

From June 8 to October 20, the exhibition Albert Oehlen. Malerei will present the first comprehensive overview in Austria of Oehlen's work from the early 1980s to the present, including key works from all phases of the artist's career. With more than 80 paintings, collages, computer prints, drawings, and an installation from 2005, this is the hitherto largest presentation of Oehlen's highly diverse oeuvre. "This is the first opportunity to see such a large range of Oehlen's work in one place," says director Karola Kraus. The exhibition design compares and contrasts different groups of works, which are involved in a permanent "dispute of ideas" (Albert Oehlen). These various groups will transfer energy to and from, commenting on and questioning each other. The exhibition will also show for the first specially painted cycle, in which Oehlen programmatically refers collage techniques and actionist finger painting to each other.

Albert Oehlen (born 1954 in Krefeld) is not only one of the most influential, but also one of the most controversial of contemporary painters. His project of bringing painting up to date consists not least in positioning this good old medium against its critics and often naive supporters alike. He aims to bring painting into conflict on several fronts at the same time—with its own history, with its clichés and its missed opportunities, and with the ubiquitous power of the pictorial languages of advertising and pop. Oehlen wishes to restore freshness and complexity to a medium that has been declared defunct, not by dodging all the attacks and polemic to which tradition is subjected, but by making the picture itself the locus of lively debate on these issues.

"It is as if Oehlen were continually out-tricking painting. The intrinsic and extrinsic enemies of painting—avant-garde and new technologies—are brought into the picture, and clichés like beauty or virtuosity are smuggled in cunningly," says curator Achim Hochdörfer about Oehlen's painterly strategy.

Oehlen's initial turn to painting in the 1980s was characterized by restrictions and impertinence. He concentrated on certain colors (mostly drab browns), hackneyed symbols (such as the mirror), and themes that were ideologically negative (like the self-portrait). These were tactical steps with which Oehlen, who now lives in Switzerland, drew painting into embarrassing situations. This kind of polemic was not least directed at all the countless stop signs and dead ends that modernist painting had been increasingly confronted with since the 1960s. Oehlen blurs the neat dividing lines between traditional and progressive art, between good and bad, and between reactionary and critical. In his monumental Mirror Paintings of the mid- 1980s, he overlaps different concepts of space, for example: color surfaces, perspectivist space, and mirrored real space combine to create dark and beautiful scenarios.

Post-non-representational Painting

In the late 1980s, Oehlen coined the term “Post-non-representational Painting” as a way of describing his basic conceptual approach. Programmatically speaking, his aim was to deconstruct the oppositions between figurative and non-figurative, figure and background, and color and line. The polemical jabs that had been spread across various groups of work in Oehlen’s early oeuvre now seemed to be brought into the picture itself. In mostly very large tableaux Oehlen developed a sheer inexhaustible arsenal of painterly signs, as figurative, narrative, abstract, and collage elements all speak simultaneously with and against each other. Here Oehlen’s painting turns against the dictates of purity in reductionist modernism, which saw itself in a permanent process of shedding extraneous, non-artistic elements. But Oehlen did not abandon painting—his excursions into pop culture, advertising, trash and computer aesthetics, and into political iconography, are always strictly bound up within the larger context of the composed and painted picture. To this day, Oehlen remains true to this principle. In a series from 2010 to 2012, which has not yet been presented to the public, he links expressive painting with collage elements and confronts art-historical points of reference (to DADA, for example) with the garish trash of the culture industry.

This Vienna exhibition uses a deliberately confrontational design and hanging of Oehlen’s groups of works so as to highlight his critical approach to the medium of painting, thereby allowing the works to critically question each other.

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