

CLEVELAND

## Albert Oehlen

CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART

"Albert Oehlen: Woods near Oehle" was the latest selective survey by the shape-shifting German artist, and the largest exhibition of his work ever presented in the United States. Comprising thirty-six works, it spanned more than three decades and focused on the artist's long-standing interrogation of painting via a practice that oscillates between representation and abstraction and locates the medium within an expanded field. The show also featured eleven works by other artists—including two sinuous canvases by de Kooning (*Untitled*, 1987, and *Untitled XIII*, 1985)—suggesting lines of dialogue that connect Oehlen's oeuvre to American modernism as well as to the artist's contemporaries.

Nearly four decades ago, when Oehlen began his career, painting seemed exhausted. In the wake of Minimalism and Conceptual art, the art world harbored implicit biases against expression, as well as against the mixing of abstract form with iconography and symbolism. As this exhibition suggests, Oehlen's solution to the perceived crisis in the medium was not to reject any of its fundamental principles but rather to repeat, combine, and overload them to the point where their deployment registered as ironic. Contemporary painting, for him, emerged from a contradiction: It was both the most serious of mediums and the tritest.

The earliest works by Oehlen on display here were massive, largely abstract canvases created between 1986 and 1989. In these murky, dark-toned paintings, we followed the artist as he progressively breaks down figuration through a compressed layering of strokes, smears, drips, fragmentary representations, and abstract fields of color. Trees, streets, and the human body all become elements within a dissolving visual matrix: a deindividualizing field that undermines distinctions between geometric and organic, form and image, figure and ground. The emptiness of the vegetal and arboreal forms on display—as well as the wipes and blurs that reveal overpainting and erasures—marks the artist as a critic of German neo-expressionism, with its ambitions of coming to terms with the country's Nazi past. In contrast to figures like Georg Baselitz or Anselm Kiefer, Oehlen presents himself as a painter who acts without hope of expressing any higher or historical meaning.

More representational than these early canvases are medium- and large-scale oil paintings from 1997 and 1998 and a series of charcoal and watercolor drawings from 2002, all of which appropriate aspects of a mysterious, quasi-surrealist portrait, *Tramonto Spaventoso* (Terrible Sunset), ca. 1940–49, by the modernist figurative painter John D. Graham, a mentor to the Abstract Expressionists. In the "John

Graham Remix" series, 1997–, Oehlen morphs the various elements of the older artist's cartoony canvas—a mustachioed male head, schematic renderings of a mermaid and floating celestial bodies, and text—combining them into dense, layered images that shuttle between different styles of representation, language, and abstract form. Although recognizable biomorphic and architectural elements are present, they do not cohere in terms of line, structure, or even space. Instead, we were presented with a tangle of scavenged components that become avenues for different types of historically aware gestures, marks, and accidents.

The third and largest series of paintings was the most recent: primarily abstract, oil-on-Dibond evocations of trees from 2014–15 that shift between line, form, and figuration. In the largest of these works, black arboreal silhouettes are juxtaposed with monochromatic color gradients that give the impression of computer-generated color fields. In others, branchy profiles collide with capsule-shaped areas of color, as well as smeared, dripping, and sprayed passages of paint. Pushed to the point of illegibility, the skeletal trees morph into furcating linear presences that variously resemble roads, rhizomes, and networks. By interconnecting fragmentary representations within an abstract system of differences, Oehlen's tree paintings reminded us of the foundational role that the word *tree* played in the history of modern semiotics, where it was used to illustrate the concept of the sign as a combination of signifier and signified in Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (1916). The exposure of the general structures of meaning, rather than a communication of a series of specific messages, is what continues to motivate Oehlen's analysis of the contemporary conditions of painting.

—Matthew Biro



Albert Oehlen,  
*Bäume (Trees)*, 2004,  
oil and paper on wood,  
two panels, each  
8' 6½" × 12' 7½".