

ALBERT OEHLEN

2 October 2019 _____ 2 February 2020



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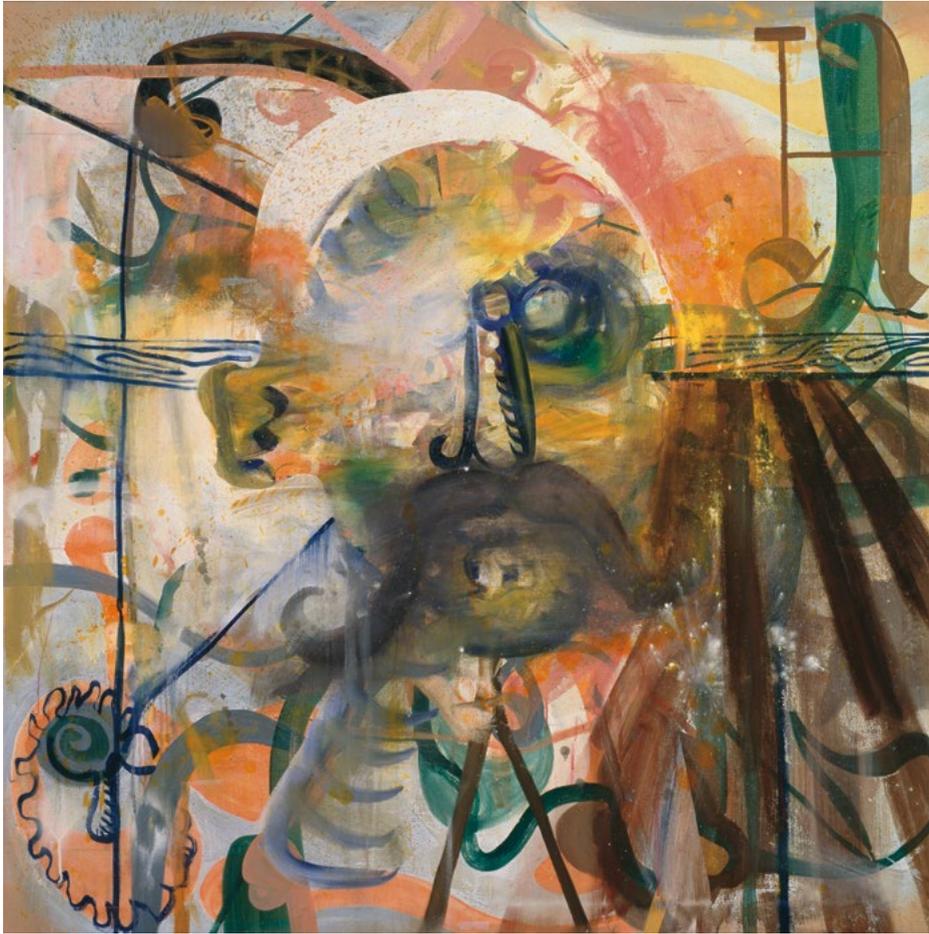
Albert Oehlen (b. 1954, Krefeld, Germany) has been a key figure in contemporary art since the 1980s. By bringing together abstract, figurative, collaged and computer-generated elements on the canvas, he continues to explore an inventive diversity of artistic approaches. Through Expressionist brushwork, Surrealist gestures and deliberate amateurism, Oehlen engages with the history of painting, pushing its essential components of colour, gesture, motion and time to bold new extremes.

This exhibition at the Serpentine focuses on a recurring thread in Oehlen's practice through a selection of works dating from the 1980s until the present day, which are brought together under the rubric of the *John Graham Remix* series. Taking its title from the eponymous American Modernist figurative painter, this body of work appropriates elements of Graham's painting, *Tramonto Spaventoso* ('Terrifying Sunset') (1940–49), which have then been interpreted, remixed and reconfigured by Oehlen across multiple compositions. Graham's painting becomes a singular starting point for the artist's experimentation, 'a vehicle for endless interpretation' that he has continued to return to throughout his career.

The unique architecture of the Serpentine Gallery, in particular its domed central space, is the site of a new installation that forms part of Oehlen's interpretation of the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas, founded by John and Dominique de Menil. A selection of new paintings based on Graham's painting, which match the scale and size of the four horizontal paintings by American painter Mark Rothko displayed in the original chapel's interior spaces, are exhibited at the Serpentine for the first time. Permeating this gallery is a newly configured soundtrack by the hardcore, avant-garde trio ensemble, Steamboat Switzerland, playing at intervals throughout the day, which draws connections between the movements, rhythms and systems of music and the internal strategies of Oehlen's paintings.

Oehlen's site-specific response to the Serpentine Gallery follows his interest in extending the internal logics of his paintings to the sites in which they are exhibited. It is this significance of architecture that results in unique installations that have a distinctly mutable relationship to space. As the artist says: 'I am not interested in the idea of staging my work in a space specifically conceived for it. I think that art should adapt to the architecture or fight with it.'

BEGINNINGS



From 1978 to 1981, Albert Oehlen studied at the Hochschule für bildende Künste Hamburg under painter, Sigmar Polke. Following his graduation, he quickly rose to prominence, moving between different artist groups and scenes in Berlin and Cologne. It was during this time in the 1980s that these artists sought to create works that defied categorisation and contradicted the existing artistic status quo. In negotiating his relationship to painting, a medium that had come under attack for its conservative and limited relevance to contemporary life, Oehlen became known as part of a growing number of artists in Germany, Switzerland and Austria called the Neue Wilde

or Junge Wilde ('Wild New' or 'Wild Youth'). By deconstructing the medium of painting, he arrived at its essential elements, bringing together abstract and figurative styles. Oehlen's approach within this context combines a certain flexibility towards convention, with the introduction of self-imposed, often absurd, parameters within his working process. Since the 1980s, he has continued to pursue this line of investigation by using a range of techniques in his work, from oil painting to spray paint, digital printing and collage.

3. *Gear - It's alright* 1998

Oil on canvas

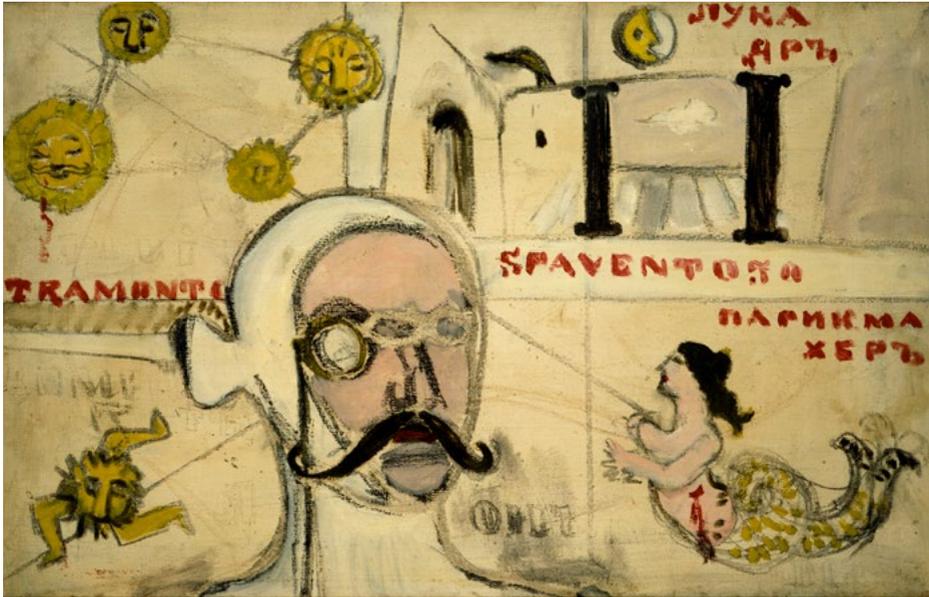
150 × 150 cm

Private Collection

Photo: Archive Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin | Paris

© Albert Oehlen

JOHN GRAHAM



Tramonto Spaventoso 1940–49
Oil on canvas
Photo: courtesy Allan Stone Collection, New York

In 1990, Oehlen came across the work of the Russian-born, American Modernist figurative painter, John Graham, within a biography of Jackson Pollock. Although Graham and his work has somewhat faded into obscurity, during his life he was an important influence within the development of the New York School of painters during the 1950s. For Oehlen, the interest in Graham began after reading about his mentorship of Pollock during the early years of his career and the questioning of the idea of genius that the biography intimates. However, it was not until a few years later, when he was looking through a book by the art historian and critic, Dore Ashton, that Oehlen came across an image of the Graham painting that would become a continuous influence and object of study for many of his later works. Titled *Tramonto Spaventoso* ("Terrifying Sunset") and made around 1940, Oehlen was initially struck by how poorly the painting was executed, but was interested in the tacit communication that belied the work's composite elements: a self-portrait head of Graham with handlebar moustache and monocle/goggles, the letter 'H', a mermaid, a series of suns and various graphic lines and fragments of text.

As Oehlen says:

[The painting is] some kind of vehicle for me. It's like a construction kit of motifs. It's actually one motif, but with various elements that are different in nature. It goes from the graphic to the picturesque. That means there are parts that prompt you to paint more, to become more plastic. Then there are others with a big letter and smaller text and a wooden bar. There's a head with a pilot hat and goggles. But there could also be a third eye, rays and lines going into the depths, like in [Salvador] Dalí, or the wooden planks that we find in Jörg Immendorff paintings.

Graham's *Tramonto Spaventoso* became the starting point for an extensive group of works that Oehlen began in the 1990s called the *John Graham Remix* series. As indicated by the title, this body of work exemplifies Oehlen's unrelenting return to this one painting, with an approach that reconfigures and reconstructs its elements through remixed logics and warped pictorial strategies. It is this series that constitutes Oehlen's exhibition at the Serpentine Galleries, bringing together works made over the last four decades with a selection of new paintings made especially for this display.

THE ROTHKO CHAPEL



terrible sunset, 2019
Charcoal on canvas
457.2 × 266.7, 2 parts: each 228.6 × 266.7 cm
Courtesy the artist and Gagosian
Photo: Erika Ede © Albert Oehlen

In the domed, central space of the Serpentine Gallery, Oehlen has created an installation that forms part of his process of interpreting the Rothko Chapel, a non-denominational chapel in Houston, Texas, founded by John and Dominique de Menil. The interior serves not only as a chapel, but on its walls are displayed fourteen large paintings by the American painter, Mark Rothko. For the Serpentine exhibition, Oehlen focuses on the presence of silence within the original chapel and how he can invert this sensation of being inside it, saying of his experience: 'back then, when I was there, you had this feeling of twilight and these paintings in which the eye could barely find anything to

hold onto.' Through a series of new paintings based on Graham's *Tramonto Spaventoso* with a soundtrack produced by the ensemble Steamboat Switzerland, Oehlen's site-specific response to the Gallery's architecture creates a meditative space combining the experience of looking and listening within a hypnotic feedback loop. The installation at the Serpentine is preceded by exhibitions *TRANCE* at Aishti Foundation, Beirut (22 October 2018–30 September 2019) and *Hyper! A Journey into Art and Music* at Halle für Aktuelle Kunst, Deichtorhallen, Hamburg (1 March–11 August 2019), where Oehlen also presented interpretations of the Rothko Chapel.

SURREALISM AND MUSIC



Left to right:
never sleep again, 2019
Charcoal on canvas
365.4 × 182.6 cm

at the steering wheel a man is a man, 2019
Acrylic on canvas
365.4 × 259.1 cm

starter – turn me on, 2019
Acrylic on canvas
365.4 × 182.6 cm

Courtesy the artist and Gagosian
Photos: Erika Ede © Albert Oehlen

A connective thread running through much of Oehlen's work, and in particular the works of the *John Graham Remix* series, is the influence of Surrealism. Oehlen understands the strategies of Surrealism as a kind of toolbox, which is centred upon notions of absurdity, humour and appropriation as opposed to dreams and the unconscious. As he says: 'I'm more interested in that point when Dalí comes up with something funny and claims that it comes from the subconscious. That's what I admire. I want to approach that method.' Surrealism therefore becomes a methodology or attitude to the world and to painting, a logic of subversion that Oehlen adopts in his ongoing remixing of Graham, a figure who emerged from Surrealism. In her text published to accompany this exhibition, art historian Dawn Adès writes:

Surrealism is not a style, nor is it a technique. There was no veto, no prescription, no aesthetic rule. When Oehlen says he sees himself in the tradition of Surrealism, it is not just because of a history that he mines, but because it questioned the nature of the real, which must include more than the immediate material world. Painting has extensive means of divesting reality of its verisimilitude.

In addition to the undercurrents of Surrealist strategies that permeate Oehlen's paintings, his interest in and use of music within the exhibition also connects to this movement. The stochastic appearance and disappearance of sounds by Steamboat Switzerland in the central gallery connects to the experimental significance of music within Surrealism, where jazz, improvisation and alternative sonic structures all played a part within contemporary compositions made during this period. The combination of free-form experimentation and premeditated limitation that is inherent to these musical modes is expressed through the paintings and sounds encountered by the visitor to the Serpentine exhibition. For Oehlen, Surrealism and music are not only isolated reference points, but aesthetic and sonic systems that resonate throughout his work.



COFFTEA / KAFFTEE

Produced in collaboration with Aqua Monaco, Oehlen presents his project *Cofftea/Kafftee* in the entrance space of the Serpentine Gallery. Visitors to the exhibition can purchase a bottle of this specially developed mixture of coffee and tea, a drink that won't let you sleep ever again. Oehlen's '*Cofftea/Kafftee*' project was previously presented on the occasion of his exhibition, *Cows by the Water*, at Palazzo Grassi, Venice (8 April 2018 – 6 January 2019) and at Kunstmuseum St. Gallen (6 July – 10 November 2019).

Cofftea/Kafftee
Palazzo Grassi, 8 April 2018 – 6 January 2019
Photo: courtesy Aqua Monaco

HIDDEN BEATS: ALBERT OEHLLEN AND SURREALISM – DAWN ADÈS



An der Ampel 1998
Oil on wood
65 × 65 cm
Private Collection, Detroit, Michigan
Photo: Archive Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin | Paris
© Albert Oehlen

Albert Oehlen doesn't claim to be a musician, but he's used music – sound, anyway – to test ideas which may not be restricted to that medium alone. He recorded several tracks on a disc electronically in which a couple of beats of one tempo are placed on top of one another and sound chaotic. But they are so placed that some of them coincide with an organ melody which is in a completely different tempo, which they then reinforce. This is the hidden beat. Related to remix in music and collage in the visual arts, this odd – perhaps dead end – experiment would appear to be at the other end of the musical spectrum from jazz, which is important to Oehlen. However, both relate to his interest in the tensions between free expression and constraint, improvisation and order, reaching into an abstract realm of natural / human versus mechanical processes. His questioning often takes place in the context of new technologies. He was fascinated when Sun Ra, whom he much admires, started experimenting with a synthesiser, an unusual step for a jazz musician. This was a prompt for Oehlen's computer paintings, which explore not the frontier of the high-tech possibilities of the time but rather the problems they might cause. He blended the handmade with the print-out drawings: 'As if the computer still needs the human hand. It's a heightened technology, but it's not good enough. It still needs humans.'¹ Other forays into sound include recordings of Oehlen scraping at a violin, reminiscent of the scratch orchestras of the early 70s, made up of people with no experience of the instrument they were playing; the results were hilarious as well as a shocking attack on the very idea of skill and decorum.

This might seem a strange place to begin looking at Oehlen's practices in relation to surrealism. But aside from André Breton's notorious hostility, for many Surrealists music was a potential field for expression, especially jazz. As the Surrealist artist, poet and jazz trumpeter Ted Joans wrote: 'Jazz is my religion and surrealism my point of view. Jazz is the most democratic art form on the face of earth, it's a surreal music, a surreality. Surrealism like jazz is not a style, it's not a dogmatic approach to the arts like cubism. Poetically I'm first of all concerned with sound and rhythm.' For Oehlen, discovering that Surrealism was more than the paintings of Max Ernst and Salvador Dalí, through reading Dalí's *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí* (1942) and Mark Polizzotti's *André Breton: Revolution of the Mind* (1995), was to recognise an attitude – a point of view – in which he felt more at home than among the neo-expressionist painters. And although it was not least Surrealism's attitude to painting that attracted him, it was also its open approach to experiment in any field, including music. The musical act, the Belgian surrealist Paul Nougé argued, was more than a sound structure or an aesthetic object – it was a human and social practice to which the spectator / listener contributes.² There are loose parallels between improvisation in jazz and automatism, which was defined by Breton in the first 'Surrealist Manifesto' (1924) as 'the true functioning of thought' to be recorded in any medium, outside the control of consciousness and reason and free of aesthetic or moral concerns: an action and a state of mind.³ While not equated with improvisation, automatism could be part of it. Oehlen has said that his work has a lot to do with improvisation, and he has had a go at automatic writing: 'This is where we start to play

what we have taught ourselves. Our brushes make you dizzy. I can still control our computer. Africa, Jazz in Norway, Underground, Sex in Public, Freely Improvised Will, that's the privilege...⁴

Surrealism is not a style, nor is it a technique. There is no veto, no prescription, no aesthetic rule. When Oehlen says he sees himself in the tradition of Surrealism, it is not just because of a history that he mines, but because it questioned the nature of the real, which must include more than the immediate material world. Painting has extensive means for divesting reality of its verisimilitude. Surrealism has championed painting but is often caricatured as the opposite of the abstract / constructivist tradition in 20th-century art. It is assumed that Surrealism must be wedded to the figurative given what are commonly taken to be its primary interests: dreams and the irrational; the odd or fantastic in the everyday. But Surrealism had a far more complex and responsive attitude to the visual arts in general and to painting in particular than this crude binary allows, both in terms of the critical ideas it engaged with and its history. Far from maintaining a counter position to abstraction, Surrealism – both the artists themselves and the writer-critics, in particular André Breton – increasingly questioned the distinction. 'I can see no advantage, within the framework of surrealism, in trying to choose between these two tendencies, however openly antagonistic they may have become.'⁵ The 'great discoverers' of the 20th century, for Breton, were Marcel Duchamp, Piet Mondrian and Wassily Kandinsky. Painting in particular is not and never can be the straight representation of what is commonly understood to be reality. As Mondrian wrote: 'Not everyone realises that in

all plastic art, even in the most naturalistic work, the natural form and colour are always, to some extent, transformed.'⁶ Oehlen himself puts it bluntly:

In painting you really have a completely absurd way of going about things. You've got something three-dimensional reduced to two dimensions, and that's abstraction. ... The work you do, the reshaping of reality into the picture, is such a remarkable transformation that it really doesn't matter much whether an apple is still recognisable as such or not. ... If you understand the accomplishments of abstract painting, then you don't have to paint abstract at all any more. With hindsight, the difference is not that great.⁷

Painting, widely regarded as finished, seemed to Oehlen to have limitless resources still. Famous for 'ugly' painting, his exuberance and delight in the activity, on occasions as perverse as his punk music, is overwhelming. As well as the 'abstract' paintings, Oehlen revels in exposing the lies or half-truths of figuration: the ambiguities, cryptic clues, codes, hints and false trails. He has, he says, a nasty attitude towards the idea of representation, and dislikes meaning and the search for meaning which is endemic among viewers of pictures. No doubt it's because it is so baffling and resistant to interpretation that John Graham's *Tramonto Spaventoso* (terrible, scary sunset) (1940 – 1949) has retained Oehlen's interest for over twenty years.

Graham's picture was reproduced in Dore Ashton's book *The New York School* (1972) where it stood out weirdly among the Abstract Expressionist artists and immediately attracted

him: 'I found it ugly and at the same time a vehicle for endless interpretation.'⁸ Graham's enigmatic, probably autobiographical, picture prominently features a self-portrait, with flamboyant moustache, spectacles obscuring one eye, the other masked by the blank lens of goggles, and a white hood (racing driver? airman?) with inflated earpiece; the background is divided into four like a poster or comic strip with inscriptions and heavily coded symbols. There are lion-faced suns, one of which has developed three legs like the Isle of Man flag, in which some have seen an incipient swastika, and a mermaid / ship figurehead with a Christ-like bleeding cut in the side – Graham's famous studies of women's heads often have a wound in the neck. Graham never joined the Surrealist movement, which he wrongly regarded as primarily literary, but was close to Arshile Gorky and Jackson Pollock, interested in the unconscious and admired Giorgio de Chirico, from whom he derived the idea of 'enigma' in art. 'What is the value of the strange, enigmatic and absurd in art? The value of the strange and absurd lies in their suggestion of a possible unknown, supernatural, life eternal.'⁹ The fragment of deep perspective in the upper right corner, framed by a columnar letter H, recalls de Chirico's spaces as well as Dalí's early Surrealist paintings, and the self-dramatisation of the bust also points to familiarity with the disembodied heads in Dalí's *Honey is sweeter than blood* (1927). None of these references is lost on Oehlen, though in the variety of transformations to which he subjects Graham's motifs – not least in the most recent cycle of very large canvases – they open up into completely new and unexpected directions.

Oehlen first exhibited a work related to *Tramonto Spaventoso* in 1997; many subsequent paintings drag the Graham violently into his

pictorial world. Graham's elusive iconography is unravelled and remade, takes on other allusions, dissolves into abstract marks. The obsessional reworking of the limited number of motifs is stunning, like improvisation in jazz.

At the heart of the Serpentine exhibition are four monumental works: three triptychs and a single diptych turned to the vertical. Using both charcoal and paint, they ruthlessly lay bare the bones of Graham's picture, totally transforming it at the same time. Little is what it seems at first sight. The endless possibilities of line to create and undo form, to tease, suggest and play are absorbing, drawing the viewers close and then thrusting them back again. In the charcoal works the handlebar moustache of Graham's self-portrait – already indelibly Dalí-stamped – shoots out, twirls round or curves up like a monacle, dominating and macho. In the east triptych, *at the roundabout; she's always driving – it's hypnosis; and eastbound and down* (2019), which is all charcoal, the larynx in the mouth is testicular, while the ghostly skull-eyes above the steering wheel are also a self-referential umlaut (Öhlen).

Oehlen was inspired to work in charcoal by his friend and colleague Konrad Klapheck, who makes a complete sketch in charcoal of the chosen object / machine, which he then reproduces in oil. Breton's last essay on an artist was devoted to Klapheck, whose work recalled for him the long list of those admired by the Surrealists who explored the relationship between man and machine, including the Comte de Lautréamont, Alfred Jarry and his 1902 novel *Supermale* and Duchamp, especially his *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1915–23). Among Klapheck's favourite objects is the sewing machine, iconic for the Surrealists of the erotic encounter described by Lautréamont ('...beautiful as the chance

encounter between a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table'. 'It is,' Breton wrote, 'the collision with sharp edges alternating with the caress of beautiful curves, graced by a light deriving its source from the inner life, which enables Klapheck to raise himself, by means of correspondences, to a new level at which he has a sure hold on the psychological and the sociological.'¹⁰

Oehlen has his own sets of correspondences between man, woman and machine, which emerge rather than impose themselves on the mutating forms. In the north (*Öbstruct Reality; Öbstruct Reality; Stop Sign*, 2019) and east triptychs the diagonal lines that divided Graham's picture have been magnified into sight-lines, devouring dynamic gazes; their directional force underlines the references to driving and the woman now occupying the centre in the east triptych is at the wheel. The titles subsequently added to the triptych reinforce this idea: 'at the roundabout,' 'she's always driving / it's hypnotising,' 'eastbound and down' (references to pop songs, baseball, advertisements et cetera). In the west triptych (*never sleep again; at the steering wheel a man is a man; starter - turn me on*, 2019) she has her finger on a button ('starter: turn me on'). In the north triptych, Oehlen added an outstretched arm from the female figure, outlined in a strong purple, thrusting a placard reading 'NO!,' #MeToo style, at the head with a revolving eye that occupies two panels. On the one hand gender identity is a cliché, male with predator-gaze, female with exaggerated curves; on the other hand there are gender ambiguities and misplacements, motifs or stylistic hints, that sow confusion.

For Oehlen, working in charcoal has a sculptural feel. Drawing has a natural affinity

with volume and space. The burnt black wood is very flexible, creating dense outlines, with dark as well as lightly dusted shadows, splatters and drips when sprayed with water, and may be worked over in several layers. Though the forms in the east triptych, all of whose panels are in charcoal, have a direct, crude look, apparently simplified, even caricatural, there are also extraordinarily delicate passages, material mysteries. In the right-hand panel, the head, with its cartoon-scream mouth, is framed along its right side with an even scattering of lightly drawn decorative marks, carefully contained within the outline of the head, which they never overlap. The pattern, resembling printed fabric or wallpaper, on the body of the central figure, is like a close-up of this decorative passage, which turns out to be made with a rubber roller. The repeated outlines of the central motif are like tree rings, or perhaps a perverse way of registering her movement, speeding off at the wheel, eyes closed. Her rather horrible, rudimentary features conceal a phallic nose, exaggerated in the central panel of the west triptych, where the very identity of the form-as-head becomes alarmingly questionable.

In the west triptych, a very watery acrylic paint in blue, yellow and pink is applied lightly over the huge surface of the central panel ('At the steering wheel a man is a man') in loose patches, streaks and streaming folds; in the right panel the colours are stronger and harsher, roughly outlining the shapes that seem to be positioned in a flood of light, backed by a ghostly memory of Constantin Brâncuși's *The Endless Column* (1918), supporting a large beam. The motifs in each panel on the whole do not extend beyond their borders; abrupt curtailments and interruptions interfere with any narrative.

The work on the south wall (*terrible sunset*, 2019) is again charcoal, and picks up from a small 2007 charcoal drawing, a version of the encounter, in which the moustachioed head sprouts a pig nose. Now placed vertically, with the head at the top, the diptych takes on the proportions and format of Duchamp's *Large Glass, The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, whose study of the mechanics of desire and the ambiguities of gender has echoed through the sequence.

Identifiable only by the scale and the distinctive format is a further reference: to the Rothko Chapel, next door to the Menil Collection in Houston. This is the second time Oehlen has played with the chapel as reference, previously an exhibition in Beirut in 2015 where motifs from paintings by Dalí, including the long spoon from the *Agnostic Symbol* (1932), are entwined in huge blow ups from collaged advertisements. In the new triptychs, Graham's *Tramonto Spaventoso* is the focus. As with Rothko's huge dark canvases, the central panel of each triptych is raised on a low plinth, which emphasises parallels with an altarpiece, though the meditation the chapel invites is strictly non-denominational. Some find the chapel a quiet source of spiritual reflection, others find the paintings terrifying images of the void. What kind of revenge against the spiritual claims of abstract painting is this? Or is it a lifting of the black curtains to reveal another reality, both comic and threatening, but full of paradoxical life?

My thanks to Albert for his great generosity with time, insights and information during the preparation of this essay.

1. John Corbett and Albert Oehlen. 'Bionic Painting.' In Hans Werner Holzwarth (ed.) *Albert Oehlen* (London: Taschen, 2017) p 161
2. See entries on 'Jazz' and 'Music' in Michael Richardson (ed.) *The International Encyclopedia of Surrealism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019) pp 369–75
3. André Breton. *Manifeste du Surréalisme* (Paris: Aux éditions du Sagittaire, 1924) p 42. Translation the author's
4. André Butzer. Albert Oehlen 'Switches' (1999). In *Albert Oehlen*, Op cit p 212
5. André Breton. 'Enrico Donati.' In *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (London: Icon Editions, Harper & Row, 1972) p 197
6. Piet Mondrian. 'Abstract Art' (1941). In *Art of this Century*, Peggy Guggenheim (ed.) (New York: Art of This Century, 1942) p 32
7. *Albert Oehlen*, Op cit p 140
8. *Ibid* p 230
9. John Graham. 'System and Dialectics of Art' (1937). Quoted in Dawn Adès. *Surrealist Art: The Lindy and Edwin Bergman Collection* at the Art Institute of Chicago (London: Thames & Hudson, 1997) p 147
10. André Breton. 'Konrad Klapheck.' In *Surrealism and Painting*, Op cit p 412

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

The John Graham picture, which Albert Oehlen has now already been dealing with for so long and so tenaciously, and from which he is apparently somehow no longer truly able to detach himself (as he should not and also cannot do), is arguably an allegory for painting, pictures, art and truth. In this allegorical picture, a magical field of coordinates is spanned, which assigns the important positions of the signifiers (man, woman, sun) that inhabit the picture on the one hand by measuring the surface, on the other, in turn, in a purely symbolising way, and as a whole thus produces meaning and a symbolic relationship that generates infinite (non-)sense. To Oehlen the artist, who is indeed also and above all a real dreamer, just as all 'real' artists are, this picture must have seemed so familiar and 'innate' when he saw it, or rather saw a reproduction of it, I believe. He was then able to really make it into his own picture so as to understand what his art, or art in general, should be in a quite nonverbal, but very intelligible way. What interests him is thus naturally not any private mythology. The familiar accusation of a private mythology is a contradiction in itself, since a myth does not exist solely for itself. We constantly encounter the myth that Oehlen dreams here in a continuation of (or preparation for) John Graham, indeed experiences anew and, concurrently, virtually 'dies' from (more on this shortly), at such artistic pinnacle situations where the truth, indeed the origin of creation and all imagination, lurks like a vine creeping over a tree line, like a joyfully gushing spring, which becomes a river in the valley, at which people then fetch their water and thus settle there to live, that is, to simultaneously die there. To me personally,

the Graham picture was also more than familiar when Oehlen showed it to me for the first time on the Canary Islands in 1997, when I was 23 years old. I had to comprehend it as the same truth that numerous art books (Matisse, Mondrian, Cézanne, Rembrandt and so forth) had already imparted to me, and even more importantly, which communicated to me a very similar mythology with the name NASAHEIM, to which I had already given this title and named back then and which has remained a guiding image for me until today. Oehlen says that I am my 'own Graham', which would mean that NASAHEIM is my own personal Graham.

The new pictures that Oehlen has created for his exhibition at the Serpentine Galleries in London and that I had the opportunity to examine personally in Los Angeles and declare to be very good, are surely the best that he has ever been able to make. Also because he saw himself doubled in a way never seen before as both a figure and tragic actor in Graham's schema, and, among other things, was able to identify himself and his dependency artistically with charcoal on canvas. This realisation is a heavy burden, but his understanding of his blindness, of his absolute inability to create alone is a great and huge asset. Just as Oehlen's 'colour' has always been extremely abstract, a separated inversion, a flipside seen from the inside of withheld shades, colours turning away, the meditation space created for London is now an enhanced self-awareness, as that empty form that only becomes completeness, potential fullness and its perfect fit in constellation with the main figure in Graham's motif respectively, namely the woman. It is his gaze, because the seeing eye is also blind, that the woman in the picture first generates as such, i.e. it is she who

projects his gaze outward from within himself, since she is the one that first of all directs it outward from within herself, strictly speaking based on her clear sexuality, the nourishing organ of the world, towards him, so as to first make him see, but only very conditionally. She would merely like to make him see, to call his attention to her own place, her seating position in very close proximity to the threshold, to the oscillating location of truth. Why? Because she bears and holds colour, and because she, as Graham shows, first gives her absolute lucidity and her general genetic knowledge to the blind man so as to make him creative, since she is connected with water and originates from it by nature of her essence. Myth is above all a topos of standstill. This is what Graham's system of coordinates proposes or directly effects and brings about. It results in a suspension of chronology, of sequence, and makes what seems mundanely explainable as the origin of the seeing picture inscrutable. It is de facto a seeing picture (it represents seeing), but its fully seeing and foresighted moment is a standstill, a knockout. Oehlen has always sensed this standstill and had to perceive it so profoundly ('in dying'), so that he, so to say, in retrospect, in a revelatory look back through Graham's picture, would experience and recognise why he must serve the great annihilation as a supremely beautiful principle throughout his life. And why his pictures, at least until he saw the picture (and possibly also beyond it), can be reduced to such an annihilating, but simultaneously glorifying place. Oehlen's great signature is the blurred spot, which concludes the picture (and thus makes it primary), disguises it as powerless and forfeits it. Oehlen's colour atmosphere is an echo-like potency of brown that collapses before it might also just incarnate or might prepare for birth,

for what the picture has still got coming. This is why he dwells inside a colour scale whose cavity he illuminates, whose vibrations he imbues with colour, but withholds like a mystery or a memory that he would preferably like to and must retain for himself. Everything stands still there; Oehlen's dream of beauty is a quiescent state and stands still, remains and sediments there. His picture dies; he dies while painting the dying picture. He has tried to take the final power from the picture; he was the one who picked the initially final flower on the entire large field that the sacred surface is. What is the sacred surface? Myth also has an answer for this. The powerlessness of the figure of the man in Graham's picture and his context vis-à-vis the truth of the threshold seems to be the key to this. This threshold – the location of truth that the woman permanently bears witness to merely as a result of her sheer presence – is not the surface itself, but its intrinsic and very exclusive reference, since the vibrations that the surface pictorially radiates as a message of death and life are themselves threshold-like, i.e. they are messages of coming and going. The surface comes and goes (like the wind or like a bell chime), because its transmission, its message of seeing and making seen is a frequency that comes and goes, like an irrational signal, that only she can emanate, as a very divine tone.

Now, the history of painting after Cézanne, namely not in line with Cézanne, but instead in renunciation of him, has largely worked on turning off this tone once and for all, and has done so above all with the aid of ready-mades (and the so-called right angle). Indeed, Oehlen also tried or was engaged in his time in skilfully painting over this tone, but he also left this tone an optimal possibility (even though he perhaps

did not want this at all) to return eternally. His system becomes self-indulgent, is damned to comprehensive reorganisation. His picture is a possible basis for organisations to come, a hidden foundation. His picture must perish so as to give rise to a new world, to create a transition to the new like a bridge. Decline is emergence. It is his presentiment of a whole and of a future equalisation of pictorial forces. Dissolution and infinity intertwine themselves. Oehlen's zero-action becomes a sign of and produced reference to the hidden foundation. Graham opens up an ideal perspective on this relationship for Oehlen, in the form of a point of view having become total. Oehlen's gesture of annihilation and decline is first given its legitimation with Graham's picture, but also its rebuke, its position in the creative scenario, which, namely, runs to meet the

setting sun nevertheless within the framework of a quite monstrous affirmation of the very horror to which we are exposed. While doing civil service at a hospital in Hamburg in 1993, I read Oehlen's book of interviews in which he proclaims himself to be a 'designer of hope'. I have taken this very seriously until today and have also coupled my artistic existence to such a statement. His path of hope not only received a companion with Graham's picture, it is also probably Oehlen's personal golden admission ticket to the land of hope. His concealing and regaining is, however, the true merit. Oehlen affords us the fortunate potency to have hope to live a higher life. It is up to us to fulfil it so as to then live in a new day.

A. Butzer
(18 June 2019)

Translated from the German by
Amy Klement



Ohne Titel / Untitled 2002
Pencil, watercolour on paper
190 × 150 cm
Courtesy the artist
Photo: Lothar Schnepf © Albert Oehlen

HANS ULRICH OBRIST IN CONVERSATION WITH ALBERT OEHLEN

HANS ULRICH OBRIST (HUO)

Let's start by talking about Spain. You have your place here in the Basque Country. How did this come about?

ALBERT OEHLEN (AO)

I went to Andalusia at the end of 1987 with Martin Kippenberger and moved into a house there, where I worked for a year. Then I stayed in Madrid for a few years. Since then, I've always had one foot in Spain – I always had a place here and another somewhere else.

HUO You once told me that your transition to abstraction happened in Spain, in that year. Is that right?

AO Yes, in Seville. It was just like that. I had the intention of becoming an abstract painter, but no idea how to do it. In Carmona, I made various attempts to go in that direction, and at some point it happened.

HUO What was the first abstract painting you made?

AO Well, I started by naming the work with the big mouth, the lips with the teeth inside and the uvula, *Abstract Painting Number One* (1988), with the idea that you can call something abstract if you no longer believe in the function of presentation or visualisation. Another was a mash-up of an American flag. I didn't mean to refer to the flag itself, but to Pop paintings. I tried out various approaches towards abstraction, like painting something figurative or recognisable, but not believing in it; that was one method.

HUO Painting something, but not believing in it. To turn to your show at the Serpentine: you made a Rothko Chapel in Beirut for *TRANCE* (22 October 2018 – September 2019) at Aïshti Foundation, and for the Hamburg exhibition *Hyper! A Journey into Art and Music* (1 March – 11 August 2019) at Halle für Aktuelle Kunst, Deichtorhallen. But your interpretation of the Rothko Chapel for your upcoming Serpentine exhibition is the opposite to the chapel in Houston but follows a similar idea.

AO Yes, I'm approaching it from another side. It's simply about the silence in the original Rothko Chapel in Houston. Back then, when I was there, you had this feeling of twilight and these paintings in which the eye could barely find anything to hold onto. If any spiritual effect were to be achieved, my question would be how much auto-suggestion would be necessary? Because you often hear trivial music in the context of reflection. I wondered if one couldn't also reach a meditative state while listening to *violent* music.

HUO By *violent* music, do you mean noise?

AO It could be noise. I conducted some experiments on myself where I tried to create a lulling effect with different kinds of music. I thought about what it takes to achieve meditative states – with which music it's possible and which not. With speed metal, and also with *Electric Miles Davis*, I experienced meditative states a lot. These results are of course only valid for myself. I came up with the idea of making a sort of violent chapel, without giving up on the desire for it to be about meditation. But I am not only referring to sound. The paintings

should not fit into the cliché of having any calming features.

HUO You have this idea for very specific music where fragments will almost stochastically appear in phases and then disappear. Some visitors might experience the soundtrack and others not. Can you say something about this?

AO I'm working with the Swiss band, Steamboat Switzerland, a trio: bass guitar, drums and Hammond organ. I know them via Michael Wertmüller, who for me is a genius contemporary musician, perfectly at home in the area between contemporary music composition, speed metal and free improvisation. Time has passed since these things were invented, but for a while there seemed to be an antagonism between them. Today, you can connect or switch between these musical forms. It's not a gag anymore. Steamboat Switzerland works in that area. I like them.

HUO They'll contribute sound elements to the exhibition, which aren't always audible.

AO Yes, in varying lengths.

HUO How did the Rothko Chapel works start?

AO In that first project in Beirut, there are cut-out and glued paintings made from advertising materials. Everything is held together in the trashiest way possible. They have two levels. One is the advertising material with the slogans on it – like 'Everything Must Go!', or washing-machine commercials. That's the level on which you can read the pictures and slogans. The other level is how it's cut. Basically, you have these outlines taken from rioty Dalí paintings.

You can recognise these figures when you focus on the cut outlines. You can basically see these two levels: the outlined Dalí pictures, and the motifs from the advertising material. It's cut out and collaged. There's a double layer of information, which is very colourful, and also very alarming through the Dalí motif.

HUO What is the reference to Dalí?

AO When you start getting into painting and you're 11 or 14 or so years old, you have to like Dalí. That's obvious. In my generation, hippies and druggie people would have Dalí posters on their walls – he was their hero. There was a phase when this became too much and all humankind took a step back from Dalí because he was discredited as a showman. Many people who think they have good taste continue to reject Dalí because they think that the showman, money and success stand in opposition to quality. How do you get out of that? You can overcome this by thinking about it, the easiest way being to read his autobiography *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí* (1942). I believe that if you're not convinced by then, you've missed the point. Have you read it?

HUO Yes, I love that book.

AO It's really big. I think if you can revise your own judgement, it's the most beautiful thing that can happen to you.

HUO How does the chapel for your solo show in Beirut – the exhibition and music – relate to the mini chapel for the group show in Hamburg?

AO They are done the same way. In the one in Beirut, the panels have the same size as the

original Rothko Chapel. Before I made these, I made some 250cm × 250cm test-pictures firstly as a technical test to see how the frames should be made, how stuff could be glued and how it appeared. There were six of them and now I presented these paintings in a box-like space.

HUO There's a soundtrack to these six paintings. You sit inside this box on a chair and listen to a Holger Hiller soundtrack.

AO Yes, that's correct. I've been involved with Holger for a long time now. Around the time when I was studying art, we were neighbours. I believe he was at the arts college as well, in a similar environment. I'm not sure if he was also a student of Sigmar Polke, but I have a lot in common with Holger and some time ago we did something together.¹ He produced ten musical pieces, and I made ten graphics as an edition. The original project was on vinyl, but he burned them onto a CD which we use for this project. He made a very precise counterpart to these collage paintings. For that project, and in general, he likes to work with samples. His views on the use of material pretty much echo what I did. He also processed music and sound that was generally present and he was unafraid of trash. In this box, you wear headphones and are buckled up on that revolving chair, and it becomes very narrow; it's supposed to be a claustrophobic version of the chapel, like some kind of psycho tank.

HUO For one person – you can only be inside alone. The chapel for the Serpentine is completely different, in that it will comprise paintings made here in Ispaster in the Basque Country. You told me in our last conversation that their origin was this John Graham painting (*Tramonto*

Spaventoso, 1940 – 1949). Graham (1886–1961) was a modernist painter born in Russia, who has somehow been forgotten. There's a strange amnesia about him. In your catalogue published by Taschen, John Corbett writes that you first read about him in a biography about Jackson Pollock. Can you talk about Graham? How did you come to that painting and how did it trigger not only these new paintings, but also a whole line of older paintings that we're including in the exhibition?

AO The fascination with Graham came from a strange statement in this Pollock biography *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga* (1989) by Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith. These are the people who also wrote this super-boring Van Gogh biography, *Van Gogh: The Life* (2011). But the Pollock book isn't boring at all; it's extremely good. What I liked so much about this book was that they absolutely leave it open to interpretation whether they consider Pollock to be a bit of an idiot. They describe very nicely how the meaning of Pollock lies in the entire picture – so not as the single accomplishment of a genius, but also in relation to luck and the fortuitous influence of Clement Greenberg and others. And it's all of these elements combined that results in the importance of Pollock; it's not just the result of the huge efforts of a genius. Related to that, Graham played the role of mentor to Pollock, as an opposing and interesting figure. I find it so interesting that with Pollock's work, something of enormous importance emerges as an objective final result, as something that's there, no matter how it came about, which simply has an enormous meaning.

HUO It's only a short phase, a sort of flare.

AO Yes. It's basically an appearance flashing up, mainly in the big, classical paintings that hang in museums, like the ones in the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Düsseldorf and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. In contrast, Graham as a person was very smart and good at expressing what he'd learned in Paris.

HUO Surrealism.

AO Yes. First, he was a rather clunky Picasso imitator. Later he made a couple of fascinating and disturbing women portraits. Not only because they are cross-eyed.

HUO You bought one painting, which is the trigger for this whole exhibition – for the new work, but also for many of the older paintings that will be included. Even so, we're not sure if we want to hang this painting in the exhibition.

AO Yes. The trigger wasn't my interest in Graham himself, but the painting. I'd found a black-and-white image of it in the Dore Ashton's book *The New York School* (1972). My first thought was that it was a really shitty painting. I found it spectacularly bad. It's chunkily painted, possibly unfinished. The content triggers a certain depth, but without resolving anything. I am not interested in meaning. I am unable to read paintings and understand the meaning. It is alien to me. It has the appearance of wanting to tell you something extremely important.

HUO What is the message?

AO I don't know, but something is supposed

to come across with this painting. There are connection lines and suns and triangular swastikas – three-armed ones. I don't know what they're supposed to be. They could also be running suns. They have the beards and glasses of very wise historical figures. I don't know what to associate them with. I found it quite funny that I wasn't able to make sense of it at all. I also didn't want to. I thought it would be interesting to research what it could be through my own experiments.

HUO And that's how the paintings emerged over the years?

AO Yes. It's some kind of vehicle for me. It's like a construction kit of motifs. It's actually one motif, but with various elements that are different in nature. It goes from the graphic to the picturesque. That means there are parts that prompt you to paint more, to become more plastic. Then there are others with a big letter and smaller text and a wooden bar. There's a head with a pilot hat and goggles. But there could also be a third eye, rays and lines going into the depths, like in Dalí, or the wooden planks that we find in Jörg Immendorff paintings.

HUO This movement from the graphic to the picturesque is interesting. Your triptychs emerge from this. You always made big drawings – your show at Palazzo Grassi (8 April 2018 – 6 January 2019) included large-scale black-and-white etchings. But here for the first time the graphic becomes picturesque – big drawings become paintings. There's even a triptych that's purely graphic; in another there's a big drawing. Can you say something about this?

AO The big drawings or things on paper I've made are inspired by Konrad Klapheck's studies, which he always makes for his paintings. But Klapheck did them on canvas, which I haven't seen before. Within this, I found a prompt: what if I made a charcoal drawing in which every crumb is controlled and goes exactly where I want it to go? That's very different from the association you have with the charcoal drawing, where you imagine the wine-drinking, bearded, shaggy artist giving his inspiration free rein with abrupt movements. You always imagine charcoal drawings as dirty – at least from the last 100 years.

HUO But here they're the opposite of dirty. It's all so organised. I made a book with Klapheck in 2006 (*The Conversation Series, Volume 3*). It's a very controlled order with him.

AO Yes. There's no impulsiveness with him.

HUO With you, it's controlled as well.

AO Yes. At least in the drawings. I bring the charcoal to the paper or canvas in a clean way. So it looks different from the usual charcoal drawing, because it becomes like painting. I clean while doing it. I manipulate. I erase. I edit it so that it's completely controlled. Klapheck didn't do that. When he corrects something, you can see that there's a correction. That's the idea, an aesthetic idea: to make a piece of art where the charcoal sits exactly there and frays or not as you want.

HUO That's one part of the exhibition – these incredible charcoal drawings. However, there are also paintings. They're triptychs as well. Can you

say something about the genesis of this chapel for London?

AO These big charcoal pictures are combined or fit together with large watercolours on canvas. Watercolours are also normally small, but here they're made big. It's nothing – I don't have to praise myself for doing this. It was just fun for me to do it.

HUO But it normally happens on paper; here, it happens on the canvas. The reference to Surrealism is interesting, too. Glenn O'Brien wrote that: 'There's no reason Surrealism should be finished any more than realism should be, or romanticism or bagism or fagism. Albert Oehlen is a Surrealist, practising very much in the Paranoiac-critical method as developed by Dalí, with post-cubist spatial displacement.'² And Surrealism also plays a role with Graham. He emerges from Surrealism. Surrealism also plays a role with Pollock. I knew Roberto Matta at the end of his life. I did long interviews with him. And Matta influenced them all. Matta influenced Graham, Matta influenced Gorky.

AO Exactly.

HUO What does this exhibition have to do with Surrealism?

AO Surrealism, for me, is the most interesting art style of the past century. I'm interested in that moment of Surrealism when artists, writers or whomever, approach this tool box. I don't care about the frottage of Max Ernst or the importance of dreams, fantasy and the unconscious. I'm more interested in that point when Dalí comes up with something funny and

claims that it comes from the subconscious. That's what I admire. I want to approach that method. From what I've read about Surrealism, the most important books are *Revolution of the Mind: The Life of André Breton* (1995) by Mark Polizzotti and Dalí's *The Secret Life*. I keep realising that this is also the origin of Conceptual art, and the most important forge of ideas.

HUO Surrealism as forge of ideas?

AO Yes.

HUO Can you say something about this new triptych, with these watercolours? There's only one drawing. How did these motifs come to life?

AO They all derived from this Graham painting.

HUO Including the figures?

AO Yes. Well, they look completely different now.

HUO And those heads are from Graham, too?

AO Yes. I found out after 20 years of research that the name of this painting is *Tramonto Spaventoso* ('Terrifying Sunset'). The sun sets in a sort of zigzag, not in an arch, with abrupt, criss-cross movements. On the right side of the painting there's a mermaid. The pilot-like man is staring at her breasts.

HUO Can we discuss the decades of works connected to this Graham painting? Which works are most important to you?

AO I can't really say much about that. What's nice for me about getting these pictures together

is that they're from different times and were always an opportunity for me to relax. I risked quite a lot in these paintings. I think that if you're willing to look at my things, there's a high entertainment value.

HUO Paradoxically, because of the restriction in this one painting, there's a lot of freedom.

AO I think it's become an entertaining story.

HUO There are always figurative elements.

AO It's always the same repertoire, which is being overstretched in all directions.

HUO Yes, in that sense it's infinite.

AO Theoretically, yes.

HUO I saw this exhibition of your grey paintings in 2017 (Nahmad Contemporary) in New York. It was interesting to see these grey paintings, made from 1997 to 2008, all together for once. The works that come from the Graham painting is not such a clear group like the grey paintings.

AO It's connected more content-wise, not via the motif and the way it's painted.

HUO In that way it's different from the grey paintings.

AO Exactly. Here you have the only motif that's continuously present in a larger group.

HUO And the grey paintings are completed?

AO You never know. But let's say yes.

HUO With the Graham paintings, the restriction to one painting gave you freedom. With the grey paintings, it's a restriction to one colour. How did that come about?

AO It was super simple. I was thinking about Gerhard Richter, and about his blurring of black-and-white paintings. I simply wondered how it would be if you blurred in all directions. What happens then? I mean, Richter did that as well, although he's a bit more systematic. With me it's different. When I have a conceptual idea, I don't realise it immediately. I look where I can gain something. And that's the difference from Richter.

HUO So, you don't work systematically?

AO I also don't stick to the requirements. I'm happy about the requirements, but I don't have to stick to them if I don't feel like it anymore. Now I'm telling all my secrets!

HUO That's good. But you've also said that with the grey paintings, you self-prescribed, like a medical prescription, these grey colours as therapy to increase the longing for colour.

AO Yes, that's right. That's a side effect.

HUO Back then in New York, when I saw this exhibition, I asked myself, how did it come to an end, in 2008, this apparently infinite series?

AO I didn't feel like it anymore.

HUO It just ends?

AO You do something different.

HUO But with this John Graham painting, it keeps giving you desire.

AO That also went quiet for a certain number of years.

HUO How did it return? Did it happen suddenly?

AO That was in Los Angeles. I've no idea how it happened. I didn't know what to start, and then I thought, 'Ah that! I'll try it out. It's certainly easy.'

HUO What made you switch from oils to watercolour and charcoal in these works?

AO In comparison to my colleagues, I have a relatively small studio. Which I like, but over a longer period, I've started to paint more and more fluently. Fluency with oil painting means more turpentine and more smell. At some point I got really mad. I didn't want to smell it anymore. I also looked at oil paint suspiciously. Even worse, I developed a real reluctance. That's why I did this charcoal and watercolour thing, because I didn't want to smell that anymore.

HUO Not Serpentine, but turpentine!

AO Exactly. I was in the middle of some large-format abstract oil painting. Suddenly I stopped, because I couldn't bear to smell it anymore. I like having a reason for something. It's nice. Because then you don't need inspiration. You simply have a reason.

HUO Something we haven't covered is the role of collecting. When I visited you for the first time in Gais, Switzerland, I realised that there's a lot of art in your studio by students, colleagues, older

artists, including a de Kooning painting. Can you say something about this idea of collecting and art made from art?

AO Yes. Art is made from art. I feel that way. It's nicer to own a piece of art than a share. Therefore I bought some when I had money. It began by trading with Kippenberger, and Werner Büttner. Kippenberger was a role model because he was so greedy.

HUO He was greedy for other art?

AO He was greedy in every way. I understood how this supposed deadly sin could actually be a good thing. Somehow I realised that it's fun. Then I began to acquire art pieces. It's a gesture of trust towards the person you're buying from. If it's a young person, it's nice, they're happy. You can consider yourself smart and say they're going to be really huge one day. It has many nice aspects. You can hang it on the wall and be pleased with it. Basically this happens when you see something of meaning for yourself. You consider yourself smarter than other people and ask yourself, 'Why don't they see it?' It's all lots of fun.

HUO In your studio in Gais, there was also an André Butzer painting. He's a younger artist you're supporting.

AO You can't call it 'support' because he's an established artist but I got to know him very early on.

HUO And here in the Basque Country, there are also works of younger artists in your studio. While this cycle for the Serpentine is being created, young artists are painting in your studio.

You say that you're often surrounded by artists. The studio isn't very big. You don't have many assistants. It's not a factory. It's an exchange of energy with artists. Can you say something more about that, because it's quite uncommon?

AO Well, yes. I like being alone in the studio. I always work alone basically. But every now and then I have people around who help me. I can put the paintings up myself. It's no problem for me at all. I can carry them by myself. I can do everything. But sometimes I get mad and like to have people around to talk to. From their facial expressions, I can tell how they're reacting to what I'm doing. I like that. It's even better when they do something themselves. Then it's not a situation where you pay someone to give you answers. It's mutual. That's especially nice. I hope it's beneficial to them as well.

HUO Now that the chapel has been built, do you have any other unrealised projects?

AO No. I'm glad to have anything at all. One or two years ago, I thought, everybody has something they dream about, where they say: 'I want to make the largest whatever, I need that museum or just I want more money.' But I don't have anything. There was a total emptiness. I thought, I don't want anything, or need anything. I just want to paint the next painting. I don't even have a series or a project in mind. Now, I'm happy to at least have the chapel.

1. See *Untitled* (Fondation Beyeler, LP by Wendy Gondeln and Holger Hiller with etching by Albert Oehlen. etching, 2016), <https://shop.fondationbeyeler.ch/en/artikel/albert-oehlen-holger-hiller-wendy-gondelnuntitled-2016-25529>.

2. Glenn O'Brien, 'Indulgences: 95 Theses or Bottles of Beer on the Wall', *Parkett*, May 2007, p 32.

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