

frieze

Albert Oehlen

Galerie Max Hetzler

In the early 1990s, after a decade of anti-purist, jokey figuration, Albert Oehlen decided to exclude anything but painterly abstraction from his work. Yet in 1995 he started to question that move, prompted by a conversation with his friend, the writer Rainald Goetz. As Oehlen recounted in an interview with *frieze* (issue 78), Goetz told him 'that believing yourself to have achieved clarity was a stupid state to be in'. Oehlen took the remark to heart, and the pictographic mayhem of pizza service leaflets or corner shop windows became the basis of his lavish and hilarious computer collage posters.

From then on the two strands, painterly abstraction and collage, ran parallel. But the next logical step – to let the two 'smear' into each other – didn't occur until more recently. The series of large-format works on show throughout Galerie Max Hetzler's Kunsthalle-size temporary space proved this operation to be tricky but worth it. Oehlen pasted single sheets from Spanish or Basque billboard posters (the works were created in the Basque region), two or three at a time, onto the white-primed canvas, leaving empty space around them. None of the large letters, vivid colours or female models advertising flat screen monitors, bank loans or beach holidays dominate the picture as icons. Instead, they become modules in a pictorial scrabble that results in absurd and often knowingly silly hiccups of meaning. A euro sign is added to the end of the word 'hur', thus making the German term for 'whore', and placed adjacent to a Christmas ad for perfume (Navidad, Christmas, 2008). The word 'merde' condemns an advertisement for British Council language courses (English Courses, 2008). The posters are painted over with strokes of cheerful lavender, blue and orange, leaving a picture plane marked not by faux-virility, but by an effortlessly elegant dance of soft blurs and saturated strokes.

However, if a visitor had taken in the panoramic view from the entrance area in haste – the works were hung on freestanding walls – and thought this had provided an accurate impression of the show, he or she would have been completely wrong. The real coup was another series of works that hung on the back of all these walls: a series of untitled dense abstractions in muddy colours from 1991 – the year in which Oehlen thought he had found that 'state of clarity'. They are as eloquent as the new works, but radiate struggle rather than effortlessness; the attempt to feed the canvas with contradicting painterly gestures until it bursts. Separate but together, the two series formed a Janus head of an exhibition – and an apt, decades-spanning portrait of Oehlen's taste for doubt and surprise.

Jörg Heiser