

Albert Oehlen (German, b. 1954)

[Oehlen at Gagolian](#)

[Oehlen at Galerie Max Hetzler](#)

[Oehlen at Skarstedt](#)



Oehlen, 2015 Photo: Katherine McMahon

“Following a self-imposed set of guidelines certainly gives you more momentum. Forbidding yourself certain things, believing in rules, is a good state to be in,” Oehlen explained to [Frieze Masters magazine](#) in a 2003 interview his infamous painting “rules,” while promoting exhibitions of new work in Berlin at [Max Hetzler](#), in Naples at [Alfonso Artico](#), and a future survey at [MoCA in North Miami](#) – his first major exhibition in the U.S.

The New Museum’s 2015 exhibition, [Home and Garden](#), delivered a thematic appraisal of the artist’s thirty-year career, from his early self-portraits and mature appropriations of language, through constant explorations of interrelated themes. The Museum held a two-part symposium featuring [a keynote address](#) and panels discussing facets of Oehlen’s practice such as [contemporary painting](#) and [digital abstraction](#).

British artist Glenn Brown [spoke with Oehlen in 2016](#) for his first solo exhibition in [Gagolian’s London gallery](#). The two painters discussed artistic influences, Oehlen’s new work, and the experimental yet dogmatic approach Oehlen has forged with medium, material, style, and concept.

The [Guggenheim Bilbao](#) featured three defining series of Oehlen’s career in a 2017 survey: [abstractions](#) from the 1980s, [computer paintings](#) spanning the ‘90s, and more recent [tree paintings](#) and [self-portraits](#).

“Sometimes, you look at a painting and say, ‘Something is different.’ You see that something is wrong; it can’t be what it looks like. That’s enough. You haven’t seen it before and then you can feel something,” [Oehlen told Hyperallergic in 2017](#) in an intimate conversation about process, influences, and his [show at Gagolian](#) featuring two experimental series.

85 works, including a [series of skateboards](#) designed by Oehlen, explored the artist’s influences and inspirations [at Palazzo Grassi, Venice](#) in 2018. Digital resources include an exhibition guide, [catalogue](#), and an [essay from curator, Caroline Bourgeois](#) on Oehlen’s impact and relevance.

In 2019, [London’s Serpentine Galleries](#) showcased new work inspired by the work of modernist figurative painter John Graham, which Oehlen *remixed* within his own complex abstractions. Taking cues from gallery architecture, Oehlen crafted an environment influenced by a second modern legend, Mark Rothko, and his chapel in Houston. Serpentine’s director, Hans Ulrich Obrist, [interviewed Oehlen](#) about his practice and [discussed the exhibition’s concept](#) during a gallery celebration. [Oehlen also elaborated on the work’s](#) influences and source material 2021.

[Galerie Max Hetzler](#) in London and [Nahmad Contemporary](#) in New York co-presented another important series of Oehlen’s in 2019. Painted between 1982 and 1990, the *Spiegelbilder (Mirror paintings)* comprise self-portraits and interiors, with pieces of mirror collaged in canvas.

“There are habits in painting that you don’t think about...and I was trying to reverse them all. Whenever I find something, it makes me think, What if I don’t do that, or what if I do the opposite? And then other ideas come,” [Oehlen told art historian mark Godfrey](#) in 2021 during a studio visit in which Oehlen [demonstrated his intuitive process](#) and spoke in depth about his conceptual and material-driven practice. “I want more, I want problems. If you do it ‘right,’ you might end up with just another nice painting where everything sits in the right place.”



Cologne, 1983

Photo: Bernhard Schaub



Albert Oehlen (German, b. 1954)

Red Sky, 2020

Acrylic, lacquer, and oil on canvas

Private Collection; L2021:110.1

Albert Oehlen graduated from the University of Fine Arts Hamburg in 1978. That same year, the painting of the *Jungen Wilden* (“young wild ones”) arose in Germany to defy the minimalist and conceptual trends of the previous decade. As a nominally anti-establishment artist, Oehlen strives to create work that defies categorization. He embraces a “bad” painting aesthetic by self-imposing “rules” that limit his color palette and lines. **Red Sky** is a return to the artist’s abstract style of the 1990s, with strong diagonals, drips, and smudges. When asked about this recent work, Oehlen said: “A lot of what I do is very clumsy and avoids the elegance of a real master, you know? And I think that’s the funny part, because any detail looks like it’s been done by someone who doesn’t know what they’re doing.”

On view August 25 – November 28, 2021