

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Albert Oehlen: 'There's something hysterical about magenta'

Fuelled by beer and speed, Albert Oehlen ran riot through the Berlin art world. He made intentionally bad paintings, worked only in grey, and was even anti-art altogether. Now's he's living the outdoors life in Switzerland – so why do his trees still look psychopathic?

Sean O'Hagan



'Alarming' ... a detail from Untitled (Baum 44), 2015, by Albert Oehlen. Photograph: Stefan Rohner/Courtesy Gagosian Gallery

Albert Oehlen has filled the Gagosian Gallery in Mayfair with big paintings of trees. Oehlen's trees are black, skeletal and deformed-looking, their thin curving branches extending beyond blocks of smeared magenta into pure white backgrounds. In some paintings, straight black parallel lines suggest the trees are standing on an autobahn and, indeed, their minimalism and bold colours would not look out of place on a Kraftwerk album cover.

In others, a single long line of black spray-paint trails across the canvas like a hurried graffiti scrawl – except that these are not canvases, but shiny, smooth, synthetic sheets of Dibond, a polythene-coated aluminium board more commonly used for advertising displays in trade fairs.

"I like the stiffness," says Oehlen, "It has this modern technological feel to it, and it's actually much easier to paint on than canvas. I wasn't looking for another surface, I just tried it one day and liked it."

This kind of accidental development is emblematic of Oehlen's approach to making art, which is somehow both instinctive and cerebral. He paints in the long shadow of abstraction, abstract expressionism and minimalism, as if aware that the act of painting is a gesture of defiance in the face of history. When he talks about his work, it is often in a self-deprecating and mischievous way. It is almost as if he doesn't take his vocation seriously, when in fact the opposite is true. Like his paintings, Oehlen is hard to pin down: elusive, I suspect, by nature rather than design.

“I don’t intend to be cryptic or difficult,” he says at one point, “I am like I am. I work and sometimes I get ideas and I pursue those ideas until I exhaust them. To me, it all fits together. It’s a continuous work for me – and of me.” As is often the case, his attempt at elucidation ends with a wry laugh. I have never encountered an artist who so effortlessly debunks the myth that to make art you must be a tortured soul. “I do struggle,” he says, “but mostly, I struggle because I have a lot of work to do. Often, I have one recurring problem: how to make a painting that is entertaining – to me and to everyone else. It’s a lot of effort, that one idea. It means I am often trying to do something that is impossible. So, yes, what I do is playful, but it is also work.”

Oehlen currently lives and works in Buhlen, a small town near Zurich. It seems an oddly sedate base for a former enfant terrible of German painting, but the days of beer and speed in post-punk Berlin have given way to an outdoor lifestyle of hiking and skiing in the surrounding mountains. Back then, Oehlen was best friends with the hard-drinking Martin Kippenberger, and at the vanguard of the Neue Wilde movement. “We hung out together, we had fun, we got into trouble. We wanted to be – pathetic words – ‘new and provocative’. But, the flip side of that coin is that you can’t ask for success because you have set yourself up to be totally against the very idea of success.”

It all sounds like an impossibly faraway time, before the tyranny of the global market turned artists into unapologetic careerists. “I was even against art for a while,” he says, laughing. “Punk was in the air, but, really I didn’t belong to punk.” As a strategy, though, punk made sense to him. “It interested me because it asked the question – what happens if you work with something that you are not a master of and don’t control? That’s still an interesting question.” It is one that has resounded through all of Oehlen’s work to one degree or another, not least in his constant adopting of often absurd-seeming rules and limitations. He once laboured on a series of paintings in which he only used shades of grey. For another series of intentionally “bad paintings” – including a garish portrait of Hitler – he stuck rigorously to red, yellow and blue.

He has an odd and wilfully dysfunctional relationship with what many might consider the most fundamental aspect of painting: colour. “For a long time, I just didn’t care about it,” he told me, when I visited his studio, which looks out over snow-covered rooftops to the mountains beyond. “I just put my paint on the palette and worked with what was there. Then I thought, what would happen if I *did* care about colour?”

It is this kind of approach that has led some critics to dismiss Oehlen as a chancer, while others, including a new generation of younger artists that includes Urs Fischer, Wade Guyton and Michael Williams, have found his punkish attitude and constant stylistic shifts a source of inspiration. In the mid-90s, he was ahead of the game in his use of digitally manipulated images for a series he called Computer Paintings. Before that, he made “smear paintings” using his fingers instead of a brush.

The Tree paintings first appeared in more messily abstract form some 20 years ago. “They are more simple and more complicated now,” he says. “When you place those black lines against a magenta background, something alarming happens. Magenta is a hysterical colour somehow. To me, they look like psychopathic trees – psychopathic *human* trees.”

He pauses for a moment. “But, I’m not really interested in what the paintings mean. People can interpret them how they want, but, for me, painting is about trying to get as far away from meaning as possible, which is perhaps the most difficult thing of all. Really, I am just trying to

make something new every time. I'm an experimenter who can live with the contradictions and even the mistakes that experimentation entails. If we were talking musically," he adds, "it's definitely Frank Zappa, not Leonard Cohen."

Albert Oehlen is at the Gagosian Gallery, London, until 24 March