

Albert Oehlen's Born To Be Late places paint above pixels

The German artist's retrospective at New York's New Museum is a bolshy, unflinching defence of painting that embraces its challenges rather than decrying them



Albert Oehlen's Self-portrait with One-hole Vase. Photograph: New Museum

Oh, painting, you dear old beast. What role can painting play in a world saturated with billion-pixel screens? What more can painting offer when every turn these past two centuries, from the invention of photography to the rise of the readymade, has been cause to declare the medium's death? Why paint, when the whole model of art history as a succession of painterly innovations no longer seems to hold? Why paint, when you can just take a screenshot?

[Albert Oehlen](#) answers: stick with painting. Have faith in the medium not *despite* the challenges to its legitimacy, but *because* of them. The German artist, who is the subject of an outstanding new retrospective at New York's New Museum, is intensely, terminally in love with painting - and yet he knows better than anyone that painting today is hard, hard work. Since the 1980s, he has been painting sardonic, weird, sometimes bracingly ugly canvases: fecal-brown backgrounds defiled by aimless blue squiggles, or multicolored cloudbursts intermingled with floating amoeboids, passages of graffiti, and unashamed cross-outs. Yet even when Oehlen is hammering the medium of painting, he's actually making love to it. Instead of tuning out the challenges to painting - challenges posed by other media and by painting's own history - he acts on them, works through them, internalizes them, and comes through, shining, on the other side.

It is well past time that New York had a proper museum retrospective of Oehlen's churning, challenging art, poised between doubt and faith in the future of painting, between skepticism and deep authenticity. [Albert Oehlen: Home and Garden](#) is not a large exhibition: just 27 paintings, spread across two floors of the New Museum. (The show is organized by Massimiliano Gioni, the museum's artistic director, along with his colleagues Gary Carrion-Murayari and Natalie Bell.) Maybe you could wish for more artworks, especially in the earlier sections of the show. But the hang is sober and elegant, and the show allows you to see Oehlen's art not as cynical, not as a put-on, but as deeply committed to an art form he distrusts yet adores.

It's fitting that the New Museum is host to this show, since in 1978 its founder Marcia Tucker curated a landmark exhibition called "Bad" Painting - note the scare quotes around "bad". The painters in that show, such as Neil Jenney and the late Joan Brown, pushed back against avant-garde rigidity and turned to mordant, often weirdly scaled imagery that defied notions of good taste. Oehlen's paintings of the early 80s have something of that "bad" painting spirit. His early work - Self-portrait as a Dutchwoman - is a hasty, off-kilter mess; Oehlen appears in a gender-bending white lace cap, his/her body is overlaid with cranking gears, and the background is a rough Halloween orange and black. His subsequent Self-portrait with One-hole Vase has the same distasteful background, on which Oehlen paints himself with a grossly oversized, comically out-of-scale right hand.

In both cases, self-portraiture was a tool to belittle painting - the first one stabs at the possibility of making art like the Dutch masters, the second lampoons the artist as artisan by placing himself not at an easel but at the potter's wheel. Yet also, and at the same time, self-portraiture was a means of keeping faith with painting. Derision, cynicism, bad manners: these were not nearly enough for Oehlen. He accepted, even embraced, the mess that painting was in, and instead of mocking from the sidelines he happily embarrassed himself. He had figured out how to make paintings that were, [in the words of Run DMC](#), "not bad meaning bad but bad meaning good".



Bad meaning good: Oehlen's Captain Jack.
Photograph: New Museum



Sometimes, Oehlen shows, being inauthentic is the most genuine thing you can be. In the late 1980s Oehlen turned to abstraction: muddles of brown and goldenrod, on which he superimposed meaningless hieroglyphs or cursory loop-de-loops. (His teacher, Sigmar Polke, had already punctured the spiritual pretensions of abstraction by claiming that "higher powers commanded" he paint a corner of a white canvas black.) Later he used early personal computer technology to produce black-and-white collisions of prefab patterns that advertise their digital source - diagonals, for example, are rendered as ratchet horizontal and vertical steps. Since the late 1990s he has turned to recklessly multicolor all-over compositions: cloudy explosions of blue and pink, gray and gold, on which meandering lines and disruptive rounded shapes do battle.

Oehlen's goal throughout, as Gioni argues in a persuasive catalogue essay, was to be "*bête comme un peintre*", in Marcel Duchamp's phrase: as stupid as a painter. Oehlen's recourse to Duchamp, the falsely accused killer of painting,

is informative. What makes Oehlen's art so compelling is that he accepted, in a way other painters of his generation did not, that the medium of painting really *did* face challenges to its legitimacy in the last two centuries: from the camera, from the readymade, from the rise of mechanical reproduction, from the exclusionary rhetoric of mid-century critics, and on and on. In no case did that did mean painting was "dead". It did, however, mean that painters had to think through and respond to those challenges or else risk irrelevance. Even if Oehlen's art of the 1980s bears a superficial resemblance to brasher painting of the 1980s - the market-friendly bombast of America's Neo-Expressionists or Germany's Neue Wilde - Oehlen's aims were entirely different. He was not running away from the history of painting. He was running right into it.

And yet the greatest achievement of Oehlen's art is that it's never a commentary or a critique of painting's importance. It is painting itself, autonomous, knowledgeable of its history and yet beholden to nothing. On my visits to Home and Garden I kept going back to the arresting Born To Be Late, a monster painting from 2001 so packed with visual material I could barely take it in. Handmade squiggles and inkjet-printed patterns jostle against spills of gray, or flares of olive and mauve. Here a little black-and-white rainbow pops up; there a burst of digital confetti is unleashed, in the form of cheap-looking oversized pixels. I couldn't make head or tail of it, and yet I couldn't look away. There's just too much to take in, and there doesn't seem to be any hierarchy - just like in our supersaturated digital present, whose explosion of information has been accompanied by a collapse of order. Oehlen, like Manet before him, is a painter of modern life, and all the more relevant for projecting our condition not on screen but on canvas.

Born To Be Late: it's a good title. Oehlen is a belated lover, devoted to painting even after its many near-deaths. But none of us can help who we love.