abstractions in earthy tones filled with drips, cloudy smears and partially erased imagery, but also jolting bursts of radiant light and color.

Tough on the artist, and the viewer

Oehlen's more recent paintings feature stark black forms afloat on fields of harsh white amid hard-edged fields of metallic blues and reds that fade from light to dark, like a glissando on an electric keyboard - a rapid run across notes from low to high.

The craggy black shapes in Oehlen's recent paintings, although ostensibly inspired by trunks and branches, can be jagged, strangely geometric or spindly and awkwardly attenuated. They can evoke a woman's breasts, a string of gourds, a high-powered rifle, the antlers of a cartoon animal or a barbecue fork with long tines.

But none of that matters to Oehlen as much as how the shapes are made. His aim is to deconstruct the act of painting by taking apart each and every way of touching the surface with paint to find out what happens if he re-engineers habitual ways of thinking and making.

"My idea is to take it all apart, question it all, and put it all upside down," he said.

For example, he'll take a line that looks like it's drawn very fast, but make it very slowly.

He'll begin a gesture freehand, but complete it using a ruler. Or he'll combine splashes and drips with razor-edged fields of paint that paradoxically contrast with exquisitely choreographed messiness.

"I'm driven by wanting to surprise myself with the result," he said. "I never think of the final result. I never have a vision of how it looks. I only think about how to get there and what would be fun on the way."