

Albert Oehlen

NEW MUSEUM

The works in “Home and Garden,” the first major retrospective of Albert Oehlen’s work in New York, explore separate but parallel universes—representation and abstraction, manual dexterity and pixelated matrix—and commonly bring both together at once. Oehlen is a skilled painter, despite the sensation of glum helplessness his work often evokes, an emotional tenor fortuitously coincidental with (and generative of) our moment in art history when the “de-skilling” of painting passes for fiat: Expressionism as “inexpressionist painting . . . a pretext for an analysis of the act of painting than as painting itself—the picturing of a picture. . . .” as Massimiliano Gioni (who headed the show’s brilliant curatorial team) neatly puts it. Or, to say it another way, this show celebrated “a grammar of expressionism” ultimately deflating into the blur of modish inexpression.

Painting as a mirror of nature—gone. Its replacement? Virtuosity capsized by Surrealist automatism, or Abstract Expressionism drained of felt necessity, or abject, farcical Cubism, all leading to the wiping away of image (the sign of frustrated anger), even as the blur embodies the most up-to-date lassitude—boredom as an exercise in spectacle. Following World War I, Expressionism epitomized progressive German art. Then came the brownshirts and, amid the smoldering ash of Hitler’s



Albert Oehlen,
*Selbstportrait mit
Einlochtopf*
(Self-Portrait with
One-Hole Vase),
1984, oil on canvas,
67 × 102 1/2”.

Third Reich, an official abstraction (Fritz Winter, Ernst Wilhelm Nay) arose endorsed by western-zone taste, the reversing mirror of the eastern zone’s socialist realism. Finally, during the 1960s, Joseph Beuys (the alpha) reunified the “economic miracle” of Germany with its tattered past. Beuys’s student Sigmar Polke (the omega) lent giant credence to the emerging work of a yet younger generation—that of Martin Kippenberger, particularly, whose work shares inescapable points of similarity to that of Oehlen.

“Home and Garden” assembled some twenty-seven large works from the 1980s up through more or less the present day. Oehlen’s default mode has been a black-and-white figuration that layers seemingly errant motions with superposed digital bits and pieces. Such works, while pleasing, also register Oehlen’s dissatisfaction with direct representation. Studying *Selbstportrait mit Einlochtopf* (Self-Portrait with One-Hole Vase), 1984, for example, we note that the figure’s proportions are “off”—well, who cares about that? And of course, the color is way too murky—unsurprising, given that the artist’s lack of intuitive chromatic agility. (In fact, this is a hallmark of his “bad painting,” the rubric under which this work came to be known, indeed celebrated.)

But beyond these “demerits,” *Self-Portrait with One-Hole Vase* is vexing because it is left incomplete, implying the tedium inherent in actually finishing the damn thing. Perhaps the act of completion is ruled out by the sheer antagonisms built into Oehlen’s enterprise—his efforts to reconcile the ostensibly irreconcilable. Over time, as we approach the present moment, Oehlen defaults to the swank smear and hapless blur.

But there is an additional twist: As the tropes that spawned Oehlen’s decades-long disaffections are ultimately upended, they become, in their inverse correlation, the very heart of his oddball practice. What is surpassingly strange is that the loss of painting as an aesthetic act has become the status quo of contemporary painting itself, a perfect art for our era of disinformation. What hitherto would have been discounted, not to say shunned, becomes the new official model, the new New, a paradox I understand well, having greatly endorsed it in a lifetime of criticism. But here, in examining some three decades of Oehlen’s work, we see that his destruction of representation in particular continues to carry force: We are still surprised and horrified at the same instant. As Gioni astutely grasps: “[E]verything is real just as long as everything is in a picture.”

—Robert Pincus-Witten