

---

ART

---

A small exhibition of Ostrowski's work in New York just closed at OKO. A solo show of his work, *Emotional Paintings*, can currently be seen at Peres Projects, Berlin through June 21.

**Alex Bacon (Rail):** What is your interest or investment in painting? Do you feel any particular affinity with the medium? How exactly did you end up expressing yourself through painterly means, rather than any number of other ways?

**David Ostrowski:** I used to think that, once I left the studio, I would also be able to forget about painting. But I actually contemplate the medium the most before I come to and after I leave the studio. Painting enables me to produce the greatest possible emotions with the fewest possible means; since I'm a romantic painter, there's a lot of drama going on. My pictures are like me: often empty, full of emotions and with a penchant for suicide.

**Rail:** How did you begin making art? What steps then led you to the kind of work you have been making the past few years, and for which you have become known?

**Ostrowski:** My mother is a singer and actress, my father is a sculptor, my grandmother was a writer and, as a kid, I was always painting. When you think about it, I guess I had the best prerequisites for becoming an artist—and, tragically, this is just what happened. I quickly reached the limits of figurative painting, didn't have anything else to say, nothing left to discuss. The process of moving away from the pictorially narrative to the incomprehensible was a natural one, and it was accompanied by the attempt to create something new, something that I didn't already know or at least something that I stole so well that it became mine and remained surprising. For me, painting means looking for sense in nonsense. I'm not interested in understanding—it's more about not understanding.

**Rail:** Where do you think painting finds itself today? It seems that, after lying dormant for several decades, at least in terms of the mainstream aesthetic conversation, the pressure has finally been lifted about whether or not one should, or even can, paint.

**Ostrowski:** Painting dies and is constantly reborn again. This regularly alternating state is a human invention. I believe in the contents of painting and the preoccupation with the medium itself. Generally speaking, knowledge doesn't hurt



David Ostrowski, *Das Goldene Scheiss*, March 9 - April 15, 2014. Installation view, Almine Rech Gallery, Paris © David Ostrowski. Photo: Rebecca Fanuele. Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech Gallery, Paris / Brussels.

either, but what do we know?

**Rail:** Do you think your work is destructive or constructive relative to painting as a medium, and to art and culture in general?

**Ostrowski:** My painting has to please me; it can thus also be beautiful. My pictures have to surprise me sometimes—and sometimes they should also fly. What they should never be is stupid and painted to death, but they're definitely allowed to get on your nerves. I have high expectations.



David Ostrowski, *Emotional Paintings*, May 2 - June 21, 2014. Installation view, Peres Projects, Berlin. © David Ostrowski. Photo: Hans-Georg Gaul. Courtesy of the Artist and Peres Projects, Berlin.

**Rail:** What do you think are the minimum requirements for a work to stand convincingly as a painting?

Does this notion have any meaning for you when you are conceiving of, or making a painting?

**Ostrowski:** I'm much more interested in the question of what's necessary to make a good work. I'm a painter and my job is to paint good pictures. The studio is sometimes also a laboratory, in which all the questions regarding painting are analyzed. The rest are things from everyday life, which are brought into the lab and put through a sieve. The finished works are propositions, which I offer after they've been put through and authorized for distribution by my own product-testing bureau.

**Rail:** How did you come to the particular materials and techniques you have been using? For example, spray paint, lacquer, and wood frames.

**Ostrowski:** I work only with the simplest and most inexpensive materials, since these aren't already bogged down with information. I stopped painting in oil, since it offered me too many possibilities. Spray paint, on the other hand, forces you to restrict yourself; you have to work quickly with lacquer—it's almost impossible to make corrections and there's only a Plan A, never a Plan B. Painting over is not an option, since it's not really possible with lacquer. The first shot counts. Too many acts are overestimated.

**Rail:** Speaking of which, what are your thoughts on framing? Why do you choose to frame the work at all?

**Ostrowski:** The frames consist of simple baseboards, which I saw and put together—and often also paint—myself. The baseboards are part of the work and often keep the scene together, so that I can sleep better. Some paintings are left unframed and the contents of the picture tend to get more out of control. I also investigate the idea of the frame itself: place an ugly drawing in a beautiful frame and it looks good. It's more challenging when you put a beautiful drawing in a beautiful frame, since the two materials don't really need each other in any way at all. Even when it comes to the smallest changes, you still need to make the right decisions. My series of Outline Paintings is all about just this—what the edges of a picture, a hole or a color can actually signify.

**Rail:** More generally, could you walk us through your process? How do you go about conceiving a given work? Certainly, some works have a lot of layers, and different kinds of materials incorporated, while others explore the minimal conditions by which a single casual mark might be legible.

**Ostrowski:** I already have two fictitious neon signs hanging in my studio: one that reads "Surprise," which lights up when appropriate. Unfortunately, it doesn't light up all that often, but I still keep trying. The other sign reads "Think Harder"—and, in fact, I can't really complain about a lack of thinking processes. But what these finally result in is a completely different story. And then there's another state, which I like to describe as "Let Loose." The materials are merely a means to an

end: to make something out of almost nothing.

**Rail:** What role does speed and error play in your work?

**Ostrowski:** I like to use speed in order to paint something improbable, as well as to provoke mistakes. It's a simple painter's trick, just like the primitive idea of a right-handed person painting with his right hand as though it were his left hand. It's all about constantly manipulating yourself; I want to fall for something all the time, to lose control in order to create a kind of tension. I'm a master of suppression and actually forget most of the time how I constructed, primed, and painted the works I have done before. Paradoxically, a kind of deceleration takes place in the studio; I spend practically all my time looking for something. Mistakes are chances for something new to be created. It's an instrument that I like to make use of, at least at those times when I'm able to let go. What is more, I also stopped drawing and making sketches a while ago, which is a big advantage when it comes to losing control on the canvas and provoking mistakes. For me, the whole world and life itself is a mistake, but the world still has some beautiful corners and sometimes life can also be fun—sometimes!

**Rail:** How much do you think about installation and architecture when putting together a show? For example, the recent show in New York, at OKO, was very tightly hung, with the paintings slightly exceeding the dimensions of the space.

**Ostrowski:** The installation of my work is the second act of the ode, so to speak. It would be a complete waste not to include the exhibition space. It's the same thing, by the way, with the titles of the pictures and the exhibitions, as well as with the design of the invitation cards. Life is too short not to give a difficult work of art an outrageously good title. It's not about causing confusion, but rather much more about finding a balance between poetry and things. My father always said: "If you're in pain, have someone kick you in the shin." I don't want to see any diagrams of the space and I don't plan my installation in advance, but rather always do it spontaneously on site—but this might have something to do with the fact that I have no concept of three-dimensional space.



David Ostrowski, "F (Rom)," 2013. Lacquer and cotton on canvas, wood, 241 × 191 cm. © David Ostrowski. Photo: Ben Hermanni. Courtesy of the Artist and Simon Lee Gallery, London / Hong Kong.

With my current show in Berlin, for example, visitors thought I planned the installation in advance and that this was part of my exhibition concept. Four 4 by 3.5 meter canvases were hung from the ceiling with only a few centimeters each between both the floor and the ceiling. To be honest, back in my studio in Cologne, I thought there would be at least 1.5 meters between both the floor and the ceiling. With regard to the show at OKO, I never saw the space in person, but rather only saw photos of the tiny room and didn't want to subordinate myself to the small size of the space—so, without my even being there, I gave instructions for the hanging of three large works, and it turns out that access to the office was actually blocked. You could literally smell the works, that's how tight it all was—and I felt that this was somehow a really beautiful thought.

**Rail:** Judging from your press releases, book projects, etc., it appears that you have an interest in language. How would you characterize this interest and what is your sense of its role with regard to painting, and perhaps to art more generally?

**Ostrowski:** My works are me; I have already painted or will very soon paint everything I am, say, and do—only then do I really live it. It's the same thing with language; it's all part of the big picture. The real question is what one does with this.



**Rail:** Beyond language, what kinds of things are you trying to accomplish in your various book projects? How do you see them relating, if at all, to your painting practice?

**Ostrowski:** It all belongs together. Many of my books have not been published yet. But there is in fact one that deals with my weakness for women's feet, and one with a series of works that accompanied my presentation at Art Basel Miami Beach last year. I believe that you should only make catalogs and artist books when it really makes sense and not just because you can.

**Rail:** What position do you take on aesthetics? Do you feel that terms like beauty are an appropriate way to evaluate your paintings, or else do you prefer people be more attuned to issues like materials, process, and installation?

**Ostrowski:** I like it when people find my works good for the most various reasons, but I especially like it when they find my works good. I don't just paint for fun; when I'm in the studio, I'm on to something but will probably never figure out what this actually is. If I had any concept of what painting is really about, I would probably be called Jerry Saltz.



David Ostrowski, *Outline Paintings June 1 - June 1, 2013*. Installation view, Peres Projects, Cologne © David Ostrowski. Photo: Ben Hermanni Courtesy of the Artist and Peres Projects, Berlin.

**Rail:** What kind of experience do you hope the viewer has with your work? Are you trying to elicit certain kinds of responses? Are some responses better than others? If so, what kinds?

**Ostrowski:** The truth of the matter is that I actually hope that I don't get stabbed. I'm astonished that there are people out there who find my works good. Javier Peres told me recently that an elderly French lady had visited my exhibition in Berlin and left the gallery in an outrage. My only thought was: Thank God I wasn't there; otherwise she would have let herself be converted by my beguiling charm.

**Rail:** How much time do you spend with other artists? Do you feel part of an artistic community? Is it important to you to be in dialogue with other artists?

**Ostrowski:** I don't like other artists; they're all egomaniacs and make bad art and only talk about art all the time. In general, friends are annoying and only cost time and money. The same holds true for family—my mother would tell me I looked incredibly handsome even if I had two noses on my face. It doesn't make any sense, because I actually do have two noses on my face.



David Ostrowski, "F (Gee Vaucher)," 2013. Acrylic and lacquer on canvas, wood, 241 × 191 cm. © David Ostrowski. Photo: Hans-Georg Gaul. Courtesy of the Artist and Peres Projects, Berlin.

**Rail:** You have spoken about addressing "nothingness" in your work, or at least I have read this position as attributed to you, could you expand at all on what that means for the work, and for your personal philosophy?

**Ostrowski:** Nothing is the beginning of the end, but also the beginning of something; it's perfect.

Jerry: You want to go with me to NBC?

George: Yeah, I think we've really got something here.  
Jerry: What have we got?  
George: An idea!  
Jerry: What idea?  
George: An idea for the show!  
Jerry: I still don't know what the idea is.  
George: It's about nothing.  
Jerry: Right.  
George: Everybody's doing something, we'll do nothing.  
Jerry: So we go into NBC and tell them we've got an idea for a show about nothing.  
George: Exactly.  
Jerry: They say, "What's your show about?" I say "Nothing."  
George: There you go.  
Jerry: I think you may have something here.

*- Seinfeld: Season Four, Episode Three*