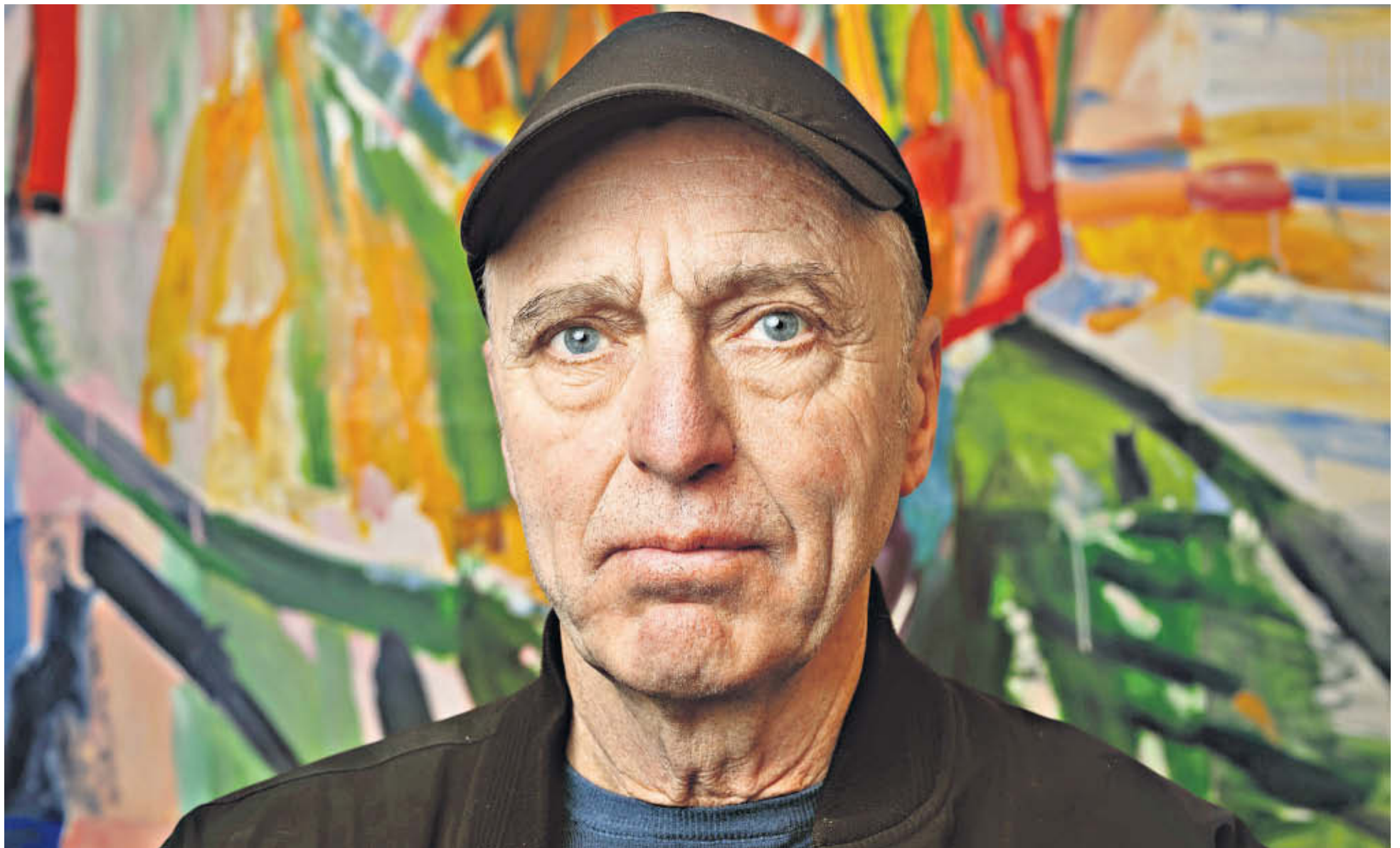


# Arts & Books



RIL SCHROEDER

## Meet the man who turned 'bad painting' into an art form

Bored by the dominance of dour conceptual art, Albert Oehlen led a rebellion in the 1980s. As he tells *Mark Hudson*, he's back for more

Albert Oehlen's canvases may look as if they were uproarious fun to paint, but it turns out that that's far from the case. "I've never felt that," the German painter tells me. "Maybe I do a little now, after all this time, but when I started, I felt the opposite – disgust. Even now, it's never a pleasure for me to hold the brush."

Oehlen came to prominence in the 1990s, a period during which painting appeared to be in terminal decline in the face of competition from conceptual, installation and video art. Combining free-form use of computers and industrial-scale digital printers with wildly expressive daubing in oils, his works felt like they'd been through the long-predicted "death of painting" and come out the other

side – an approach *The New Yorker* described as "post-painting". Yet for all his pioneering use of computers, Oehlen says he "just hates" the internet. "It's dirt. If your life is a building, which floor is the internet? I think anyone would say it's the basement."

Oehlen, now 69, is no newcomer to contrarianism. In the 1980s, he was part of a group of punkish "bad boy" artists, whose beer- and amphetamine-fuelled antics turned the staid German art scene on its head. He and his fellow art conspirators, the painter Werner Büttner and the multimedia prankster Martin Kippenberger – the nearest thing Germany has had to a Damien Hirst – would invade gallery openings and bawl out coal-miners' songs. Kippenberger

**'It's never a pleasure to hold a paint brush': Oehlen at his show in London**

would pose in oversized underpants in homage to his hero Picasso, who was famously photographed painting in such garments. The trio were seen as rebelling against the high seriousness of much postwar German art – typified by the heavily symbolic imagery of Joseph Beuys and Anselm Kiefer.

Oehlen's deliberately cackhanded "bad paintings", as he called them, lit up the art market, as a refreshing alternative to the austerity of the then-dominant conceptualism and minimalism. (One sold for £6 million at Sotheby's in 2019.)

Approaching 70, does Oehlen still feel like a bad boy? Cutting a

serious, rather shy figure via Zoom from Los Angeles, where he's on holiday with his family, Oehlen chuckles drily at the idea he might ever have been such a thing. "Some evenings got a little... extended," he says, looking back on those pranks. "But the important things for me were sitting together talking and exchanging ideas."

There's an impish humour beneath Oehlen's earnestness. Having read that in every interview he gives the opposite answer to the one given in his last interview, I'm starting to wonder whether I should take anything he says seriously. Bluffing, after all, is his artistic speciality. "When I started painting as a teenager," he says, "I was very interested in politics, so it seemed obvious that

a painting should convey a message. But it took just two or three paintings for me to realise that I didn't believe in representation. So that meant I must be an abstract painter. But I came to realise that what interested me most were the clichés of abstract painting: the idea that the artist is expressing their emotional identity when they put the brush to canvas. I thought, how can I play with these things? How can I mess them up?"

The viewer's perceptions may feel messed up looking at the paintings in Oehlen's new exhibition at Gagolian, in London, in which elements of landscape merge with abstract grids, and

*Continued overleaf*

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strange moustachioed faces peer out of swarms of richly coloured brushstrokes. While he has for the time being abandoned the digital in favour of pure paint, there's a free-Googleing randomness to these paintings that's strangely exhilarating. "People think of art in terms of originality," he says, "but I've always been interested in its artificiality."

A graphic-designer's son from Krefeld, near Düsseldorf, Oehlen studied at Hamburg's University of Fine Arts. While he grew up in the shadow of the Second World War, he and other artists of his generation – born in the 1950s – have been seen as wanting to shake off the weight of history, and the overpowering sense of guilt evident in the work of many older German artists.

## I drank a lot of beer, but I never needed speed because I already have it in me

"We were against the self-important attitudes of some artists," says Oehlen, becoming entirely serious for a moment. "They approached history in a way we felt had become bombastic and kitsch. But I didn't want to distance myself from dealing with this history at all. I'm German, and when I learnt in school about German history in the 20th century, that was a shock – for life. Even if you don't see it in my work, it's a project: what can you do after the Holocaust?"

Still, there must have been fun as well as soul-searching on the Berlin scene. Kippenberger's anarchic spirit was clearly an influence on Oehlen, particularly his bad paintings – along with all that beer and speed. He laughs. "I drank beer, for sure, but I never needed speed, because I already have it in me. But it was 90 per cent Kippenberger's show, and we went along with it." The larger-than-life Kippenberger mocked the idea of the tragic genius, while feeling obliged to live out the archetype through heavy drinking, contributing to his own death, aged 44, in 1997. Oehlen threw himself into his painting, producing a series of deliberately

clunky self-portraits, one of which, *Self-Portrait as a Dutch Woman*, Kippenberger paid the compliment of claiming that not even he could have painted that badly.

I was surprised to note that the publicity for Oehlen's new London exhibition revives the notion. Oehlen, we are told, champions "self-consciously amateurish 'bad' painting, infusing spontaneous and expressive gestures with surrealist attitude". I assumed he would have moved on from that posture in the early 1980s, after "bad painting", which was briefly a much-publicised – and much-derided – phenomenon, seemed to vanish without trace.

"The term always fascinated me," Oehlen says. "Over the years, I thought, what happened to that? Because I liked the contradiction of the idea. So I thought I might produce more examples of it myself." But is it even possible to do a "bad painting" now? Who would decide what bad painting is, when any sense of a standard in art has become even more diffuse than it was when Oehlen started doing bad paintings in the 1980s?

"Maybe bad painting could mean being against the rules. That's a cause I would sign up to right away. We think now there are no rules in art. But still too many people, artists and audiences, believe in them." But what are the rules in art today? "I can't put it into words. But you feel it all the time."

The recent upsurge in identity-driven art has given rise to an odd sort of cosiness, whereby if an artist's work ticks the right boxes, it will be accepted. With this has come a revival in narrative painting, much of it twee, and a world away from Oehlen's work. Among the paintings in the Gagosian show are several featuring discernible trees and sky, inspired by a film he has made on Van Gogh, for which he created the paintings – though his approach wasn't conventional. "I was aware when I was painting them that these paintings were totally worthless. So I was able to ignore the possibility of making 'art'. And that's a fortunate situation to be in. The work gets looser, fresher. Some of these paintings are total crap. But who cares? They could be the source of a good painting."

*'Albert Oehlen: New Paintings' is at Gagosian Grosvenor Hill, London W1, until May 11. Info: gagosian.com*



'Worthless': Oehlen didn't feel pressure to make 'art' with his Van Gogh paintings

By Simon Heffer

### THE ILLUSIONIST by Robert Hutton

384pp, W&N, £19.99 (0808 196 6794), RRP £25, ebook £14.99  
★★★★★



Warfare has been partly about deception since the days of the Trojan Horse, but by the time of the Second World War, it appeared to have reached a peak of sophistication. And, according to Robert Hutton in this well-researched and often entertaining book, the ultimate sophisticate was Dudley Wrangel Clarke, who, thanks to impressing two senior generals – Wavell and Dill – found himself in charge of the Army's attempt to use deception to make up for the overstretching of its resources.

Clarke's father had been a gold-mine employee in South Africa, where Dudley was born in 1899, early in the Boer War. (It was evidence of his sense of humour that he sought to be awarded a campaign ribbon for that conflict, having been in the war zone as an infant.) His younger brother, TEB ("Tibby") Clarke, became a celebrated screenwriter at Ealing Studios, eventually with *Passport to Pimlico*, *The Blue Lamp* and *The Lavender Hill Mob* to his credit, and Dudley shared his gifts of imagination.

He had joined the Army during the Great War, the moment he was old enough, but, to his disappointment and despite strenuous efforts, he never saw action. He managed to get to Palestine in the 1930s, where he impressed his seniors not just with

his courage as a soldier, but with his charm, wit and ability to think originally. He managed to get out of France in 1940, which was when Wavell – then commander-in-chief in the Middle East – summoned him to Cairo.

Over the next couple of years, Clarke perfected various means of conning the Germans (and, even more easily, the Italians) into thinking the British were going to strike when and where they were not, or not striking when and where they were. He set up entirely imaginary military formations, including something called the Special Air Service, which caught on somewhat more tangibly elsewhere. He invented spies and double agents to pump out bogus information about these non-existent divisions and battalions; and the star invention (devised by one of Clarke's colleagues) was a man called Paul Nicosoff, reflecting, as Hutton puts it, one of the inventor's main interests in life.

Clarke understood there was a fine line between giving the enemy information that was sufficiently credible to be taken seriously, to enhance the reputation of the "agent", and information that actually compromised Allied plans. He also saw that if the information passed on was consistently rubbish, the

## Clarke tricked Germany into sending men to the Balkans just before the British invaded Sicily

increased imprisonment of dissenters and journalists, or the death of the opposition leader Alexei Navalny in a remote Arctic prison colony last month, has only spurred interest further.

The publication in English of *The Prisoner*, a 2013 memoir by former inmate Vladimir Pereverzin, is thus well-timed. Prior to his 2004 arrest, Pereverzin was no radical or dissenter; he had little in common with Navalny, Vladimir Kara-Murza or other opposition figures jailed or even killed under Vladimir Putin's rule. He was a middle-level manager at Yukos, an oil and gas company owned by Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the oligarch who was once the richest man in Russia.

"agent" would be pointless. These balancing acts, led by Clarke, were conducted superbly. In 1943, such deception caused the Germans to pack the Balkans with troops when the British were preparing to invade Sicily; and when the invasion of Sicily actually took place (on the south-east corner of the island), boats armed with loudspeakers pumping out the sound of men and gunfire toured the west of the island to make the Italians believe the invasion was coming. When the Italians could find no invasion forces, they presumed they had won a great victory.

Spreading false information about potential troop movements caused the Wehrmacht to keep 300,000 men in Norway until the very end of the war, when 100,000 would have been more than enough to repel any (unlikely) attempt by the Allies to liberate the country, and the rest could have been fighting to try to save Germany from ruin. And the greatest act of deception was the way in which the Germans were persuaded to believe first that the invasion of France was going to happen in the Pas-de-Calais and not Normandy, and, even after D-Day, continued to imagine a second attack would be launched against northern France.

The main set-piece in the book is how Clarke, with a group of able and genial lieutenants (who at different times included David Niven and Douglas Fairbanks Jr), managed to buy time, first for Auchinleck and then for Montgomery, before the tide-turning victory at El Alamein.

But because of the most incomprehensible episode in Clarke's career, none of it might

By Ada Wordsworth

### THE PRISONER by Vladimir Pereverzin, tr Anna Gunin

309pp, Ad Lib, £9.99 (0808 196 6794), ebook £6.99  
★★★★★



For centuries, the West has been gripped by the brutality of Russia's frozen detention centres, and prison literature from Dostoevsky to Solzhenitsyn has nursed the fascination. The system's global significance, whether in the mass release of dangerous prisoners to serve on Ukraine's battlefields, the

Khodorkovsky, however, fell foul of Putin's regime after campaigning for a freer society, and in 2003, he and his business partner Platon Lebedev were arrested. Pereverzin's own arrest, the following year, seems to have been an attempt by the Russian security services to persuade him to testify against his two former bosses. Having refused to do so, he was convicted of fraud, and sentenced to 12 years behind bars. (He ended up only serving seven of these before being released due to a change in the criminal code. He now lives in Germany.)

Much of *The Prisoner*, skilfully translated by Anna Gunin, focuses on the daily grind of Russian prison life. It's repetitive, dull and, for the most part, undramatic – bar