

## David Ostrowski

*"I want to make beautiful paintings. But I don't make beautiful paintings by putting beautiful paint on a canvas with a beautiful motif. It just doesn't work."* - Albert Oehlen.

I was reminded of an anecdote the other day in relation to the American Abstract-Expressionist, Franz Kline. The story goes that Kline's gallerist Sidney Janis, who was frustrated at Kline and his resolute need to use cheap, household paint broke into the artists studio one night. Janis then replaced the pots of emulsion favoured by Kline with refined and expensive oil paints. When the artist returned to work the next day he furiously cast-away the new materials and returned to the cheap paint denied of him. Janis worried that if Kline continued to use everyday household paint he would never be able to command high market prices, and would not be taken seriously as a fine artist.

Albert Oehlen's acknowledgement that beautiful paint does not make beautiful paintings is something that extends through the practice of his student David Ostrowski. Ostrowski, who uses the most simple of materials, from the everyday can of spray paint, or perilously quick drying acrylic makes a virtue of the risk that such cheap materials present. These materials are not loaded with art-historical implications, in this respect they are not easily read, they lack information and keep hasty connotation at bay.

When 'superior' oil paint is indeed used by the artist, it is done so with such immediacy of application that the medium is prohibited of its usual behaviours. Oil paint, in this case fails to be oil paint, it is denied its adjustability or dragged from its pedestal with the accompanied use of devices such as ungraceful lacquer or pointedly clumsy collage.

The artist, who lives and works in Cologne, Germany, creates work of a sparse lightness that skilfully and confidently advance abstract painting and bring the medium as a whole into question. These are, without hesitation, beautiful paintings. Immediate, steadfast and visionary. Ostrowski strives for the transcendental mistake, at all times we are aware of the artists hand, here the intentions of the painterly gesture seem to be abandoned mid-flow, caught between the idea and the execution of an action. There is no content as such, but the consequential documentation of an idea encapsulated in the drama of a failed gesture.

The lack of content however does not propose that these works are about 'nothingness' they are in-fact loaded, capacious in their essence and deftly present the artistic conflict between an initial idea and resulting fulfilment of this concept in an accomplished reductionist form. It is so easy to affix the execution of Ostrowski's practice to that of street art or graffiti, but in doing so we denigrate his output. It is an unintelligible comparison, and one so often projected. The use of spray paint is to do with the immediacy of the medium and nothing further; it does not represent the acts of dissension that the spray-can will often denote.

Just as Kline enjoyed the hard, flat surface that household paint could afford, Ostrowski's use of paint allows him a difficult broken line, the dull patina of which carves through pictorial space and is demonstrative of the inadequacies endured by the artist. The idea never fails. The paint fails, the surface fails, the artists body fails.

The 'F' paintings (the 'F' standing for '*Fehlermalerei*', translated to mean '*Failure Painting*') demonstrate this and follow the total abandonment of figurative form and the wilful desertion of learnt skill. They are manifested in uncomplicated manoeuvres, such as the simple method of swapping hands, to unlearn, attempting at all times to loose the stifling burden of discipline. This willing dereliction can allow therefore, a complete rediscovery of style,

structure and appearance. It is also worth noting that this series was born out of the ashes of a studio fire in 2011 that incinerated much of the artists work.

In another project '*Even The Most Beautiful Woman Ends At Her Feet*' (2013) Ostrowski looks at female feet and in doing so represents the body part in an abbreviated form, presenting the most basic shape of a foot across a painting or inviting women to his studio to walk across canvasses creating a palimpsest of the passage made. These visible tracks make an intimate expression of a moment, entrapped, imperfect by nature and are as much about a welcome failure in mark-making as those impressions made by spray paint or acrylic.

A zine publication also demonstrates female feet in relation to the wider context of his work. The notion that we are forever making unconscious tracks and marks is presented in a series of found images of feet alongside photographic reproductions of Ostrowski's paintings.

We are gently reminded of the work of Antoni Tàpies, who often used the foot as a symbol throughout his painting and sculpture. Tàpies used a very similar reduction of the form as a constant reminder to stay grounded and in touch with the earth, often incorporating his own footprints in paint onto a canvas. This humble and everyday signifier, familiar and attainable is suggestive of the artistic journey both artists have initiated and the results are an elegant example of process-based abstraction that remains in-touch with the self.

To make beauty out of failure is an ambitious and problematic exercise but Ostrowski demonstrates the triumph of the mistake as a transient and lawless force. The artist's work seems to hint at the Japanese theory of imperfection *Wabi Sabi*. His work of painterly asperity and gestural economy is agreeably bewildering and mythical, substantial yet with deliberately limited means.

It is rare to find an artist of such faculty, and rare to find an artist who is not easily cornered into classification. The very best of beauty is said to be natural, autonomous, unexpected. David Ostrowski manages to produce work of unexpected and pure beauty by his unregulated, free and experimental approach to the very action of producing a painting. They are emotionally arresting, often haunting, always alluring. Ostrowski's output stands unaccompanied in the annals of contemporary art. His work is truly intoxicating and represents what seems to be a crucial moment in the progression of German art and the expanding discourse on painting.

*David Ostrowski is represented by Peres Projects, Berlin and Simon Lee, London.*