

Albert Oehlen

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Luhring Augustine, through Sat 21
(see Chelsea)

When Albert Oehlen started painting in the late 1970s, it was with calculated cynicism. Working in a medium many considered deflated and self-consciously of parodying styles and techniques, Oehlen was free to court failure. His devotion to "bad" painting seemed a mock-heroic stance. But this early posturing has long since blossomed into a rule-breaking reverence, as the assured and brazenly elegant paintings in Oehlen's seventh solo show at Luhring Augustine reveal.

Discordant yet refined, these new abstract paintings are those of an artist in the process of shedding his chrysalis of irony. Looking for vitality in a supposedly atrophied form, Oehlen employs a protean repertoire covering nearly every form of mark-making—drips and doodles, washes and blurs, spray-paint swirls and elaborated brushstrokes—frenetically set into structured grids of white canvas. Hard-edge abstraction and painterly gestures merge with hints of representation, their opacity and murkiness alluding to, but never



completely cohering into, legible motifs. In *Menschenpemmikan*, the most figural of the new paintings, a crouching figure can just be made out through the eccentric collection of disparate marks. This ambiguity is enhanced by the lack of a unifying visual element, a trait shared by all the paintings in the show.

Oehlen builds his works up so deftly and with such bravura that it's easy to forget that an incongruous compendium of 20th-century attitudes such as his should not resemble anything like successful painting. Yet his canvases are masterful and stylishly graceful, even if Oehlen still stays coolly detached.

—João Ribas

Art