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 cornershop windows became the basis of his lavish and hilarious computer collage posters.

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