

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

# Art in America

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW



Albert Oehlen: *FM 53*,  
2008-11, oil and paper  
on canvas, 86½ by 74¼  
inches; at Gagosian.

### ALBERT OEHLLEN GAGOSIAN

Not since Rauschenberg's Combines of the 1950s have paintings looked so fresh and of their time as did a dozen by Albert Oehlen recently exhibited at Gagosian's up-town gallery. Most of the 2008-11 canvases by the German artist, born in 1954, are collaged with sections of large-scale advertisements, paint applied on top. Nearly recognizable logos may share space with ad text or graphics hand-painted onto the canvas. The works range in size from 75 by 90 inches to 83 by 106 inches.

Oehlen applies paint in filmy screens that coalesce into clouds, as in a Turner seascape. There is a subtle, shimmering, yet tossed-off quality about his layers of pigment, which become strange and wonderful graffiti. Skittery marks are made by fingers, or by an improperly loaded brush. One sees drips, smudges, washouts and the occasional use of spray paint. There are nodes of feathery density. In *FM 53* (2008-11), brown and gold marks over a blue-gradient frame-like rectangle resemble dead poultry by Soutine.

Oehlen does away with alloverness in favor of asymmetrical knots of activity. He seems to prefer violets, greens, green-blues and peachy smears, plus

ocher and umber, all on predominantly white backgrounds. The expansive surfaces provide arenas in which the painter acts, and the results often look like the aftermath of a bullfight. Gestural paint and emerging linear structures are given plenty of room. To take in the larger works, you have to walk from one side of the canvas to the other.

There may be nothing new about painting on top of found advertisements, but Oehlen somehow makes it newly compelling. His exertions accomplish just enough. They serve to defuse the poster fragments, and to reassert human freedom against the background of a mechanized, spectacularized culture. The often obscured text that appears is in different languages, among them English, occasionally applied with a heavy hand. On one untitled canvas the crossed-out word "power" is visible in round brown letters, and another features the pasted-together "DEITH," or perhaps it reads "DEATH"? One work is plastered with large colored dots, recalling Damien Hirst's recent mega-show of spot paintings at all Gagosian locations. This canvas suggests that dots by them-

selves are not so interesting, until they are smeared all over with paint.

Oehlen's works are breezy, irreverent and provisional. They seem not so much to have been invented as to have been worked over, with the action of painting as commentary on already existing conditions. The advertisements and the white rectangle stand in for the world as the painter finds it, and Oehlen's paintings declare that gestural abstraction is the perfectly reasonable response of an individual to that world.

—Jeff Frederick