Albert Oehlen (German, b. 1954)

“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 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 Gagosian’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 free paintings and self-portraits.

“One 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 Gagosian 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.”
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**