

GAGOSIAN

# HYPERALLERGIC

Beer With a Painter: Albert Oehlen

Jennifer Samet



*Albert Oehlen, "Untitled (Baum 60)" (2015), oil on dibond, 98 7/16 × 98 7/16 inches, (250 × 250 cm) (© Albert Oehlen. Photo by Stefan Rohner. Courtesy Gagosian)*

Albert Oehlen and I are in the thick of conversation over IPAs at the Maritime Hotel bar when his teenage daughter slides onto the sofa across from me with a book. She was on a school break and accompanying her father to New York for his exhibition at Gagosian Gallery.

Oehlen had been good-naturedly answering my questions about childhood experiences with art. He's now telling me why he no longer cares about painters like Max Beckmann, and why he thinks figurative painting is fundamentally incapable of expression. Finally he chuckles. "I guess I don't like art," he says, and looks over at his daughter. Lovingly and mischievously, he tells me "She is interested in art history." She seems unfazed by this unveiling of Oz, smiles sweetly, and returns to her book.

This exchange is a little taste of Oehlen's attitude. The long-reigning bad boy of German painting has consistently poked and prodded at whatever preciousness we associate with the medium. Early in his career, fueled by his association with Martin Kippenberger and other Junge Wilde artists, he employed a sardonic and deliberately ham-fisted figuration. As he shifted into abstraction, he implicitly parodied the idea of the artist's struggle by juxtaposing chaotic passages with highly controlled and mediated ones. The work is unsettling — maybe even more so in the vast barrenness of Gagosian's white rooms — because it forces us to confront our vestiges of faith in stable meaning and the comfort of rules.

Oehlen was born in 1954 in Krefeld, Germany. He graduated in 1981 from Hochschule für Bildende Künste, Hamburg. From 2000 to 2009, he worked as a professor in painting at Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. Recent solo exhibitions include *Home and Garden*, New Museum, New York (2015); *An Old Painting in Spirit*, Kunsthalle Zürich, Switzerland (2015); *Behind the Image*, Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, Spain (2016–17); and *Woods near Oehle*, Cleveland Museum of Art (2016–17). Oehlen's work was included in the 55th Biennale di Venezia in 2013. He currently lives and works in Switzerland.

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Jennifer Samet: I know there are other artists in your family, like your brother. What part did art play in your childhood?

Albert Oehlen: My father was a graphic designer. He made cartoons and designed covers and illustrations for stories, novels, and children's books. When I was a kid, I loved that world of cartoonists. I studied them and knew every drawing. My favorite was Saul Steinberg. I remember that in the house, we had reproductions of a Picasso, a van Gogh, and a Beckmann. I was always staring at them. I liked to look and concentrate on them.

JS: In Hamburg, your primary teacher was Sigmar Polke. What kinds of things did you learn or take from him?

AO: German art schools, at least at that time, were very different from other schools. They were very open, and we would come and go when we wanted. You didn't go to classes every day to learn something. That didn't happen in Düsseldorf or Hamburg. Also, our teachers were activist-artists.

Polke was my favorite painter. He was my idol. So it meant I had the chance to see him from time to time. He was a special character — a bit cynical in his humor. He would never teach in the sense of saying things like "If you do more of that and change that then the painting will be better." He would leave us alone. The exchange was focused on talking, looking at art, or meeting people. We visited the studios of friends of his. Mostly we were just hanging out and talking about things.

JS: You spent a year living with your contemporary Martin Kippenberger, working closely together and critiquing each other's work. It's been considered a watershed moment in your development. Why did you decide to spend that year working together in this way?

AO: Our paths crossed between Hamburg and Berlin, and somehow we met. We were not in close contact, but intermittently we would call and visit each other.

We decided it would be good to live in another country for a while. It was almost accidental, like, “Should we go to England or Spain?” We decided on Spain and met a gallerist from Madrid who helped us find a house in the south, in Carmona. We were there for a year, and then we split and didn’t see each other for about another year.

JS: It has been described that you emerged from that year (1988) an abstract painter.

AO: Yes, but that was the plan. I wanted to be an abstract painter. I never took figurative work seriously, even when I did it. I thought it was bullshit. The early self portraits are highly ironic.

JS: Why did you decide figurative painting was bullshit?

AO: I didn’t believe in the possibility of transmitting a message, expression or feeling. I was a friend of Jörg Immendorff, who was very political in the beginning. He brought me into that political left wing. There was this idea that art has to serve the masses, the movement. I got indoctrinated in that and I believed it. But as soon as I tried to do something like that, I thought, “This doesn’t work at all. “

You try to heroize something and the opposite comes out. It is out of control. You make fun of it without wanting to. Or, maybe ten years later it turns into something annoying, stupid, ridiculous.

Then you start thinking, “What is reproduction or representation? How does it work or not work?” I didn’t even have to read much about it. It just seemed obvious that there was nothing to win. I still don’t think that if you paint a person you can transmit something about that person. I don’t think you can communicate something about an experience or a situation. I got completely resistant to it.

As a kid, I was a fan of Francis Bacon. Now the only thing I feel is, “I guess this painter was in an aggressive state when he painted it.” That’s what I think. It doesn’t move me at all. I can respect it; I can think it is good, but it doesn’t touch me in the way that he wanted it to touch me.

There is no art that touches me in that way. Maybe I don’t like art. I do have admiration for artists — for having ideas, and being smart. If I see that ability, I become a fan and get enthusiastic.

JS: It seems as if you respect the project and the artwork as a record of the artist’s ideas. In your own work, this manifests in the way you set up parameters and work within them. Can you tell me about how parameters have functioned in your work?

AO: Yes, I have done that since the beginning. It stems from being a student of Polke: that was our world. I decided to make painting, but I wasn’t coming from painting in the sense of needing to hold a brush and smear paint. Rather, it was a decision, as part of a chain of reactions: How do I set it up? Do I need a style? No. What do I do with color? I didn’t know, so I found a vehicle to get rid of that problem, which was a couple of rules. It made my concerns obvious. You could tell that if I cared about colors I would have acted differently.

That was the beginning; then came different systems for using colors, like three primary colors on a brown ground. I did that for a year or two and it presented different problems, different challenges. Then I went on to the next thing.

I don't really want to put it on the table — what those rules were, one by one — because why should I explain everything? But yes, something like that has always been part of my work — elements that I could control.

JS: Your current show at Gagosian presents two bodies of work: “Elevator” paintings and “Tree” paintings. The two series represent two very different concerns. Over the course of your career this seems like something you have explored: two distinct approaches occurring simultaneously. Can you tell me about why you do that?

AO: It's not planned, but it's something I do; it has happened again and again. In the “Tree” paintings I concentrated on forms and shapes, so I always use the same colors — red and black on a white ground. It's a decision.

The other paintings are the opposite. I try to ignore forms and shapes completely. I just perform some actions on the canvas and focus on colors.

The color grid painting, “Untitled (Elevator 1-8) and Raumflug” (1996-2017), is an old piece that I had around. I thought that since the eight “Elevator” paintings are about color, it would be interesting to have it as part of the group, at the end.

JS: I am intrigued by your interest in de Kooning — an artist whose existentialist search, rather than a conceptual one, seems, on the face of it, diametrically opposed to your project in painting.

AO: His painting process was quite complex. There was a lot of intelligence involved. He tried things, tried to do things differently, change the process. For example, he involved time in his painting. He found out that time plays a big role, and other people had not thought about that before.

When de Kooning was teaching at the Black Mountain School, he had the students work for a very long time on one drawing. It was about what happens if you spend days on one drawing. I think this idea is so crazy and so intelligent. It wasn't about showing that if you work more, it gets better. You might destroy it, or you might end up somewhere else. You might get bored. He was not saying drawing can only be good if you work for a week on it. He just wanted to explore what happened.

JS: Who are some of the contemporary painters you are interested in?

AO: Malcolm Morley is the greatest alive. It is so impressive to me what he did — so funny and so smart.

Sometimes, you look at a painting and say, “Something is different.” You see that something is wrong; it can't be what it looks like. That's enough. You haven't seen it before and then you can feel something.

JS: You have been interested in electronic music for a long time. How has it informed your work?

AO: The first thing I was into was Acid house, which I liked because it was so stupid. I didn't see it as the root of techno, because techno didn't exist at the time. It was something Belgian or Italian — cheap shit. I bought cassettes at a gas station. They had a pirate smiley on the cover. I thought it was incredibly funny.

Then, early techno incorporated slogans like “No Women Allowed” or “I'm the One and Only Dominator.” “Captain Kirk, Your son is Dead.” “Who Is Elvis?” I loved it, because it made me think, “Why is this funny? What is going on?” I had my thoughts and theories about it. That was relevant to me for my art. I can't explain in what sense — but anything that makes you think is relevant.

It is about the context. Slogans are at the beginning of the song and they give a context of stupidity, like leaving your brain at the entrance before raving. So you could do that in art — have one aspect that wipes away all seriousness, so it has a different starting point. That's interesting: the context, the frame of it. Songs happen in time, so what's in the beginning becomes the frame. But most importantly, I never went to a rave.