



The New York Times

ART IN REVIEW

Friday, November 21, 2014

ALBERT OEHLER: 'FABRIC PAINTINGS'

By ROBERTA SMITH

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/21/arts/design/albert-oehlen-fabric-paintings.html?src=twr>



A big “Wow” is in order. Albert Oehlen’s scintillating Fabric Paintings, now around 20 years old, are quite a sight — and they’ve barely been seen before. According to the Skarstedt gallery, this show is their international debut as a group. It presents 14 of the 20 that Mr. Oehlen made from 1992 to 1996, and mostly kept in his studio.

Most are untitled and painted in fairly somber tones on canvases pieced together from crisp pieces of awning fabrics, printed with either striped or floral patterns. Over these, slurries and tangles of paint slither and cascade, their hand-wrought improvisations evoking jungles, entrails and pseudo-angsty emotions. The works improve as the series progresses and the paint brightens, sometimes conspiring with the fabric to create sudden gaps of deep, glowing space.

Had they come a decade earlier, Mr. Oehlen’s Fabric Paintings would have constituted a high point of 1980s painting. Made a decade later, they form a brilliant summation. My first (America-centric) reaction was, basically, that Mr. Oehlen had stolen Julian Schnabel’s stylish garbling and was dispensing it with a lighter touch, in tighter compositions, at a more intimate scale, on more decorative and overtly new materials, without pretense.

There are other points of intersection: the stripes of Frank Stella and Daniel Buren, the layerings of David Salle’s paintings, and much by Blinky Palermo and, of course, Sigmar Polke, with whom Mr. Oehlen studied. These connections would be clarified by an Oehlen retrospective in an American museum.

In the meantime, the Fabric Paintings seem to have been made, specifically and aggressively, to be visually parsed and enjoyed. They are works that — like certain Modernist paintings — you lust to live with. Somehow they promise to look new forever.

Image Credit: Albert Oehlen, *Bedienungsmotiv*, 1996, oil on printed fabric, 57 1/2 x 44 1/2 inches, © Albert Oehlen