Kaleidoscope
Corbett, John: ZIG ZAG WANDERER – ESSAY BY JOHN CORBETT
June 2015

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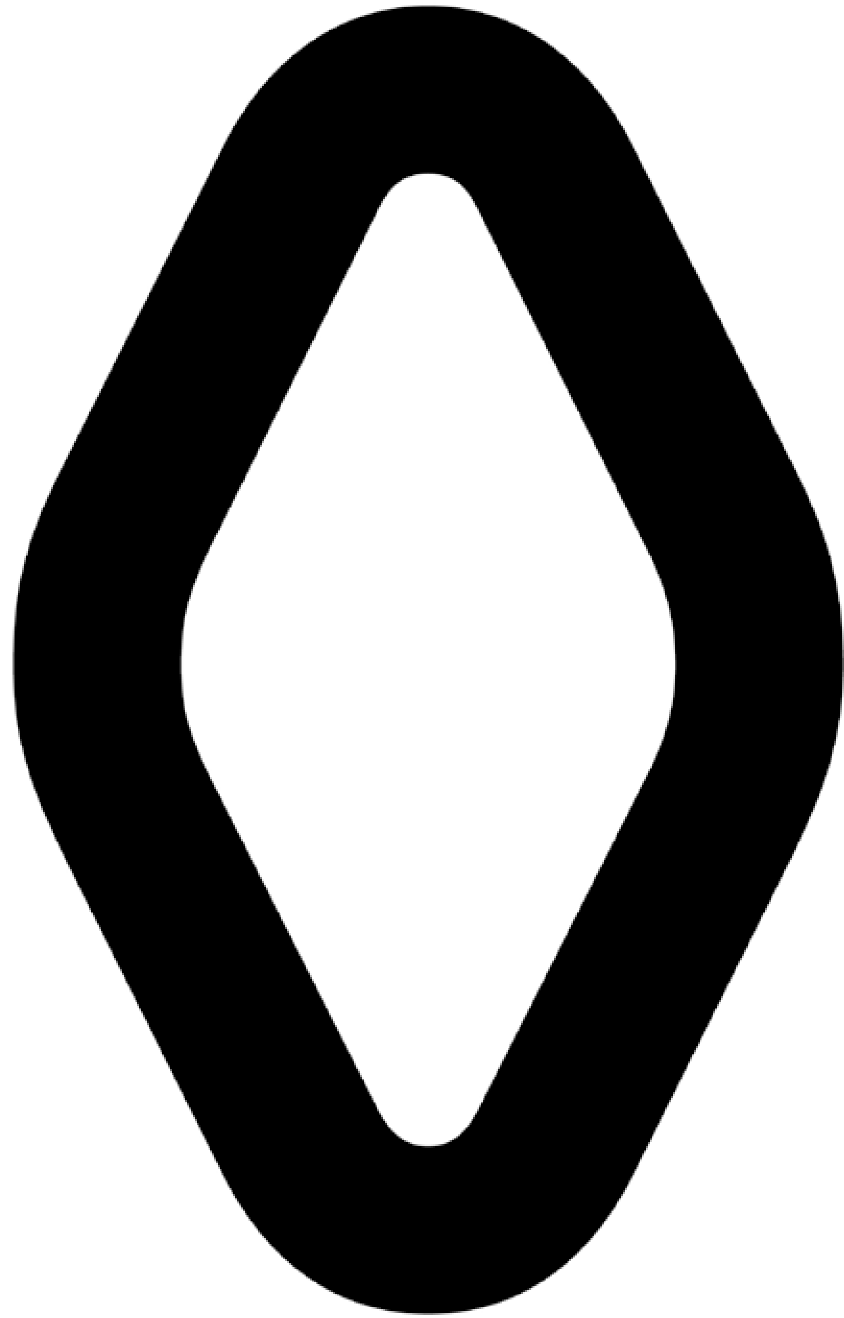
Albert



Oehlen

ACROSS 35 YEARS *of* PRACTICE, THE GREAT GERMAN PAINTER ALBERT OEHLEN *has* EXPLORED *an* IMPOSSIBLY BROAD RANGE *of* APPROACHES. UNIFIED *by* A BRILLIANT UNDERSTANDING *of* THE SEMIOTICS *of* IMAGES, *and* AGITATED *by* A HUMOROUS TAKE *on* THE FALSE DICHOTOMY *of* GOOD *and* BAD TASTE, HIS PRACTICE UNFOLDS THROUGH A SET *of* CONSTRAINTS *and* A BRUTALLY HARSH INTERIOR DIALOGUE—SETTING UP *a* LITTLE CHESS GAME BETWEEN *the* PAINTER *and* THE CANVAS.

EDITED BY FREDI FISCHLI AND NIELS OLSEN

PORTRAIT BY ANDREAS LASZLO KONRATH

Are you going to change yet again, shift your position according to the questions that are put to you, and say that the objections are not really directed at the place from which you are speaking?… Are you already preparing the way out that will enable you in your next book to spring up somewhere else and declare as you're now doing: no, no, I'm not where you are lying in wait for me, but over here, laughing at you?
What, do you imagine that I would take so much trouble and so much pleasure in writing, do you think that I would keep so persistently to my task, if I were not preparing—with a rather shaky hand—a labyrinth into which I can venture… Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order. At least spare us their morality when we write.

Michel Foucault

There are trees in Albert Oehlen's studio. They are towering, twelve feet tall, a small forest comprised of previously unidentified species, each specimen an example of some new hybrid grafted together out of parts. Six or seven giant tree paintings lean against the wall, one of them singled out for attention on a specially designed hydraulic easel that raises the tree even higher or lowers it into the floor. Outside sits a quaint Swiss town with beautiful, lumbering mountains behind it, their bluffs covered in patches of firs nearly up to the snow-capped peaks.

Each of the trees in Oehlen's paintings consists of a trunk and limbs. They float toward the center of the picture; there's no definite horizon and they're not "planted" in any stable ground. In the background, a rectangle of color hugs the edge of the picture, a soft plum-purple-pink gradient with plenty of white space around it. The tree itself is black, with a thick trunk, branches on top and roots on bottom that get thinner as they grow further from the body. Some limbs are brushed by hand, some are spray-painted, a few rendered in gray fading to white.

While these shapes may sound like trees on paper, and though they are immediately identifiable as such, they don't really resemble the trees one finds in nature. Instead, the huge canvases, which the artist exhibited at Gagosian Gallery's Los Angeles space in 2014, extrapolate the *idea* of a tree, the concept of tree-ness applied to a painting. Oehlen's use of the tree as a vehicle for generating images first appeared twenty-five years ago, when he made a group of tree drawings and paintings that had a different look but utilized the same guiding principle. The notion is simple: a very slim set of constraints help concentrate the artist's decision making process, setting up a little chess game between the painter and the canvas. This match contains an almost infinite set of potential moves: a branch can go this way or that, can be straight, angled or curved, can end or continue, can loop back to connect with other branches or poke out into space. In these earlier canvases, the trees appear against a looser backdrop, the thinned out layers of drips and scumbled paint adding an atmosphere around the mutant plant, as if it was buffeted by a storm.

Upon seeing the tree paintings and understanding how they work, you begin to recognize similar mechanisms in other Oehlen pieces. There's something about the logic of branching, the arborescent way that lines can behave, that is echoed in his many disparate bodies of work. It's there embryonically in the figurative paintings he made before the trees—their converging lines articulating space or outlining a figure (dinosaur, lawnmower, portrait of Hitler) in the most economical way. It can also be found at the heart of some of the abstract paintings he's made since, with their encyclopedic array of marks and the myriad ways they interact. Throughout, Oehlen has remained a student of the line, a dedicated observer of its form and function. He chronicles the secret life of lines, testing how they relate to other elemental ideas like area and edge, examining their proclivities and scheming how they might be perverted.

How, then, do we account for those Oehlen paintings in which there are no added lines? Take his most recent canvases, created exclusively from excised areas of appropriated billboard advertisements. In these works, he takes an existing image—an artwork by Dalí or Artschwager, an early painting of his own, an example from a book on the cows of Appenzell—as a guide in making contour cutouts of the obnoxiously bright, visually hyperactive billboard materials, which he then reassembles into dizzyingly concentrated abstract assemblages. Oehlen constructs hilarious combinations from inane ad imagery, playing illusory space—a room or the sky—against the flatness of grocery store announcements, mismatching an image of a woman in one of the posters with a cutout of a woman from one of the source paintings, or putting a photograph of a horse into the contour cutout of a cow. In doing so, the source image virtually disappears, and the billboard signs lose the clarity of their signifying power.

Compared to the trees, there are far fewer lines here. Nor is there paint superimposed on these images, the way there was when Oehlen first started using advertising posters in 2007. As such, you could be forgiven for thinking the work is basically about area. But if you look closely at these paintless paintings, there are in fact lines. There are those that already existed in the adverts, including the branching, looping logics of letters and numbers and their font specificity. And there are the contours drawn by Oehlen's knife, which separate one area from another, the seams functioning as marks. Oehlen plays with all of these constituent parts, continuing a linear element from one poster to another, matching a curve in an ad to a curve in a source.

So while the line remains important to him, Oehlen is not the Painter of Lines. His work is much too rich for that, too full of other kinds of information: conflicting and contradictory impulses, historical connotation and formal ingenuity, a brilliant understanding of the semiotics of images, sensitivity to color, awareness of process. The sheer range of approaches he's explored across 35 years of painting is impossible to encapsulate—though this hasn't stopped others from trying. New bodies of work have emerged occasionally as ripostes to critics who have sought to define him, more often as solutions to problems he set out for himself, sometimes confounding fans that thought they understood him. Perhaps the most surprising left turn came in the early '90s, as Oehlen shifted from the dirty earth-tones and painterly application of the early abstractions to the Computer Paintings, which were black and white, starkly graphic, and contained screen printed passages. "I am not willing to be a pawn of the art market, theorists, or curators," he's said. The refusal to be pigeonholed is the first order of business in such a gambit.

As a result, Oehlen is often labeled an eclectic, but this is a serious misunderstanding of his motivations. Oehlen doesn't move frivolously between ideas: he examines them in detail and thinks through the consequences with a critical eye. He is restless, no doubt, and can adopt a contrarian's hypercritical mindset toward himself and others, but there's always a through-line that links all the different modalities in which he works, from the aggressively expressionistic to the most photorealistically rendered. It is the artist's *sensibility*, one that includes humor and agitation as well as an appreciation of the false dichotomy between brazen ugliness and idealized beauty, between bad and good taste. The whole of his life's work is imbued with something unique to him, an identity that's more than an aesthetic, more than a style, more than a signature gesture. Oehlen relies on a way of thinking, an introspective mechanism that starts with self-examination, a brutally harsh interior dialogue, but ends up in a highly freewheeling and playful place.

This is evident in a series of important collages from 1983 collectively titled "Ewige Feile." Oehlen is essentially a painter, but he's also been one of the most advanced and influential collage-makers of the last three decades, and these breathtakingly outrageous works set the standards for a new generation of artists interested in the medium. Culling images from nudist magazines, wartime photographs of tanks and soldiers, Ku Klux Klan rallies and the occasional floating pipe, guitar or architectural photograph, he constructed an unsettling world in which blithe utopian naiveté and savage macho cynicism openly cavorted in a neutralizing buzz. Amusing as it may be, Oehlen's work is never capricious. Take the incredible group of carpets that he had fabricated in 1986, the designs for which featured similarly disjunctive photographs, stray ballpoint pen marks and short, politically infused phrases unfolding on scrolls like fortunes from cookies. As in so much of his output, the results are critical and inventive in equal measure.

Sometimes taking something very concretely offers a new and unexpected result. In some of his figurative works from the early '80s, a period when he was closely associated with a circle of fellow Germans that included his brother Markus, Werner Büttner and Martin Kippenberger, Oehlen painted banal interior spaces in rough, brusquely aggregated brushstrokes. Seeking literally to add another dimension to the canvases, he affixed mirrors to their surfaces, bringing the room of the spectator into play with its oil-rendered counterpart. Oehlen's so-called grey paintings of the late '90s, meanwhile, started with the observation that Gerhard Richter always swiped his canvases one direction; as a sort of snarky experiment, he made a piece that instead wiped in all different directions. The results were captivating and unexpected and led to an entirely new direction. Even the Computer Paintings came about as a result of *wanting* an obstacle, eager for the unforeseen outcomes that can come from dealing with an impediment—in this case, the lunkheaded-ness of drawing with a mouse. "I like it that procedure can lead to a strange result," he said. "I had a mess of lines, and I thought, 'Okay, now I have to work on it until it looks good.'"

In recent museum exhibitions, Oehlen's work has been shown as a clashing of subgroups: the Grey Paintings facing off with his so-called "FM" series (for *fingermalerie*), brown-toned abstractions from 1991 with recent collages. In viewing, however, one often finds continuity instead of divergence, and as a result, we begin to do away with the idea of linear development, the worn out cliché that an artist's work can be read as a neat, logical journey from a primitive state to an advanced one. Oehlen has remarked that in transitioning from figuration to abstraction, he followed the same path as modern art, but he's scuttled such a clear narrative all along—doubling back to reconsider the tree, reintroducing representational images into abstract canvases, even putting a current painting on the cover of a catalog for a show of his earliest works ("Krisiun"at Max Hetzler, Berlin, 2002). The history of each artist, he seems to say, is a construction, a convenient myth.

In Oehlen's case, it's not a matter of falsifying or doctoring the actual historical record, but more subtly undermining its certainties, complicating its sense of inevitable forward momentum. The musician Sun Ra did this on some of his records, situating wild free improvisation from the late '60s alongside straightforward big band pieces from the '50s, going back in the '80s to re-examine Duke Ellington's and Fletcher Henderson's songbooks in detail. In the process, Ra thoroughly confused discographers while enlightening his audience to the artificiality of conventional stylistic chronologies. Oehlen is just such a historical zig-zag wanderer, his own story and the story of contemporary art made to dovetail and digress at various intervals, the path decidedly non-programmatic."I believe in day-to-day work," he says. "I know that something good comes from that—and not just in my case. It goes without saying that you must work with your head, too. The rest is just the interplay of experience, freshness, surprise and aversion." Each dawn invites a new set of problems and a refreshed paradigm. Like Foucault, Oehlen ventures into the labyrinth, putting his assumptions on the block, daring to do something different from what he's done before, all while donning the guise of a trickster and calling from an unforeseen tree limb: *Hey, you, viewer—turn around, I'm over here!*

John Corbett is a writer, musician, radio host, teacher, record producer, concert promoter and gallery owner based in Chicago. He is best known among musicians and music fans as a champion of free jazz and free improvisation. In recent years he has become known in the visual art world through his gallery, Corbett vs. Dempsey in Chicago.

DOWN
UNTITLED, 2009 - 2011

RIGHT
RIVULET, 2004

LEFT
UNTITLED, 1992

DOWN
I 2, 2009

DOWN
FM 53, 2008 - 2011

<<To improve something you have to repaint, overpaint, take the painting further>>

DOWN
I 28, 2011

RIGHT
UNTITLED, 1988

LEFT
UNTITLED (BAUM 6), 2014

DOWN
SELBST BEIM TÖPFERN, 2012

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June 2015

<<It fascinates me when I hit on something that other people over-looked>>

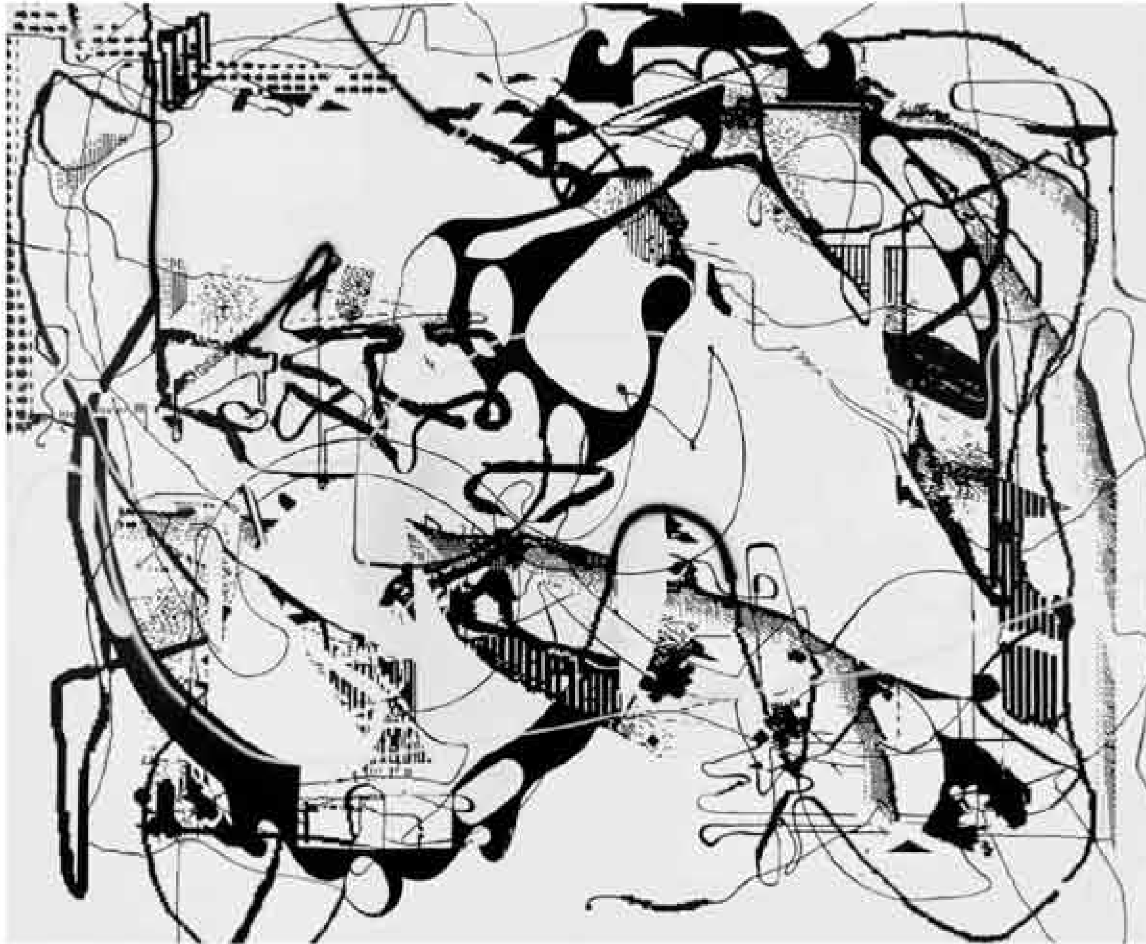
DOWN
CAPTAIN JACK, 1997

LEFT
BORN TO BE LATE, 2001

DOWN
BAD, 2003

DOWN
UNTITLED, 2005

RIGHT
SELBSTPORTRAIT ALS
HOLLÄNDERIN, 1983



Your upcoming show at New York's New Museum is centered on your "Computer Paintings."

Yes, that series is based on computer-generated images that have then been painted on. I made them in two short bursts, sometime in the middle of the 1990s through 2000. It's a great thing to see these paintings together again—it makes me happy.

And along with the computer paintings, there's a group of works from the late 1990s. Massimiliano Gioni calls them "switch paintings." Where did that concept come from?

It's a temporary title suggested by the material. In theseis works, I layered various images over each other on the computer, printed them out in large format, and then painted over them. They can be seen either as computer-generated art or as physical constructions. I appropriate something "found" and imagine I have painted it myself. Naturally, I'm not satisfied, so then I take further steps.

Are these further steps closer to erasure or to improvement?

Both. The two go together. To improve something—in order to make it fresh—you have to repaint it. That's one part of the process. You also have to overpaint—that is, to take the painting further, playing surgeon to an extent by connecting, swabbing, sewing together, plastering over.

How do you bring the computer into the process?

It allows me to bring up many different images. As I consider them, I define a vocabulary of qualities that I want to see brought together: delicacy and coarseness, color and vagueness and, underlying them all, a base note of hysteria.

The work does have a very hysterical quality to it, probably because it does not represent any realistic composition. They are totally "all-over" paintings.

Yes, they are extreme "all-over" paintings. From time to time, some specific element is accentuated, but then there will be something absurd, right in the middle of the picture. It's the third eye—the Eye of God, so to speak. But I also don't think that "all-over" is contrary to composition.

Yes, though the paintings follow the "all-over" principle and are hysterical, they're also very specific. Your imagery draws strongly on the aesthetic of computer-assisted design, which makes it emblematic of those techniques. This is made all the more true because you use the computer's traditional tools in your compositions: spirals, patterns, shading, grids, pixels, etc. Then you bring your painterly art to it. To me, the group makes a compelling center of the exhibition because it grows out of one particular method.

The beautiful thing is that here, people can see this whole group of paintings together for the first time and see that they fall somewhere in the middle of my oeuvre. It marks a central point and shows where the streams cross.

I wonder, as you develop a new group of work—your current collaged "interior" paintings, for example—what role the contemporary context plays in it. It seems to me that your works engage the zeitgeist, but they also have a markedly nostalgic mood.

I assess my ideas to see where they fit in time. I did that pretty consciously with the computer paintings, the black-and-white ones—I knew just where I was, and it turned out to be right. Maybe I just was lucky that my idea was correct, that I simply knew how it would look in the end. With these collaged "interior" paintings, I have no idea where they rightly belong, but the nostalgic element is of course part of it, because there are references to *décollage*, Pop art, and the anti-consumerist culture of the 1970s. While it's all deliberate, it does fascinate me when I hit on something that other people have overlooked—that's the coolest thing of all!

The same holds true for the computer paintings. At the moment you were making them, it was probably clear that the prevailing computer technologies were precarious and would soon become obsolete. Now, more than a decade later, they've taken on an almost archaeological aura.

Obviously, when a new approach or technique appears, you can bet that some clown from Krefeld doesn't stand the best chance of gaining a worldwide monopoly on it. But there are mistakes a person can avoid making and mistakes you can get away with, to a degree.

Computer art has always been associated with precise effects that you can't normally achieve by hand. When computer art began to appear on electronica album covers, for instance, you would see spirals that were far too labor-intensive and complex to be drawn by hand. The computer can generate improbable images pretty effectively, and that's become the expectation we place on computer art. Expectations are still being defined in the context of extremes: new technology offers new possibilities. But at the same time, just because these days we can print cheaply and large-scale doesn't mean we should print like fiends; just because the computer's color palette is varied doesn't mean we should assume it might give us more colors than can be produced with the oils we buy.

It's remarkable the way you blend the precarious technology of computers with motifs from preexisting visual material, creating a new kind of pictorial composition. You don't treat the images you've isolated as individual elements—you add to them by bringing them into contact with new images, so they are freed of their original content and exert a different impact on the picture. Do the original images work primarily as triggers to your compositions?

Yes, something like that. Although, actually, in my evolution as a whole, I really wanted to recapitulate the evolution of modern art—from representational to abstract. I say that only half-earnestly, but it's essentially true and was consciously done.

Was it actually programmatic?

Yes. Perhaps I didn't find the same solutions for my compositions that Picasso would have; I have no idea what he would have to say about that. But I wouldn't have stuck to the program if I hadn't had so much fun with it. I did it simply because I felt enthusiasm for this evolution, and it basically worked out. The modern age has given rise to a certain attitude toward the image. In my opinion, it's not so much a shift to the abstract; rather, it's closer to the idea that you can extract the meaning of images from the canvas. This was probably already implicit in my representational work.

The motives you chose were always very exaggerated—you worked mostly with iconographically-charged motifs.

That's right! That was the point—that you had to counteract them. I think that when you're doing an experiment, you should make it extreme. If I want to make a point about the meaninglessness of an image, I have to find a strong image to challenge it. Practically speaking, they're chosen based on what they represent for me. Hand: hard to draw. Here is where real talent shows itself. Cocktail glass: a contemporary painter, up for discourse. Landscape: you've got to bother with too many shades of brown. And so on. The painter recognizes such things instantly, instinctively.

Did you experiment with classical genres of painting, like portraiture and interiors, in your early work?

Yes, of course, everything there was. I was influenced by my older colleagues, who were constantly harping on that: people like [Georg] Baselitz, [Markus] Lüpertz, [Anselm] Kiefer and [Jörg] Immendorff. Though Immendorff actually took the extreme opposite position—that everything was secondary to meaning.

For you, does it come closer to a tug of war between meaning and form?

You could say that. I've had a lot of fun tacking cheesy phrases onto appalling images. That has let me define my painting as a kind of unique sentence construction system. It gave me a starting point to build from. This strategy isn't followed by any radical Conceptual art practice that would deny or attack connections between motifs and meaning. Instead, it requires me to come up with practical rules. Would you call that passive-aggressive? In any case, it was my way of working around unlovely images or content.

Are there separate categories of motifs in your work? It seems that there are some elements that come from Pop, which you can tell are deliberately constructed and are meant to be understood as a code; and then there are actual "Ur-Motifs," like the dog, the cow, or the tree, which we can see as a guiding motif in your newest group of work.

I see the tree as a program for my work, not just as a motif. This is the problem: how do you represent something that has no consistent form? A tree really has no form. If you were to take all trees together, you would only be able to elucidate the principle of the thing. And if you

were to single out a few trees and look at them, you would notice that they do all kinds of crazy shit with their branches. From that, I concluded that my task as an artist was to make all kinds of crazy shit with my lines—to do essentially the same thing. You become a tree yourself and let your branches grow.

The newer works are starting to look like pictograms again, but in the 1990s, were your trees more expressive?

My approach to painting trees in the 1990s was similar, but I used different, murkier colors and a background. Now I've simplified the principle so I can focus on the branches. I've fit them into the program.

How should we interpret the graduated red background? It recalls a digital fade-out effect.

It has to do with the image, not with the tree in itself: the background functions to keep three-dimensional effects to a minimum. But it is not important to me to offer interpretations in this way. Someone once told me that it could also be seen as a psychogram, which is a cool thought—a kind of Rorschach test.

Drawing a tree is a test that children have to do at the psychiatrist's… If you draw no roots, you have a bad character!

Burdened with red flags like these, the paintings become hysterical. They shout: "Interpret me!"

Translated by Liesl Schillinger

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Albert Oehlen (German, b. 1954) is an artist who lives and works in Switzerland. Upcoming solo exhibitions include "An Old Painting in Spirit" at Kunsthalle Zurich (May 30 – August 16) and "Home and Garden" at the New Museum in New York (June 10 – September 13). In addition, his work is currently featured, alongside Michel Majerus and Laura Owens, in the exhibition "Best Students Best Teachers Best School," organized by Fredi Fischli and Niels Olsen at Michel Majerus Estate.

Fredi Fischli and Niels Olsen are curators based in Zurich and contributing editors of *Kaleidoscope*. They are directors of gta exhibitions, ETH Zurich, and initiated the exhibition space and publishing series STUDIOLO.

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