

GUGGENHEIM BILBAO

Press release



The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao presents on October 21, 2016

Albert Oehlen: Behind the Image

Albert Oehlen: Behind the Image

- Dates: October 21, 2016–February 5, 2017
- Curator: Petra Joos

- **Artistic freedom, identified by the artist as his main subject matter, is evident in the way he fearlessly approaches each canvas, using techniques with old vocabularies to create the uncanny, paradoxical sensation of familiar novelty**
- **In his work Oehlen fuels the ongoing debate begun in the second half of the 20th century about the death of painting, and he does so precisely by using painting as an expressive medium**
- **The show explores the extent to which we are capable of seeing. Although the series are formally different at first glance, they have a common core that unites and connects them, generating a network of interrelationships**

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao presents *Albert Oehlen: Behind the Image*, a powerful artistic statement by one of the most influential painters of recent decades and one of the most controversial artists of postwar Germany.

The contemporary pictorial style of Albert Oehlen (b. 1954, Krefeld, Germany) is an amalgam of methods borrowed from the advertising industry, Expressionist brushwork, Surrealist gesture, and computer-generated images. With his work Oehlen fuels the recurring debate begun in the second half of the 20th century about the death of painting, and he does so precisely by using painting as an expressive medium.

In recent years, his paintings have attained what the artist defines as his main subject matter: artistic freedom. This liberty is evident in the way he fearlessly approaches each canvas, using techniques with old vocabularies to create the uncanny, paradoxical sensation of “familiar novelty”. In this respect, Albert Oehlen is not concerned with the meaning of his works, how they might be interpreted by spectators, or whether the audience engages with them; he just tries to experiment and create something different every time he faces a blank canvas.

This exhibition, conceived as an artistic statement rather than a conventional retrospective, consists of two self-portraits and three series. The first of the series, abstract in nature, dates from the 1980s; the second comprises computer paintings from the 1990s; and the third, still in progress, revolves around the theme of trees. The show explores “the extent to which we are capable of seeing behind the image”, for although the works are formally different at first glance, these three series have a common core that unites and connects them, generating a network of interrelationships.

Self-Portraits

In the course of his career, Albert Oehlen has created a number of self-portraits in which his own likeness is used to stimulate a reflection on the meaning of art and the artist's identity.

The subject is irrelevant in these self-portraits; the artist merely expresses his thoughts through a specific theme. Oehlen also uses his self-portraits to criticize the notion of the painter as a godlike being, depicting himself as an artist with no control over his work. Normally, his portraits are highly expressive images rendered with a limited palette of browns, ochers, and grays and painted in a direct, gestural style. They constitute a controlled, pensive form of expressionism, focused on essentially pictorial problems and executed with a deliberately anti-virtuoso technique.

In *Self-Portrait as Spring (Selbst als Frühling)*, 2006, Oehlen reinterprets a traditional pictorial theme—the celebration of spring and of life—by depicting an idyllic scene where appearances are deceiving. The man gazing at us represents the painter himself, who has replaced the god Bacchus. His serious expression is not that of a deity celebrating a joyous occasion; nevertheless, Oehlen takes the god's place, presenting himself as a creator—the creator of the painting but also the destroyer of its traditional significance. He incorporates elements from modern life, substituting the wine with a bottle of beer and the crown of vine leaves with a sleeveless white shirt.

In *Self-Portrait while Potting 3 (Selbst beim Töpfern 3)*, 2012, Oehlen revises his self-image as an artist, following a pattern established in the early 1980s. As in all of the painter's self-portraits, this classically rendered picture uses his image not as a psychological element but as tool for proclaiming his thoughts and ideas and, above all, challenging cultural and aesthetic conventions.

Computer Paintings

"I am interested not in chaos but in uncontrolled order." Albert Oehlen

In 1992 Oehlen began painting computer-designed pictures. These low-resolution and frequently pixelated images speak of a future that immediately becomes obsolete in a world of rapidly evolving technology.

The machine's technical yet limited possibilities provide a new set of norms and patterns on which the artist can improvise. This new form of abstraction uses rudimentary digital drawing programs in which the resulting artwork is created by the hand-guided movements of a mouse, ~~eliminating all~~ maintaining personal expressive gestures.

Oehlen composed drawings using computer patterns of dots, arrows, and other symbols and screen-printed them on canvas, enlarged and pixelated to emphasize their coarseness. This method established an arbitrary structure that allowed him to make decisions in response to "bad ideas", as the artist himself stated in the description of his program.

These pictures are no longer pure painting but a blend of various media including computer printing, screen-printing, and brushwork. Oehlen was a pioneer of this method, paving the way for painters of contemporary digital culture.

Abstract Paintings

Oehlen's abstract paintings straddle the boundary between figuration and abstraction and are characterized by an impetuous, exuberant use of color and personal, boldly gestural brushwork. Oehlen began painting abstract pictures in 1988 with Martin Kippenberger in Andalusia. His transition from figuration to abstraction was motivated by the conviction that his life should mirror the evolution of art history, moving from the figurative to the abstract.

These canvases, though painted with oils and brushes in the most traditional manner, evince a certain nonchalance and deliberately downplay his technical prowess. In their perfectly calculated spontaneity, his canvases refuse to conform to a conventional standard of beauty or established rules.

In *Untitled* (1988), a head with large eyes behind yellow spectacles, nose, and tongue dominates the center of the picture, filled with layer upon layer of dripping paint and broad brushstrokes. The colors blend together and contaminate each other. Oehlen's abstract paintings are neither beautiful nor attractive, as their intention is to provoke a reflection on taste.

His comments on his own work are patently sarcastic. "When you work on a painting for a month, you spend 30 days standing in front of the world's ugliest picture. In my work, I'm constantly surrounded by the most dreadful pictures. It's true. What I see are unbearably ugly tatters, which are then transformed at the last moment, as if by magic, into something beautiful."

Trees (Bäume), 2013–16

Oehlen painted his first trees in 1989, shortly before producing his computer paintings, when he decided to become an abstract painter. Like Piet Mondrian before him, who investigated the dissolution of the figurative form through a tree, Oehlen uses this motif as a means of methodically draining the content from his works.

The chaotic, disorderly structure of tree branches provides a starting point from which to begin a work without knowing where the brushstrokes will lead him. Growing out from the center, each branch is a reaction to the preceding element, which means that nothing is predetermined except the colors he plans to use.

The images in this series present schematic black tree-like forms whose trunks and branches become silhouettes similar to the computer drawings, despite being meticulously hand-painted with oils and brush. The magenta rectangles inserted in these monochrome pictures contrast starkly with the white ground and black figures.

The fact that they were painted on polyethylene-coated aluminum board gives them a resemblance to advertising displays. As the painter himself admits, "I like the stiffness. It has this modern technological feel to it, and it's actually much easier to paint on than canvas. I wasn't looking for another surface, I just tried it one day and liked it." This kind of accidental development, typical of Oehlen's approach to art, is both instinctive and cerebral.

The exhibition includes one of his latest creations, *Untitled* (2016), made this summer during his stay in Ispaster, Bizkaia, as part of a series. In this piece Oehlen returns to the idea of collage, incorporating advertising fragments, slogans, and images in the painting. Furthermore, he makes these objects “impure” by using his fingers to smear them with paint. “What I wanted was an abstract painting that seems irritated, because of the pushy elements of advertising [...]. But at all costs I wanted to declare the pictures to be paintings, rather than collages.”

Educational Activities

Meet the Artist: Albert Oehlen

Albert Oehlen joins Guggenheim Museum Bilbao curator Petra Joos for a conversation about his work.

Wednesday, October 19, 6:30 pm

Shared Reflections

Discover the highlights of an exhibition, the behind-the-scenes work, and curious details about the exhibitions on special tours led by museum professionals. Sponsored by Fundación Vizcaína Aguirre.

- Curatorial Vision: lead by Petra Joos, exhibition curator. Wednesday, November 30, 6:30 pm
- Key Concepts: lead by Luz Maguregui, Education Coordinator, Guggenheim Museum Bilbao. Wednesday, December 14, 6:30 pm

Cover image:

Albert Oehlen

Untitled, 2016

250 x 250 cm

Oil, lacquer, and paper on canvas

Courtesy of the artist

© Albert Oehlen

For more information:

Guggenheim Museum Bilbao

Communication and Marketing Department

Telephone: +34 944 359 008

media@guggenheim-bilbao.es

www.guggenheim-bilbao.es

All information about the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao is available at www.guggenheim-bilbao.es (press room).

Press Images for
Albert Oehlen: Behind the image
Guggenheim Museum Bilbao

Online Photo Service for Press Images

At the press area (prensa.guggenheim-bilbao.es/en) you can register and download high resolution images and videos featuring the exhibitions and the building. Sign in to get access. If you are already a user, log in here (you need your username and password).

For further information, please contact the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao Press Department: tel. +34 944 35 90 08 and email: media@guggenheim-bilbao.es

Self-Portrait as Spring (Selbst als Frühling), 2006

Photowallpaper, oil, acrylic on wood

265 x 385 cm (2 parts)

Private collection

Photo: Archive Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin/Paris

© Albert Oehlen



Self-Portrait Making Pottery (Selbst beim Töpfern), 2012

Oil on canvas

180 x 170 cm

Courtesy the artist

Photo: Robert McKeeever

© Albert Oehlen



Untitled, 1994

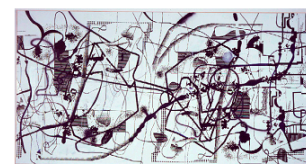
Silkscreen print and acrylic paint on canvas

280 x 520 cm

Private collection

Photo: Archive Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin/Paris

© Albert Oehlen



Bad Artist, 1997

Oil on canvas

190 x 246 cm

Private collection, courtesy Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin/Paris

Photo: Lothar Schnepf

© Albert Oehlen



Untitled, 2004/1992

Silkscreen print and acrylic paint on canvas

246 x 190 cm

Private collection

Photo: Archive Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin/ Paris

© Albert Oehlen



Untitled, 2005

Oil and acrylic paint on canvas

280 x 340 cm

Private collection, courtesy Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin/Paris

Photo: Archive Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin/Paris

© Albert Oehlen



Untitled, 2005/1992

Silkscreen, lacquer and oil on canvas

210 x 290 cm

Private collection, courtesy Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin/Paris

Photo: Archive Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin/Paris

© Albert Oehlen



Untitled (Tree 28) [Ohne Titel (Baum 28)], 2015

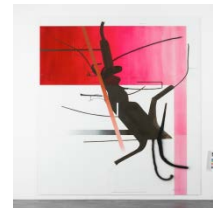
Oil on Dibond

Collection Maja Hoffmann

375 x 250 cm

Photo: Stefan Rohner

© Albert Oehlen



Untitled (Tree 1) [Ohne Titel (Baum 1)], 2013

Oil on Dibond

378 x 250 cm

Private collection, courtesy Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin/Paris

Photo: def image

© Albert Oehlen



Untitled (Arrows) [Ohne Titel (Pfeile)], 1988

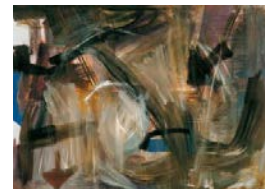
Oil on canvas

276 x 375 cm

Private collection, courtesy Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin/Paris

Photo: Archive Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin/Paris

© Albert Oehlen



Untitled, 1990

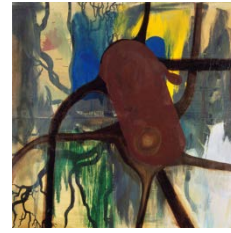
Oil on canvas

200 x 200 cm

Private collection, courtesy Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin/Paris

Photo: Gallery Max Hetzler Archive

© Albert Oehlen



Untitled (Chessboard) [*Ohne Titel (Schachbrett)*], 1988

Oil on canvas

195 x 195 cm

Private collection, courtesy Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin/Paris

Photo: Arne Landwehr, Kunstmuseum Wiesbaden

© Albert Oehlen



Untitled (Idiot Head) [*Ohne Titel (Blödkopf)*], 1988

Oil on canvas

195 x 195 cm

Private collection, courtesy Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin/Paris

Photo: Archive Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin/Paris

© Albert Oehlen



Untitled (Bull Head) [*Ohne Titel (Stierkopf)*], 1988

Oil on canvas

195 x 195 cm

Private collection, courtesy Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin/Paris

Photo: Arne Landwehr, Kunstmuseum Wiesbaden

© Albert Oehlen



Untitled, 2016

250 x 250 cm

Oil, lacquer, and paper on canvas

Courtesy of the artist

© Albert Oehlen

